THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR
1962-1972

FIGHTING AGAINST TIME:
THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY
ON THE ROAD TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Dale Andradé

In Greek mythology there is a story of a man named Sisyphus who tricked the gods. His punishment in Hades was to forever roll a rock up a hill, only to have it tumble back to the bottom when he neared the top. If Vietnam was Hades, then the US advisors played the part of Sisyphus, constantly trying to push the South Vietnamese army towards military self-sufficiency, only to see it fall back down the hill of Vietnamisation whenever Hanoi launched an offensive.

Just how good that South Vietnamese Army was is the subject of much debate even today. Some believe that the South Vietnamese never adequately rose to the Communist challenge, that they were dragged down by corruption and incompetence and a regime that failed to gain legitimacy among its own people. On the other side are those who argue that the United States is largely to blame for the defeat. America trained the South Vietnamese to fight a conventional war, then bolstered that mistaken strategy with troops of its own. When that failed, they pulled up stakes and left without adequately preparing the South Vietnamese to survive alone.

Not surprisingly, there is truth to both sides of the argument. The South Vietnamese military was an organisation with many fine qualities, and by 1972 it had corrected some of its shortcomings. Although the military was legitimately criticised for poor leadership, there were many good officers, with even more aspiring young men rising through the ranks late in the war. South Vietnamese troops fought bravely and died for their country—approximately 185,000 regular army soldiers were killed and almost 500,000 wounded between 1960 and 1973, a casualty figure about three times larger than that suffered by United States forces.[1] Clearly, the South Vietnamese were committed to their cause. In the end, however, they were defeated by the Communist forces of North Vietnam. For that reason, this essay will concentrate on what went wrong within the South Vietnamese Army rather than what went right. Considering the eventual outcome of the war, the lessons of failure are the most instructive.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, was created in October 1955, the result of an American crash program designed to transform the poorly trained and organised French-sponsored Vietnamese National Army into an organisation along the lines of the US Army- At the time, this was not an unreasonable plan. The United States saw the situation in South Vietnam potentially unfolding much as it had in South Korea only a few years earlier—with an invasion by an aggressive communist neighbour to the north. Indeed, Hanoi had made it clear that it was not happy with the political settlement dividing the country in 1954, instead preferring a quick military reunification of the country under Communist control. Even then, the North Vietnamese Army was a formidable force, organised along conventional lines and with a proven record of standing up to the modern French army in many engagements. From Washington's viewpoint then, the threat came from an invasion of South Vietnam by the North, and the US military already knew how to deal with that contingency.

At its peak strength, the ARVN consisted of more than half a million men organised into eleven divisions of 105 light infantry battalions, nine airborne battalions, and more than 50 ranger battalions, all divided among four corps tactical zones dividing the country from north to south. Two 'elite' divisions, one of marines and the other of airborne troops, served as South Vietnam's general reserve. Armour, artillery, and ranger units were also available to each corps commander, as were contingents of local militia, known as the Regional and Popular Forces.[2]

In northernmost South Vietnam was I Corps. Sitting just south of the Demilitarised Zone, this was perhaps the most dangerous part of the country, the region where military planners expected a North Vietnamese offensive to erupt. Two infantry divisions, the 1st and 2nd, were placed there, with another (the 3rd Division) formed in 1971. Eventually, much of the Marine and Airborne Divisions would also spend most of their time in I Corps.

To the south was II Corps, geographically the largest military region in South Vietnam. It encompassed the rugged Central Highlands and 40 per cent of the country's land area, yet contained only a fifth of the population. Two units, the 22nd and 23rd Divisions, were responsible for the entire region.

The southernmost two corps zones were arguably the most important. Ill and IV Corps, as they were called, comprised about a third of the land area and 65 per cent of the population. The capital was situated here, as was the Mekong Delta, South Vietnam's economic bread basket. Not surprisingly, then, much of the South Vietnamese military strength remained there—the 5th, 18th, and 25th Divisions in III Corps and the 7th, 9th, and 21st Divisions in IV Corps.

