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James H. Wilbanks. *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost the War*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004. ISBN: 0-7006-1331-5. 27 photos. 19 maps. 3 charts. 11 tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xi + 377 pages.

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James H. Wilbanks has written one of the finest military histories to date of the final two stages of the Vietnam War: the period from the Tet Offensive in 1968 to the American withdrawal in 1972, and the bitter end game, 1972-1975. A retired U.S. Army officer and a professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Wilbanks focuses much of his attention on the Nixon Administration's strategy of strengthening the Armed Forces of South Vietnam (RVNAF) while at the same time withdrawing American forces from the war. Known as "Vietnamization," the goal of the program was to make the RVNAF capable of standing alone against its Communist opponents. Why Vietnamization failed just two years after the United States withdrew its forces from Vietnam on 29 March 1973 is the central question of the book.

Drawing on an impressive range of primary and secondary sources, Wilbanks charts the course of Vietnamization from its origin in 1969 until the fall of Saigon in 1972. In addition to providing superb summaries of the major military campaigns fought by the RVNAF during this period, Wilbanks also delves into some of the political-military elements of the story. We learn, for example, that General Creighton W. Abrams, the Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, warned the Nixon

Administration in a 2 September 1969 memo that Vietnamization “would not permit” the South Vietnamese to handle the combined threat of a North Vietnamese invasion and the insurgency in the South (28). The main reasons for his pessimistic outlook were “poor leadership, high desertion rates, and corruption in the upper ranks of the RVNAF” (28).

All the same, Nixon’s Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird insisted on going forward with the strategy even though the “best that the United States could hope for was to build-up the South Vietnamese so that they could hold on for at least a decent interval after the American troops had been withdrawn” (28). Laird had to reject Abrams’s assessment because accepting it would have meant admitting “that the United States could never gracefully exit Vietnam” and achieve Nixon’s goal of “peace with honor” (28).

In the end, Wilbanks reveals that Vietnamization “achieved neither peace nor honor”(4). Beginning with the Operation Lam Son 719 debacle in 1971 and ending North Vietnam’s invasion of South Vietnam in 1975, *Abandoning Vietnam* carefully analyzes the final battles of the RVNAF. It is not a pretty story, but there were some shining moments such as the 1972 Easter Offensive, when the RVNAF managed to hold on against a 14-division North Vietnamese attack. Wilbanks, who fought at the besieged city of An Loc during this campaign, attributed much of the success of the RVNAF in 1972 to the presence of American advisors on the ground combined with American air power and naval gunfire support. Three years later when these American elements were not available to “save South Vietnam” (160), Saigon fell in a mere 55 days.

As much as he criticizes Nixon’s Vietnamization program, Wilbanks does not completely condemn the concept of America training a developing country’s army to defend itself and its nation. Had Vietnamization been applied in 1965, or 1963 for that matter, rather than 1969, the RVNAF might have survived longer or perhaps even achieved a lasting stalemate similar to Korea. Instead, the Johnson Administration relegated the RVNAF to a secondary role 1965 and “Americanized” the war. By introducing large numbers of U.S. troops into Vietnam to bear the brunt of the heavy combat between 1965 and 1968, the Johnson Administration not only retarded the natural growth and development of the RVNAF, but indoctrinated it in a style of war

inappropriate for the military of a lesser developed country: big unit operations that relied heavily on advanced technology and firepower. As retired U.S. Army Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard put it, “we erroneously tried to impose the American system on a people who didn’t want it, couldn’t handle it and may lose because they tried it” (287).

A far better approach, Wilbanks points out, would have been to train the RVNAF in small unit, counter-insurgency warfare. Not only would this approach have made the RVNAF more mobile and capable of dealing with the demands of guerilla warfare—the predominant form of warfare between 1963 and 1968—but it also would have made it less dependent on the United States for technology, ammunition, and advisors. Wilbanks argues that a counter-insurgency force with extensive battle experience, sound leadership, and a proven track record of operating independently of foreign advisors had a better chance of transforming itself into a modern, conventional army than one hamstrung by a history of dependency on American military assistance and know-how. Such a force also would have been more accustomed to fighting with maneuver and light arms as opposed to heavy firepower and high technology—useful competencies to possess when American military assistance began to dry up after 1973.

But in the final analysis, Wilbanks contends that the South Vietnamese “deserve a large part of the blame themselves” (287). To succeed, a military force must be led “by men of courage and skill, and have purposes worth fighting and dying for” (288). Without those critical ingredients, the best intentions in the world are meaningless.

This is sobering tale told by balanced, exacting scholar. The level of Wilbanks’s research not only meets the bar of most current scholarly publications, but exceeds it in many areas, especially his use of U.S. Army documents. Wilbanks carefully builds each of his major arguments with the best available evidence, and is careful to employ historiography from all sides of the political spectrum in making his case. One will find, for instance, quotations from Marxist scholars and U.S. Army generals in the same paragraph, making nearly identical observations about the war. In short, Wilbanks’s history of the period along with Jeffrey J. Clarke’s *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* will stand out as a seminal account of the period for many years to come.



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