

# The Birth of ‘Vietnamization’

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By Stephen B. Young  
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On Oct. 14, 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, **who had been principally responsible for waging war against the Communists in South Vietnam, threw in the towel.** A little over a year before he officially resigned as secretary, he sent a long memorandum to President Lyndon Johnson, artfully **admitting that he and his Pentagon had no strategy to end the war on favorable terms for the South Vietnamese.**

Johnson quickly turned to others for a new approach. A month after McNamara’s memo, the president asked two aides — Walt Rostow, his national security adviser, and Robert Komer, a National Security Council staff member — to come up with something more effective than McNamara’s tactics of attrition and bombing. Their recommendation, delivered on Dec. 13, 1966, was to “complement our anti-main force campaign and bombing offensive with greatly increased efforts to pacify the countryside and increase the attractive power” of the government of Vietnam. Long before the term became a household word, “Vietnamization” was born.

To put the plan into effect, Johnson chose three men: Ellsworth Bunker to be ambassador in Saigon; Komer to lead a new counterinsurgency organization; and Gen. Creighton Abrams to build up South Vietnam’s military capacity to defeat invading North Vietnamese **regulars** (quân chính quy).

Bunker was to work with the Vietnamese leadership and ensure coordination of all efforts — civil and military, American and Vietnamese nationalist. Komer and Abrams were to be deputies to Gen. William Westmoreland at his headquarters on the outskirts of Saigon.

But it was Bunker whose role Johnson considered most pivotal. It was about more than being America’s top diplomat in South Vietnam. **It was about getting America out of the war.** “I had gotten him out of the Dominican Republic and accomplished his political objective there,” he told me in an interview. “He wanted me to do the same in South Vietnam.”

In a private meeting where no notes were taken, Johnson told Bunker that he wanted to begin withdrawing American troops from Vietnam. But before those forces could leave, a better, stronger South Vietnamese army had to take over more responsibility for search and destroy missions to keep Hanoi’s battalions up in the mountains and close to the borders, far away from the civilian population.

Simultaneously, **Johnson wanted the South Vietnamese to accelerate democratic development, taking into their hands full responsibility for the political destiny of South Vietnam. In short, Johnson wanted the American role in Vietnam diminished at a speed corresponding to the emergence of South Vietnamese self-reliance.**

Johnson and his new Saigon leadership team organized a meeting in Guam on March 20, 1967, with South Vietnam's chief administrators, Generals Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky. They presented him with a new constitution for South Vietnam, one calling for checks and balances and decentralization of power to elected local councils in provinces and villages.

President Johnson played down the meeting's importance; he stressed in public that the conference was not devoted to military aspects of the war effort, saying only that "I think we have a difficult, serious, long, drawn-out, agonizing problem that we do not yet have the answer for." But there was no mistaking the significance of the Guam conference. Johnson used it to establish a new set of metrics by which to measure success in the war effort: **Nation building was in, warfighting was out.**

Two days before the Guam meeting, General Westmoreland had asked for an increase of 85,000 combat troops in order to intensify field operations to "avoid an unreasonable protracted war." At Guam, Westmoreland defended his request for more troops. Bunker watched Johnson react to Westmoreland's briefing. The president's mood and countenance revealed no pleasure in listening to Westmoreland's grim analysis, which largely confirmed McNamara's earlier judgment that the Pentagon strategy of high-intensity warfare could not force Hanoi to cease its aggression.

Indeed, Johnson had already turned against adding troops. When Westmoreland traveled to Washington a month later to pitch the troop increase again, the president replied: "When we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions? If so, where does it all end?" Several months later Johnson threw Westmoreland a bone, adding 45,000 combat troops, about half of what he requested.

Bunker arrived in Saigon in late April 1967, where he made clear that Washington's approach had changed. It would no longer be a "hard power" war fought primarily by American combat units in South Vietnam supplemented by American bombing of North Vietnam, with everything else waiting on the outcome of that armed struggle. Instead, he told Thieu on April 28, **the "essence of success" would be found in bringing security to all the hamlets and villages across the countryside.**

Bunker set himself four main tasks: convincing South Vietnam's leadership of the need to build a legitimate government reflecting the country's various political forces; executing a pacification program to bring peace and order to rural villages; preparing South Vietnam's army to take over the burden of direct ground combat with Communist forces; and promoting economic development to improve living conditions and raise funds to finance the struggle against North Vietnam.

In other words, Ellsworth's goal was to shift from the United States to the South Vietnamese the burden of sustaining South Vietnam as a viable independent republic.

Sent to be Westmoreland's deputy for pacification, Komer immediately started building a new organization — Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development, or Cords — which brought together American military and civilian advisers to work with South Vietnamese in mobilizing civilians against the National Liberation Front, known to its enemies as the Vietcong.

For the moment, things looked headed in the right direction. South Vietnam adopted its new constitution, and elections brought in a bicameral National Assembly and thousands of popularly chosen village and hamlet chiefs. And a relatively clean presidential campaign ended with Thieu as president and Ky as vice president. South Vietnam now had in place a political infrastructure to support villages, grow the economy and provide more manpower for the armed forces.

Westmoreland likewise adjusted his military efforts to the new strategy. In a public address at the National Press Club in Washington on Nov. 21, 1967, he announced his plan for ending American combat in South Vietnam. He called this "Phase IV" or "the final phase," in which American forces became "progressively superfluous" to the defense of South Vietnam. "U.S. units can begin to phase down as the Vietnamese Army is modernized and develops its capacity to the fullest." In an appearance on "Meet the Press" after the speech, Westmoreland predicted that American forces would start to withdraw from South Vietnam in "two years or less."

**And he was right: American forces began their drawdown from combat in August 1969 — but not before another 21,000 American soldiers died in combat.**

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