On paper, the ARVN was impressive, but the war did not unfold as expected. There was no invasion from the north. Instead, in 1961 Hanoi created the Lao Dong Party, which Americans came to call the Viet Cong, and it soon became clear that Saigon was battling an insurgency. Between 1961 and 1964 American and South Vietnamese military planners shaped the ARVN to better combat the burgeoning insurgency. The two main objectives were, first, to increase the number and mobility of South Vietnamese ground forces and improve their leadership and training in small-unit tactics, and second, to provide more security in the countryside where the insurgency was growing. Both objectives would become the core of American advisory efforts and neither would ever be completely resolved, though not for want of trying. Between 1960 and 1964 the ARVN grew from 150,000 to 250,000 and incorporated a similar number of territorial forces, or militia to back up the army.[3]

In order to match the growing US role in South Vietnam, in February 1962 Washington formed a new unified headquarters in Saigon, called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to coordinate all American military efforts. MACV was an advisory command, but it was also a theatre-level unified command designed to adapt to the changing war. At this point neither American nor South Vietnamese officials had a firm understanding of the sort of war they faced. 'Counterinsurgency' was the watchword of the Kennedy administration, but as far as the Army was concerned, this really only meant using regular military forces to chase down guerrillas and often ignored the political dimensions of revolutionary war, relegating that to non-military organisations and to the US Embassy. This mindset was passed on to the ARVN. During the period 1960 through 1963, the South Vietnamese concentrated on learning the Viet Cong order of battle and chasing guerrilla bands in the countryside rather than on pacification. When Communist military action slowed, as it often did during any given year, Saigon viewed this as evidence that military operations were taking a toll. What they did not take into account was the fact that the insurgents might simply be resting while Communist political cadres were still hard at work in the villages. From the beginning of the war, the enemy controlled the operational tempo, for the most part selecting when and where they would fight.

By 1963 the ARVN was beginning to suffer major setbacks on the battlefield. In January of that year, at the village of Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta southwest of Saigon, South Vietnamese forces were ordered to root out a group of entrenched Viet Cong guerrillas. But things went awry. Timid South Vietnamese commanders failed to close decisively with the enemy—even though they outnumbered them and had armor. In the end the Viet Cong retreated, and while officials attempted to portray the battle as a victory, the advisors themselves—along with several reporters present at the battle—saw it as a fiasco and perhaps a sign of things to come.[4]

Ap Bac was just the tip of a iceberg. In November a group of South Vietnamese generals assassinated President Ngo Dinh Diem in a coup that had the tacit support of the United States. Stability vanished and the armed forces were further politicised at a time when enemy gains were continuing unabated. In June 1964, a new MACV commander, General William C Westmoreland, brought with him to Vietnam Washington's desire to take on a more offensive role, one which would stave off defeat for South Vietnam by bringing American firepower to bear on the increasingly dangerous Communist forces. In March 1965 US Marines landed at Danang, and in May the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first US Army ground combat unit in Vietnam, deployed to Bien Hoa outside Saigon, followed in quick succession by other Marine and Army divisions. By the end of the year there were 184,000 American military personnel in South Vietnam, up from 23,000 just twelve months earlier.

The decision to commit US troops to combat was a clear admission that the ARVN was not capable of standing on its own. Throughout 1965 American troops increasingly took over the responsibility of launching offensive operations against enemy main force units while the ARVN turned its attention toward area security. This division of labour was formalised in the 1966 Combined Campaign Plan, and for the next three years little would change. While the American decision to take over much of the fighting made sense in light of the worsening situation in South Vietnam, it encouraged the ARVN to settle into a static defence, dubbed the 'bunker mentality' by some advisors. In a single year ARVN performance dropped dramatically. South Vietnamese units killed twenty per cent fewer enemy soldiers in 1966 than in 1965, even though Communist battle casualties rose by 50 per cent. Between 1966 and 1969 South Vietnamese combat battalions were, man for man, only about 55 per cent as effective as US battalions, though one has to take into account that ARVN battalions had only one-tenth the artillery and air support available to a US battalion.[5]

The ARVN's shortcomings boiled down to four basic issues, all of them interrelated in many ways. First, the national strategy left Saigon perpetually on the defensive; second, the ARVN quickly became over-reliant on American support; third, the military suffered from generally poor leadership; and finally, there was endemic desertion within the ranks. The first two problems were largely the fault of the United States. Despite the fact that North Vietnam made it clear that it intended to reunite the country by force, US planning never seriously considered giving the South Vietnamese an offensive capability aimed at carrying the war into the Cambodian and Laotian base areas or into North Vietnam itself. At the same time, they came to rely on the presence of American units and their firepower that would perform much of the manoeuvre warfare.

