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U.S. Foreign Policy during the Cold War: The Failure of Containment in the case of the Vietnam War

Abstract

The primary goal of American foreign policy during the Cold War was to contain the spread of the Soviet Union’s communist ideology around the world. By the mid-1960s, the struggle of the two superpowers was concentrated on Vietnam. Through supporting the anti-communist South Vietnamese government, the United States made several attempts to prevent the spread of communism in Vietnam: the USA fought against the North Vietnamese communists who were backed by the Soviet Union and China. However, despite all its efforts, the United States failed in its attempt to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the failure of containment policy in the case of the Vietnam War and the reasons and factors that played a major role in it.

Keywords: Cold War, containment, Vietnam War, communism, the domino theory, Lyndon B. Johnson, escalation, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, guerilla warfare

After World War II, there was a significant change in the world: the old world order, i.e. „[t]he colonial system, where nations maintained control over other countries or territories, was almost completely destroyed by the war.” After World War II, there was a change in the foreign policy of the United States, as well: U.S. political leaders emphasized that „every country should develop economic and strategic policies sympathetic to the interest of the United States,” but the „spread of communism around the world,” including Vietnam, endangered this U.S. policy. Therefore, the United States decided to prevent the spread of communism in Vietnam, and thus in Southeast Asia and in the world, but it failed. But what were the reasons and factors that contributed to it? And why was containment both a political and military failure in the case of the Vietnam War? In this essay, I present briefly the antecedents of the Vietnam War and the reasons for the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the essay primarily focuses on the failure of containment in the case of the Vietnam War as well as on the reasons and factors that contributed to it.

The main reason for the involvement of the United States in Southeast Asia, and thus in Vietnam too, was President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s *domino theory* as well as *containment*, i.e. a policy that aims to stop the spread of communism in the world.3 Communism is the opposite of capitalism where „*all property and businesses are owned by the government*”4 American political leaders thought that the spread of communism endangered U.S. national security and it also hindered American „*economic and strategic policies*”5 Consequently, as Roger Barr emphasizes concerning containment, „*[t]he purpose of American foreign policy was dominated by winning the cold war through containing the spread of communism*”6 In addition, President Harry S. Truman also proclaimed the Truman Doctrine7 in 1947, i.e. „*a new American policy*” that „*would support, through military and economic aid, all free peoples resisting communism*”8

The *domino theory* also played a crucial role in the involvement of the USA in Vietnam: the concept that became important in the case of U.S. foreign policy and Vietnam was mentioned by President Eisenhower during a press conference on April 7, 1954, where the president also „*defined the importance of Vietnam in terms of freedom, [...] and the domino theory*”9

„*[f]inally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the „falling domino” principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences*”10

As it can be seen in the quotation above, President Eisenhower explains the *domino theory* in practice, namely, if the first domino

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4 Ibid. 9.
5 Ibid. 10.
6 Ibid. 10.
7 The Truman Doctrine aimed to prevent the spread of communism in Southeastern Europe, and it was also a successful policy that helped Greece and Turkey to resist communism. Barr (1991), 10.
8 Ibid. 10.
falls, i.e. the first country in Southeast Asia becomes a communist country, then the other countries follow it immediately one after the other – as the above quotation suggests. In addition, concerning the domino theory and Vietnam, Jeffrey P. Kimball also points out that „[i]f Vietnam fell into the Soviet or Chinese Communist orbit, then neighboring Laos and Cambodia would too; all of Southeast Asia might fall”.[11]

After World War II, the Soviet Union crossed its borders because it wanted to spread its communist ideology.[12] But in 1946, the American diplomat in Moscow, George Kennan warned Washington about the plans of the Soviet Union.[13] In his „famous Long Telegram of 1946,” Kennan mentioned among others that „[i]n these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. [...] it will be clearly seen that the Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points [...].”[14]

As it can be seen in the excerpt from Kennan’s telegram above, not only did he warn the United States about the Soviet extension, but he also drew the attention of the American political leaders to the fact that the „Russian expansive tendencies” must be contained with the purpose of saving the „free institutions of the western world” – as it can be seen in the quotation above.

After Kennan’s message, the U.S. focused on Southeast Asia because the „[c]ommunists were working against the established governments” there.[15] In Vietnam, the Vietnamese communists were already fighting against the French, but with the purpose of containing the spread of communism there, the USA helped the French.[16] Vietnam was „an important French colony for nearly a century,” but the Vietnamese people wanted their own independence.

