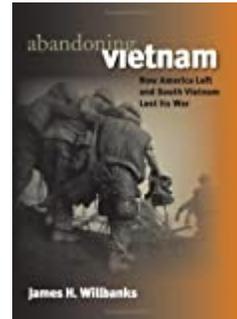




**James H. Willbanks.** *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. x + 377 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1331-1.



**Reviewed by** Ginger R. Davis (Department of History, Temple University)

**Published on** H-War (November, 2004)

## Abandonment Issues

In a letter to his local congressman, dated September 1963 and forwarded to President Kennedy, George McT. Kahin, who became one of America's foremost Southeast Asia experts, demanded that the United States halt its "faltering and schizophrenic" approach to South Vietnam. He warned that unless its contradictory and counterproductive policies ceased immediately, the United States would face responsibility for the "ultimate failure of their regime." [1] His letter is similar to many received by Washington in the years prior to the introduction of U.S. ground troops, but their warnings went unheeded. A decade later, President Nixon faced similar pressures and concerns, but on a much more urgent scale.

James H. Willbanks was an infantry officer who served in Vietnam and is presently a professor at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In *Abandoning Vietnam* he examines the post-1968 period using primary sources from both military and diplomatic circles. Focusing on the Vietnamization program, the Paris peace negotiations, and America's withdrawal, Willbanks argues that inept planning by the United States led to the ultimate fall of

South Vietnam (SVN). He characterizes the performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), as well as other branches of the SVN military, as poor, citing their lack of relevant training. The flawed implementation of Vietnamization, especially in the context of ongoing diplomatic negotiations, resulted in an overload of pressures on SVN. Thus, the author concurs with those who view the Vietnam War as an overall conflict between military need and political pragmatism, achieving what Larry Berman termed "no peace, no honor." [2]

In part, Willbanks reveals, fault can be traced through the long United States record in Vietnam. Beginning in the early advisory years, serious but ignored recommendations promoted a "Vietnamese" war, and subsequently a "de-Americanization" in the 1960s. U.S. officials had advocated training South Vietnamese forces since the late 1950s, but others overruled these proposals continuously in favor of battle-ready American forces. Moreover, problems such as corruption within the South Vietnamese military, had never received serious attention. Given the availability of trained U.S. armed forces to handle enemy attacks, concerns about South Viet-

name preparedness remained low until the post-1968 shift in strategy. Concurring with authors like Andrew Krepinevich, the author rightly points out that “big unit war” became the focus of U.S. military policy, and counterinsurgency doctrine played a supporting role in favor of conventional military strategies.[4]

Nixon entered the White House intent on withdrawing from Vietnam. The president’s shift in strategy, combining force with secret diplomacy, promised a peace with honor, but Nixon soon came to realize that a decent interval might be all he could attain. In Willbanks’ book, Nixon does not serve as the scapegoat for all that went awry; Larry Berman’s portrayal of Nixon as a talented and consistent deceiver is much more critical. Willbanks attributes the problems that plagued the Nixon administration to other issues, including internal conflicts that, combined with years of flawed policymaking, may have led to a loss of bargaining power in peace talks. Nixon believed that Vietnamization could buy him time to use force to make the North Vietnamese begin serious peace negotiations. He also needed time to make certain that Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) were trained and equipped properly, with new command structures and an expanded indigenous personnel base. According to Willbanks, Nixon believed his goals could be accomplished and sought to use a variety of methods to end the war, preserve South Vietnam, and retain American honor.

Domestic pressures would endanger Nixon’s plans. As Willbanks argues, Kissinger’s salted peanuts doctrine (“the more you have, the more you want” principle applied to troop withdrawals) proved all too prescient. As redeployments increased, Nixon found himself hemmed in by Congress, antiwar factions, and the media when military realities in Vietnam called for delays. The need for proof that South Vietnam could defend itself became so desperate, according to the author, that American officials used one SVN semi-victory in September 1972 (Operation Lam Son 719) as definitive evidence that the United States had been successful in its Vietnamization program. The White House issued strict instructions to officials in-country that the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) had to succeed. U.S. military leaders stretched to meet deadlines and policy objectives, but not without issuing their much more pessimistic views to Washington. Constrained by policy, Willbanks asserts, U.S. representatives in Vietnam did all they could to construct a viable future for South Vietnam.

Acknowledging that many scholars have placed the

blame for South Vietnam’s fall on the shoulders of Congress, the author instead focuses much of his critique on the Vietnamization effort and identifies the Melvin Laird-Creighton Abrams struggles as pivotal. America ultimately abandoned South Vietnam, according to the author, in part because Laird’s brand of Vietnamization was doomed from the outset. Such adjustments occurred too late and under extreme time pressures. Willbanks details how the realities on the ground in South Vietnam created an atmosphere fraught with uncertainties and a lack of confidence, both in Vietnamization and in the South Vietnamese military, especially ARVN. Willbanks concludes that “the process of Vietnamization began too late, stifled South Vietnamese initiative and induced dependence on U.S. support, and failed to address the fundamental weaknesses that led to the ultimate downfall of the RVNAF” (p. 285).

The SVN government encountered similar problems. Thieu was never content during this period, especially as it increasingly became apparent that the Americans actually did mean to withdraw. Yet Thieu reluctantly went along with preparations for a United States withdrawal, hoping that in the final analysis the Nixon administration would not allow his regime to collapse. Willbanks calls this Thieu’s “self-imposed delusion” and uses this to explain why SVN failed to build a successful strategy sans the United States (p. 284). He asserts that Thieu always believed that the United States would stay involved, if only in an advisory (plus economic) capacity. Partly as a result of Nixon’s rhetoric, Thieu did not envision a South Vietnam without some level of United States backing; few Washington or South Vietnamese officials would have found that image credible either.

Willbanks’s critique that the White House came to the “one war” concept only in March 1969 is an important one (pp. 50-56). The lack of integration and a combined command structure was a critical flaw in U.S. policy. He rightly notes that reliance on American-supported firepower and technology led to unrealistic SVN strategies. Willbanks contributes a detailed look at the efforts of the RVNAF and, more generally, U.S. policy debates of this time. The author’s claims could have been extended by a more careful examination of civil-military tensions, a la Robert Buzzanco, to further his explanation of policy evolution.[5] A considerable portion of his argument rests on the shoulders of the early U.S. advisory effort’s failings, errors which occurred many years prior to the period of his examination. Consideration of Lao Dong successes in the post-1968 era would challenge and perhaps extend his critique of events, as suggested

by scholars such as Ngo Vinh Long.[6] Willbanks uses some North Vietnamese sources, albeit uncritically, as well as U.S. archival materials, such as military reports, intelligence analyses, and policy memos to support his claims. Yet the missing perspectives in many such works are those of the South Vietnamese, which might bring a more nuanced consideration to charges of ineffectiveness, as would more evidence from the Vietnamese perspectives generally.

#### Notes

[1] John F. Kennedy Library and Archive, POF, WHCF, Subject Files Box 75, File CO 312 General, 7/1/63-9/30/63, p. 2. See for example George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986) and George McT. Kahin and John W.

Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: The Dial Press, 1967).

[2] Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

[3] Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

[4] Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[5] Ngo Vinh Long "The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath" in Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, eds., *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Ginger R. Davis. Review of Willbanks, James H., *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9976>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).