Arguably the most debilitating weakness was poor leadership. American advisors from Westmoreland on down certainly knew this, but lacked the authority to remedy the situation. The highest ranking South Vietnamese officers often owed their positions more to political connections than to battlefield prowess. In his important statistical study of the Vietnam War, Thomas C Thayer used the 7th ARVN Division as a case study of how good leadership alone could turn an ineffective unit into an effective one. After the US 9th Infantry Division withdrew from IV Corps in the summer of 1969, the Mekong Delta region became almost entirely the responsibility of three South Vietnamese units—the 7th, 9th, and 21st Divisions. Concerned about the poor performance of ARVN units there, US advisors pressured Saigon to replace inferior commanders. President Nguyen Van Thieu agreed and relieved several officers, including the 7th Division commander, Nguyen Thanh Hoang, and replaced him with Colonel (later Brigadier General) Nguyen Khoa Nam, an aggressive brigade commander from the Airborne Division. During the first six months of 1970 the division became more aggressive, spending 30 per cent more time on offensive operations. As Thayer concluded, 'The lone action of putting a competent commander in charge produced these profound favorable effects. No other changes were necessary.'[6]

This case was the exception rather than the rule, although in some cases Saigon was taking steps to get rid of poor officers. Within the pacification system responsible for security in the countryside, which on the American side was administered by the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program within MACV and on the South Vietnamese side by a system of military officers administering provinces and districts and coordinating territorial militia operations, US officials succeeded in formulating an agreement with President Thieu to replace ineffective or incompetent officers. By 1970 CORDS had pressured the South Vietnamese Government to replace virtually all of the worst province and district chiefs. The system impressed US Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who in October 1970 asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'do you think that the MACV-CORDS system ... could be adapted to improve the leadership of [ARVN] military units?' The secretary also pointed out that 'there is little sign of a systematic and continuous MACV effort to have the [South Vietnamese government] replace poor combat commanders with good ones'.[7] MACV never had much luck, however.

The situation was exacerbated by a shortage of experienced officers. Between 1967 and 1972 the officer corps had too many lieutenants and captains and not enough majors and colonels. The manpower was there; Saigon simply did not promote them fast enough. In his study, Thayer argued that the reason for this was the 'product of a promotion system that responded more to the politics of the senior generals than to the needs of the professional military service'.[8]

Leadership problems inevitably affected morale, a fact clearly demonstrated in ARVN desertions. Between 1965 and 1972 a stunning 840,000 troops from all services deserted the ranks, a figure that exceed casualties by 6 to 1. The South Vietnamese Army was responsible for almost 80 per cent of that figure. Desertions were high even in the elite forces—ranger units suffered as much as 55 per cent desertion rate in a given year; airborne units 30 per cent; and the Marines fifteen per cent.[9]

These fundamental flaws remained uncorrected through more than a decade of American advice and support. Despite a general realisation within the US Army that the United States would not fight in Vietnam forever, between 1965 and 1969 there was no serious and concerted effort to bring the ARVN up to the level it would clearly need to be in order to stand alone against the North Vietnamese. Instead, advisors often served as a conduit to American firepower, and the ARVN became addicted. As noted military historian Harry Summers observed, 'If there is a criticism of this field advisory effort, it is that US advisors were too good, for they inadvertently helped to create a dependency that was to prove fatal once US support was withdrawn ...'[10]

But in the final analysis, advisors could not change the basic weaknesses in the South Vietnamese military system; they could only shore up the structure. As the US Army's official history of the advisory effort in Vietnam concluded, 'Why, after all, should Americans force changes down the throats of the Vietnamese generals who, by 1968, ought to have known what was possible and what was necessary to ensure the survival of South Vietnam?'[11]

