

Richard Nixon's 'Silent Majority' Plan

Fifty years ago, the president mapped out a future that could well have saved South Vietnam from Communism.

by Conrad Black



There has been some comment about the 50th anniversary, this past Sunday, of Richard Nixon's appeal to the "Silent Majority" of Americans to support his policy of handing over the conduct of the Vietnam War to the South Vietnamese and gradually withdrawing without making preemptive or unilateral concessions to the North Vietnamese. The country had waited over nine months since President Nixon's inauguration to find out what he proposed to do about the War. He had campaigned saying "I have a plan" (a phrase that has been in the news more recently). He had frequently criticized the way the war was being waged as American participation steadily increased under his predecessors, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Most of the reflective comment has implied that Nixon was

further dividing the country and exploiting the prestige of his office to mobilize the quiescent Americans who would choose to believe their president over the conscientious demonstrators who rightly objected to the war and wanted simply to give up and leave “by plane and by ship” (in the then-current expression). Mr. Nixon has also been in the news lately as commentators who criticize the outrageous partisanship of Adam Schiff’s handling of the spurious Ukraine impeachment drive cite the impeachment hearings of the Nixon era as a model of congressional due process. It was nothing of the kind – it was a disgraceful persecution of an extremely successful and capable president, but at least in the Watergate affair, some people had broken some laws, though there is still no conclusive evidence that Richard Nixon was among them.

The history of America’s Vietnam involvement prior to the “Silent Majority” address was tortuous. President Eisenhower had declined France’s request for assistance in suppressing a colonial uprising in the 1950’s, and specifically, France’s mad request for use of an atomic bomb against the Viet Minh Communist guerrillas of Ho Chi Minh. Once the Viet Minh were conceded the country of North Vietnam at the Geneva peace talks of 1954 (where Secretary of State John Foster Dulles famously declined to shake hands with Chinese premier Chou En-lai), South Vietnam was also set up as an independent country and Vice President Nixon represented the United States at its inaugural ceremony. It was agreed at Geneva that there would be a referendum on the issue of uniting North and South Vietnam. But the North professed to believe that it would be a single referendum for all Vietnamese, and the South believed it required two simultaneous referenda and majorities in both Vietnams. Under the northern formula, a majority was assured as the vote in the North would be at bayonet point and would be practically unanimous, while most South Vietnamese were anti-Communist. When the referendum was not held in the

ensuing two years, the North Vietnamese began their infiltration of the South and the southern Communists, the Viet Cong, began their guerrilla war against the South Vietnamese government in Saigon.

This action was heavily supported by China and the Soviet Union. Eisenhower had pulled the pin on the Vietnam grenade by admitting South Vietnam into the South East Asia Treaty Organization, which assured allied support for it in case of invasion. The U.S. had not signed at Geneva but undertook not to subvert the agreement, which was important in the dispute about the nature of the promised referendum. The infiltration and insurrection grew, and Kennedy sent 20,000 military "advisors" to South Vietnam. Johnson acted on the legal basis of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964, which authorized whatever action the president judged appropriate to repel "aggression" and assist a SEATO member "requiring aid to defend its liberty." This was eventually deemed a rather slender thread to justify the dispatch of over 500,000, and ultimately a total of nearly 2 million, conscripts to a combat zone where 58,000 Americans would die. This was the war Nixon inherited. Johnson had offered Ho Chi Minh peace in 1966 by the withdrawal of all non-indigenous forces from South Vietnam. If all Ho had wanted was to take over the South, he would have accepted that and then returned two years later – the United States would not plunge in again. But it was clear that Ho wanted to defeat the United States itself and achieve the decisive historic victory of the Communist over the non-Communist world. Ho refused any peace terms except that the U.S. dismiss the South Vietnamese government and withdraw unconditionally.

The two senior living U.S. Army commanders, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur, victorious World War II theater commanders, warned Kennedy and Johnson not to commit ground forces to Vietnam (although Eisenhower had welcomed the South into SEATO), and once such forces were about to be

committed, both warned that the only way to win was to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail – the thick network of jungle trails and roads by which the North infiltrated hundreds of thousands of men and millions of tons of supplies through Laos and into South Vietnam. Johnson and his local commander, General William Westmoreland, along with the Kennedy-Johnson defense secretary, Robert McNamara, ignored this advice. They took over the war from the South and poured in hundreds of thousands of men who killed astounding numbers of the enemy, while bombing North Vietnamese military targets. But the enemy was effectively uninterested in casualties. This was the war Nixon inherited.

He determined that American policy would not be determined by street demonstrators, that the U.S would depart Vietnam, but would train and equip the South Vietnamese to defend their own country: that he would negotiate but not surrender. Nixon continued Johnson's bombing pause, announced on March 31, 1968, when LBJ said he would not be seeking reelection. The litmus test of Nixon's policy came in April 1972, when he had reduced American force levels in-country from 545,000 to 28,000, mainly involved in protecting air bases, and had made his successful reopening of relations with China. U.S. Vietnam casualties were now minimal. As soon as he left China, the North Vietnamese launched a massive offensive. Nixon resumed bombing the North and gave intense and immediate air support to South Vietnamese ground operations. With this air support, the South decisively defeated the Communists, and Nixon maintained the bombing, 1,000 air strikes a day on the North, to exert pressure for them to become serious about negotiations. When he made his state visit to the Soviet Union in May 1972 to sign SALT 1 – the greatest arms-control agreement in history – he ordered the air strikes to be increased to 1,200 per day every day he was in the USSR. His triangulation of Vietnamese relations with Chinese and Russian relations caused both those countries to urge Hanoi to make peace, and this was done, in January 1973, after Nixon's

reelection by the greatest margin in American history, 18 million votes.

His reasoning was that when the North Vietnamese violated the agreement, as was expected, the 1972 formula would be reenacted: massive American bombing from Thailand and Guam (B-52s) and aircraft carriers, and the South would hold them off on the ground. If Richard Nixon had announced what he did 50 years ago, but added the deployment of forces to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as well as the immediate beginning of troop withdrawals, which was considered, it would probably have ended the war earlier. But it was a brilliant speech and a justifiable strategic and political decision. What no one could foresee, what no tragedian had ever imagined, was that the Democrats having deserted their own president (Johnson), the Republican Nixon would extract the country from the Democrats' war, preserving a non-Communist government in Saigon, and then the utter nonsense of Watergate would vaporize Nixon's political capital, he would give up his office rather than submit the country to the ignominy of an impeachment trial, which had not been considered for a president for over a century, and the Democrats would close off all aid to the South. The Democrats would ensure that their war would finally be completely lost, and with it millions of lives in Vietnam, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, and among the boat people who fled Vietnam by sea.

By any normal reckoning, Richard Nixon was one of the country's ten most capable presidents. It is time he was emancipated from this false cloud of moralistic condescension that has enshrouded him.

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