The Nixon administration formally announced its Vietnamisation plan in July 1969, and US combat units began redeploying from Vietnam. Since the national strategy counted on a combination of US and South Vietnamese forces to combat the Communists, the eventual reduction of more than half a million American troops left a very large hole in the order of battle that would inevitably stretch the ARVN almost to the breaking point. Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, the Chief of Staff of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, observed that the ARVN's pre-Vietnamisation posture in the countryside 'nailed down our main striking force—the divisions—in a static, helpless posture from which they could not be extricated'. When the Americans left, he continued, 'We therefore lost our strategic mobility and initiative'.[12]

When historians write about early 'tests' of Vietnamisation they invariably come up with two major examples: the incursion into Cambodia in the spring of 1970 and the offensive into Laos in early 1971. In the first, dubbed Operations TOAN THANG 41 and 42, the South Vietnamese portion of a combined thrust into Cambodia west of Saigon, III Corps used its 5th and 25th ARVN Divisions, along with ranger units and two armoured cavalry squadrons, to attack enemy base areas in a region known as the Parrot's Beak. Between 14 April and 30 June some 50,000 South Vietnamese troops were on the offensive, chasing North Vietnamese units from their strongholds and destroying their supply depots. South

Vietnamese planners called it 'the most successful operation ever conducted by III Corps'.[13] American advisors accompanying the South Vietnamese into Cambodia largely agreed, noting that it 'demonstrated the capability of the Vietnamese forces to conduct large unit operations without major US assistance', though they also pointed to a lack of aggressiveness among the armoured cavalry and an over-reliance on air support.[14]

The overall success of the operation was based on three factors. First, the South Vietnamese were fighting alongside an American force of better than two divisions that ensured the North Vietnamese remained fully engaged. Second, the South Vietnamese were for the first time leaving their defensive shell and going on the offensive in a formerly 'off limits' area. Finally, and most importantly, the South Vietnamese had superior commanders leading the operation. The III Corps commander, Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri, according to one account, 'was aboard his command ship all day and every day during these operations, making contacts, receiving reports, giving orders, and stimulating his unit commanders on the ground into action ... His combat prowess, personal courage and command ability became legendary and widely recognised.'[15] To the south, IV Corps also supported the operations with its own smaller thrust into Cambodia, and its commander. Major General Nguyen Viet Thanh, was also a first-rate officer. But within a year, both Tri and Thanh were dead, killed in helicopter crashes, and South Vietnam was deprived of two of its best commanders.

This combination of factors was the exception, not the rule, however. During the second crossborder operation the South Vietnamese lacked two of these factors—strong leadership and American troops fighting alongside them—and the outcome was much different. Launched in February 1971, Operation LAM SON 719 was aimed at North Vietnam's second major concentration of base areas, the Route 9 corridor into southern Laos. This was Hanoi's main infiltration route into northern South Vietnam, a region that was well-guarded and crisscrossed with complex lines of communication and resupply. American planning was haphazard, hurried, and unimaginative, and the South Vietnamese would pay the price. In early February the three elite units—the Marines, Airborne, and Rangers—along with the 1st Armored Brigade, pushed towards the Laotian town of Tchepone in the heart of North Vietnamese Base Area 604. This time, American advisors were not permitted to accompany the units, but US aviation assets provided much of the lift and gunship capability. The South Vietnamese were outnumbered from the start, their 17,000-man force facing at least 22,000 North Vietnamese, including armour. Although the objective of LAM SON 719 was to ravage the base area and hinder future North Vietnamese infiltration, the operation soon turned into a rout. The South Vietnamese reached Tchepone on 6 March, but were immediately chased away. During the next three weeks they fought their way back to the border, suffering more than 7500 casualties—almost half their force—in the process, including 1764 killed. American losses were also heavy. A total of 108 helicopters were destroyed and another 618 damaged, and 215 men were killed. The enemy suffered an estimated 20,000 dead, but the images of South Vietnamese soldiers fleeing the battlefield, some of them clinging to the skids of flying helicopters, dominated the news.[16]

Although LAM SON 719 was a defeat for the South Vietnamese, President Nixon, in a televised address, announced that 'Tonight I can report that Vietnamisation has succeeded'. The truth was the opposite. Despite the disadvantages they faced, the South Vietnamese did not fight well and they failed to accomplish their goal of pushing the North Vietnamese out of the base area. Much of the problem was caused by poor tactical coordination. For example, advisers with the 1st Armored Brigade, which during much of LAM SON 719 was under the operational control of the Airborne Division, noted that the Airborne Division commander 'failed to support [armoured units] or withdraw them even when [they] became surrounded on three sides by enemy armor ...'[17] Even the Marines, who, in the words of an advisor, 'performed admirably in the face of the strongest enemy forces they have yet encountered', showed fundamental flaws in their operational execution, including an 'inexplicable failure to launch aggressive ground action' to clear the enemy from around key firebases.[18]

Unlike the case of the Cambodian incursion, this time leadership was a liability. The I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, a better bureaucratic survivor than a military commander, failed to execute effective command or support his troops in the field.

After the war, General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, wrote with Lam firmly in mind that 'The appointment of general officers to these key command jobs should have been devoid of political considerations and based entirely on military professionalism and competence'.[19] Unfortunately, Lam was not relieved until after he committed another serious blunder more than a year later.

The most serious test of Vietnamisation came in the spring of 1972 when North Vietnam launched the so-called Easter Offensive, a massive attack designed to achieve a conventional military victory. Approximately 120,000 troops backed by armour and artillery struck South Vietnam on three fronts at a time when the dwindling US ground forces were down to less than 100,000, of which only 5000 were combat troops. Still in-country, however, was the US advisory network, which continued to maintain American advisors with each of the South Vietnamese combat divisions.[20]

The opening shots of the offensive came in I Corps. At noon on 30 March the North Vietnamese attacked the arc of South Vietnamese firebases along the demilitarised zone and the western border with Laos, raining artillery rounds on the surprised defenders. On 2 April the South Vietnamese surrendered Camp Carroll and its major concentration of long-range artillery, giving the enemy unrestricted access to western Quang Tri Province. The North Vietnamese advance then slowed for three weeks, but on the morning of 28 April they attacked again, pushing to within 1.5 kilometres of the capital. General Vu Van Giai, the 3rd Division commander, had fewer than 2000 troops left, so he decided to abandon the city and consolidate his forces south of Quang Tri City, even though this meant conceding most of Quang Tri Province to the North Vietnamese. It was a sound decision and might have saved the remnants of the 3rd Division had not the I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Lam, ordered Giai to 'hold at all costs'. Lam allowed Giai no flexibility to move any units without specific approval.

Bewildered by the conflicting orders, South Vietnamese units splintered and virtually disappeared, abandoning most of the province north of the capital. US advisors in Quang Tri called for rescue helicopters, and on 1 May the US Air Force evacuated 132 survivors from Quang Tri, 80 of them US military personnel.

Although Lam had proven to be a poor officer since taking command of I Corps in 1966, it took the debacle of 1972 to finally convince Saigon to remove him. Lam was replaced by Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, one of the best officers in the South Vietnamese Army. His mission was to defend Hue, minimise further losses in the region, and recapture lost territory. Truong pushed the North Vietnamese from Quang Tri City in September, although much of the province remained in enemy hands for the rest of the war.

In II Corps, South Vietnam's central region, the North Vietnamese tried to split South Vietnam from the rugged Central Highlands to the sea. Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, a timid officer, commanded the region, though his weakness was offset by the highly competent John Paul Vann, one of the most experienced and effective American senior advisors of the war.

Although the main objective of the North Vietnamese attack was the Central Highlands, the fighting began in coastal Binh Dinh Province, long a stronghold of Communist support. The attacks were partly a diversion intended to draw South Vietnamese troops away from the Central Highlands. The ruse almost succeeded, but Vann persuaded Dzu to leave the 23rd Division in the highlands to defend against the main thrust.

When the North Vietnamese realised that the diversion had failed, they concentrated on the Central Highlands. During the second week in April the enemy attacked the small district town of Tan Canh and nearby Dak To firebase. The South Vietnamese force there, part of the 22nd ARVN Division, quickly disintegrated, leaving the way open to the provincial capital of Kontum. General Dzu was soon relieved of command, replaced by Major General Nguyen Van Toan.

But the North Vietnamese inexplicably paused at Tan Canh and Dak To for almost three weeks, allowing the South Vietnamese time to reinforce Kontum. When the attack did come in mid-May, US airstrikes decimated the North Vietnamese and prevented the loss of the provincial capital. Fierce fighting by the 23rd ARVN Division, commanded by another solid officer, Colonel Ly Tong Ba, ensured that the enemy attacks would fail, and by June the North Vietnamese were retreating back across the border.

The third phase of the offensive occurred in III Corps west of Saigon, around the town of An Loc in Binh Long Province, base of the 5th ARVN Division. In early April North Vietnamese troops feinted into neighbouring Tay Ninh Province, but advisors with the 5th ARVN Division correctly predicted that An Loc was the real target.

North Vietnamese armour played a larger role at An Loc than at any other place during the Easter Offensive. Enemy tanks stormed through the town of Loc Ninh just north of An Loc on 5 April, then struck An Loc itself on 13 April, but poor use of infantry in support of the armour, combined with the ARVN's effective use of handheld light anti-tank weapons hampered the onslaught. By 21 April the attack had faltered and the North Vietnamese settled into a classic siege.

South Vietnamese military officials in Saigon planned to relieve the city by sending the 21st ARVN Division north from the Mekong Delta, the only time during the entire war that an infantry division moved outside of its corps area of operation. For three weeks the division crept northward, often held at bay by much smaller North Vietnamese units. Although the 21st Division never reached An Loc, its slow advance may have helped turn the tide of battle because it diverted more than a regiment of enemy troops.

On 11 May the North Vietnamese again tried to overrun An Loc in what advisors later described as 'the fiercest attack'. An Loc held, with terrible losses on both sides. While the North Vietnamese were completely spent, the ARVN had enough strength left to launch limited counterattacks, gradually driving the enemy to the north and west. However, the town of An Loc was destroyed and much of the territory surrounding remained under North Vietnamese control.

South Vietnam survived the offensive and claimed a victory, though a costly one. Government figures claimed 10,000 soldiers killed, 33,000 wounded, and more than 2000 missing in action. Over 1000 of them died during the first two weeks in April. However, unofficial figures ran much higher, placing South Vietnamese combat deaths at almost 30,000, with 78,000 wounded and 14,000 missing, though these were never confirmed.[21] Even so, the ARVN could not have prevailed without the massive air support called in by American advisors. Although some ARVN units performed well, many did not, so in the end the South Vietnamese effort during the Easter Offensive really proved very little—except that the South Vietnamese had survived one more round in the long war, and few doubted that Hanoi would attack again in the years ahead. In the meantime, Saigon could do nothing but wait for the next offensive.

This defensive strategy remained the crux of South Vietnam's disadvantageous position throughout the war. While North Vietnam could prepare interminably for an offensive with little fear of a pre-emptive strike, and then pick the time and place of its attack, Saigon was forced to remain forever vigilant, maintaining a thinly spread defensive network all over South Vietnam. Other weaknesses also remained. Defensively, the ARVN was not organised in depth with sufficient fortification, and there was a lack of firepower coordination between the Army, Marines, and Air Force. Artillery was often broken down into small elements confined to isolated firebases which became good targets for enemy artillery. Finally, South Vietnam's reserves were woefully inadequate. Since all of South Vietnam's infantry divisions were deployed in static defence, by 1972 each Corps had only one ranger group as a tactical reserve The strategic reserve—the Airborne and Marine Divisions—were already committed in I Corps and could not reinforce other attacks across the country. On the eve of the American departure from Vietnam, General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, freely admitted that 'Vietnamisation still had a long way to go toward developing the self-supporting capabilities of the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces).'[22]

Why, if Vietnamisation had been going on since 1969, was improvement so difficult to discern? Clearly, as we have seen, progress was being hampered by something deeper than manpower and material. Indeed, at the beginning of the Easter Offensive the South Vietnamese Army was among the best-equipped in the world. By 1972 the United States had provided 640,000 M16 rifles, 34,000 M79 grenade launchers, 40,000 radios, 20,000 trucks, 400 tanks (including state-of-the-art M48 tanks), 200 helicopters, and almost 700 fixed-wing aircraft, including F-5 and A-37 jet fighters. Such military power would seem sufficient to turn back Hanoi's aggression.[23]

The problem was that none of the ARVN's basic weaknesses had been solved by Vietnamisation. Two that have been discussed earlier are worth revisiting in the specific context of the Easter Offensive: the shortage of combat officers and desertions. By June 1972 there was such a shortage of field-grade officers that out of 104 South Vietnamese manoeuvre battalions, only four were commanded by lieutenant colonels. The rest were commanded by majors, captains—even lieutenants. By October the situation was worse, with only one battalion commanded by a lieutenant colonel. By the end of the year a new officer development program improved training, but the South Vietnamese officer corps never completely recovered.[24]

The opposite was true in the enlisted ranks. Despite heavy losses in manpower, MACV noted that 'the RVNAF personnel replacement system seemed to function adequately ... in that losses were replaced rapidly'. Only during April when the level of enemy attacks was highest, and September when South Vietnamese forces were taking heavy casualties during the counter-offensive in Quang Tri, did replacements fail to keep up with losses. By the beginning of 1973, South Vietnamese manpower had all but recovered from the Easter Offensive, boasting 566,996 regular forces and 549,909 in the territorial militia. Every battalion in both the Army and Marines were at least 73 per cent of authorised strength, with most of them over 90 per cent (The Airborne and Marine Divisions, elite units which had been badly mauled during the Quang Tri counteroffensive, actually showed a net increase in total strength). These statistics are more interesting in light of the fact that 70 per cent of all manpower losses were from desertions, a figure that was 43 per cent higher during 1972 than any previous year.[25] In the end, therefore, guns and tanks—of which Saigon had plenty—were not as crucial to South Vietnamese military effectiveness as intangible factors such as leadership and morale.

The Paris Peace Accords, signed on 23 January 1973, ended all direct US military support to Saigon. Although President Nixon intended to back the peace treaty with the threat of American bombers should Hanoi break the accord, it was not to be. In July 1973 Congress passed legislation ending funding for US military programs in Southeast Asia. In addition, although Saigon had been promised $1.45 billion for fiscal year (FY) 1975, Congress slashed the figure to $700 million. This was not the first drastic cut. Military aid had reached a high of $2.7 billion in FY 73, but then dropped more than 50 per cent to $1.26 billion the following year. The cut in FY 1975 funds only continued the downward trend.[26]

At the same time argued some critics, North Vietnam was receiving 'uninterrupted' aid from its benefactors in the Soviet Union and China.[27] In reality, North Vietnam was also experiencing severe cutbacks from its Communist benefactors. Figures from US intelligence agencies showed a dramatic drop in military aid to Hanoi, from a high during the 1972 offensive of $750 million, to $330 million the following year and $400 million in 1974—figures which, even at their highest point, paled in comparison with US aid to South Vietnam.[2]8 General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's Defense Minister, wrote that while Hanoi planned for a new offensive 'we needed to economize on our use of artillery and tanks, because after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, both the Soviet Union and China stopped supplying us with these weapons'.[29]

Decreased funding had just as much of an impact on North Vietnamese troops as it did on the South Vietnamese. During the 1972 offensive, Communist forces fired more than 220,000 rounds of tank and artillery ammunition, but by 1974 the North Vietnamese Army's entire stock of tank and artillery ammunition was only 100,000 rounds, including strategic reserves.[30]

The Communist small arms ammunition stockpile in South Vietnam was 70,000 tons, along with 107,000 tons of gasoline, and 80,000 tons of food. Although these numbers were far from optimum for another major offensive, Hanoi believed that the stockpile 'was sufficient for us to support large forces conducting protracted, continuous combat operations as called for in our strategic combat plan'.[31]

Indeed, North Vietnamese forces were much more frugal with their firepower than their opponents. According to US Department of Defense figures, American forces in 1969 used an average of 128,400 tons of munitions per month (75,600 tons were bombs, the rest artillery). The South Vietnamese used about ten per cent of that figure per month, while the highest North Vietnamese expenditure, reached during the 1972 offensive, was about 1000 tons per month, or less than one per cent of the American total. Even in 1974, as military officials in Saigon were warning the US Congress of the dire ammunition shortages that would result from a reduction in aid, South Vietnamese forces fired an average of 56 tons of munitions for every ton used by the North Vietnamese.[32]

In 1975, South Vietnam was at no greater disadvantage vis-a-vis its opponent than in the previous five years. The real problem was that, as South Vietnam faced the final showdown, its armed forces were still plagued by problems first revealed more than a decade earlier. Any progress they had made was trumped by the North Vietnamese, who were consistently better at incorporating lessons learned and applying them to future campaigns. Thomas Thayer said it best. The ARVN 'was a fairly good fighting force', he wrote, 'but it was not going to be good enough'.[33]

Endnotes

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). 'Last Update of Southeast Asia Statistical Summary Tables', 3 December 1973, table 50, Cumulative Casualties.
2. The data in this essay do not include figures for the territorial militia, known as the Regional and Popular Forces, which by 1970 were roughly the same size as the regular army. Militia casualties were also similar to those of the army, making the total figure for South Vietnamese killed in action between 1960 and 1975 approximately 1.37 million men.
3. Memo, Major General Ben Sternberg, MACV J-1, to COMUSMACV, 7 July 1965, sub: RVNAF Strength Summary.
4. For a complete account see David M Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything But Learn From It* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing, 2001).
5. Southeast Asia Analysis Report, 'GVN Regular Force Effectiveness', August 1970, 18.
6. Ibid, 66.
7. Memo, Sec of Def to Chairman, JCS, 7 October 1970, sub RVNAF Leadership.
8. Southeast Asia Analysis Report, ' RVNAF Leadership', June 1968, 48.
9. Southeast Asia Analysis Report, 'RVNAF Desertions', June-July 1971, 12.
10. Harry G Summers, Jr, *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 236.
11. Jeffrey J Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 515.
12. Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, *The RVNAF* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 381.
13. Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1978), 69.
14. AAR, Op TOAN THANG, Combat Adv Team 90, 25th ARVN Div, 11June 1970, 2.
15. General Cao Van Vien, *Leadership* (Washington, DC: US Center of Military History, 1981), 126-7.
16. For details see Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719* (Washington, DC US Army Center of Military History, 1979).
17. AAR, Op LAM SON 719, Senior Advisor, 1st Armored Bde, 26 March 1971, 2.
18. Rpt, Senior Marine Advisor to Dep Senior Advisor, I Corps, 21 March 1971, sub: Combat Operations AAR LAM SON 719, 5.
19. General Cao Van Vien and Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 102.
20. Detail on the Easter Offensive comes from Dale Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, K S: University Press of Kansas, 2001).
21. Friendly casually rates are for the period between 30 March and 30 July. Although many South Vietnamese soldiers died retaking Quang Tri during August and September, they are not included as part of the Easter Offensive. Army Activities Report, Southeast Asia, 'Statistical Information on Current Enemy Offensive', 26 August 1972.
22. Vien and Khuyen, Reflections on the Vietnam War, 110.
23. 'How Good is Saigon's Army?', *Time*, 17 April 1972.
24. MACV 1972-73 Command History, vol I: C-26.
25. OASD Report: RVNAF Appraisal', 15 February 1973; MACV 1972-73 Command History, vol I: C-28.
26. These figures also included military aid to Laos, but that portion amounted to only a small fraction of the total. For FY 1973 funds see Public Law 92-570 10/26/1972; FY 1974 Public Law 92-570 11/16/1973; FY 1975 Public Law 93-437 10/08/1874.
27. For example see Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1999), 382.
28. Figures cited in Arnold R Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 334.
29. General Vo Nguyen Giap, with Pham Chi Nhan, *The General Headquarters During the Spring of Total Victory: A Memoir* [*Tong Hanh Dinh Trong Mua Xuan Toan Thong: Hoi Uc*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2000), 147.
30. Merle Pribbenow, 'North Vietnam's Final Offensive: Strategic Endgame Nonpareil', *Parameters*, Winter 1999-2000, 59-60.
31. Merle Pribbenow, trans, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 350.

32 Paul N McCloskey, 'The North Vietnam-South Vietnam Confrontation, Report on Vietnam Fact-finding Trip, 24 February to 3 March 1975, *Congressional Record*, 14 March 1975, 6777.

33. Thomas C Thayer, ' How to Analyze a War Withoul Fronts: Vietnam 1965-72', *Journal of Defense Research*, series B, Tactical Warfare, vol 7B: 3 (Fall 1975), 823.