[16] Ibid. 11.
therefore they started to rebel against the French.\textsuperscript{17} For a long time, the Vietnamese did not manage to win against the French.\textsuperscript{18} But in 1930, when the communist Ho Shi Minh \textit{became the key figure in Vietnam's quest for independence},\textsuperscript{19} together with other communists, he established the Vietminh, which is also known as \textit{a League for the Independence for Vietnam}, with the purpose of \textit{defeating the French and the Japanese}.\textsuperscript{19}

While Ho Shi Minh fought against the French, Japan invaded Vietnam during World War II and \textit{declared Vietnam independent under Japanese protection}.\textsuperscript{20} But after World War II, when Japan was driven out from Vietnam, the communists went on fighting against the French that led to the outbreak of the Vietnamese revolution on August 15, 1945.\textsuperscript{21} Since the Vietminh could not beat the French in the southern part of the country, they focused on the northern part of Vietnam where they established a temporary government\textsuperscript{22} with the leadership of Ho Shi Minh.\textsuperscript{23}

The USA intervened in the affairs of Vietnam when France wanted to control the northern part of the country and the communists resisted that resulted in a war in December 1946.\textsuperscript{24} The USA supported the French with the purpose of preventing Vietnam from becoming a communist country.\textsuperscript{25} But the fighting went on between the French and the Vietnamese communists who got military aid from China.\textsuperscript{26} The Secretary of State during the presidency of Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles remarked in his speech on September 2, 1953 that

\textit{"communist China has been and now is training, equipping and supplying the communist forces in Indochina. There is the risk that [...] Red China might send its own Army into Indochina. The Chinese communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences [...]."}\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{17} BARR (1991), 11.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 13.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 14.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 14.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 14.
\textsuperscript{22} The temporary government was officially called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. BARR (1991), 14.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 14-15.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 15.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 16.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 16.
\textsuperscript{27} quoted in KIMBALL (1990), 76.
As it can be seen in the quotation above, Dulles drew the attention of U.S. politicians to the fact that not only did China support Indochina, but it was also likely that the communist country “might send its own Army into Indochina,” furthermore, Dulles also warned China “that such a second aggression” would have “grave consequences”—as it can be seen in the quotation above. In my opinion, the last sentence of the quotation above also suggests a threat and thus an American military interference in those affairs with China.

Finally, the Vietminh, who also used “guerilla tactics” with the purpose of exhausting the French, managed to rule the northern part of Vietnam by 1952. Since the exhausted French wanted to end the war, they started to negotiate with the communist Vietminh that resulted in a peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland in 1954. The result of the peace conference “was a cease-fire agreement” between France and Vietnam, and it also officially cut Vietnam into two countries: into North Vietnam, led by the communist Ho Shi Minh, and into South Vietnam, led by the nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem who was both “anti-Communist and anti-French”.

When Diem became the president of South Vietnam, the intention of the United States was still the same concerning containment in Vietnam. Since the USA wanted to prevent South Vietnam from becoming a communist country, it supported Diem’s government “in exchange for his support of the United States”. The peace conference in Geneva also “called for national elections to be held in July 1956” in South Vietnam. But the USA and Diem “conspired to thwart the 1956 elections,” so the Vietminh could not win in South Vietnam. In addition, despite the fact that he remained in power, Diem “was unable to build a stable government” and his “poor rule left the South Vietnamese economy in ruins,” as well.

Since there were no elections in South Vietnam in 1956, and thus the communists could not win, they realized that the two countries could be united only through a war. Therefore, with the leadership of Ho Shi Minh, the North Vietnamese communists tried to win the

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28 BARR (1991), 16.
29 Ibid. 17.
30 Ibid. 17-18.
31 Ibid. 19.
32 Ibid. 19.
33 Ibid. 19.
34 Ibid. 18.
35 Ibid. 19.
36 Ibid. 19.
37 Ibid. 20.
support of the South Vietnamese people.\textsuperscript{37} Meanwhile, Ho Shi Minh’s
guerilla army was also established in 1960 when \textit{“the Vietminh changed its name to the Vietcong”}.\textsuperscript{38} In addition, the Vietcong also
turned \textit{“the rural peasants against Diem”} and they \textit{“also used guerilla tactics to terrorize and frustrate the South Vietnamese army”}.\textsuperscript{39} 

Because of the worsening \textit{“economic, political, and military conditions in South Vietnam”} in the 1960s, the USA decided to send
\textit{“more aid and military personnel”} to the country.\textsuperscript{40} When Kennedy became the U.S. President in 1961, he increased \textit{“the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam from about 900 to 11,000”}.\textsuperscript{41} The
plan of the United States was to support and strengthen the South
Vietnamese army with the purpose of making it stronger to fight
against the communists.\textsuperscript{42} Since the Vietcong were very strong in
South Vietnam and the American military strategy was not
successful, President Kennedy sent more aid to the country because
he \textit{“did not want to let South Vietnam to fall to the Communists”}.\textsuperscript{43} 

The United States made several attempts to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam: beside President Eisenhower, and Kennedy
who sent \textit{“U.S. military, financial, and political”} support to the
South Vietnamese army,\textsuperscript{44} President Johnson also asked the
Congress on August 5, 1964 to help South Vietnam:

\begin{quote}
\textit{[a]s President of the United States I have concluded that I
should now ask the Congress, on its part, to join in affirming
the national determination that all such attacks will be met,
and that the United States will continue in its basic policy of
assisting the free nations of the area to defend their
freedom.}\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

As it can be seen in quotation above, not only did Johnson ask the
Congress to help South Vietnam against the communists, but he also
announced that the USA \textit{“will continue in its basic policy of assisting
the free nations,”} i.e. the USA intends to maintain its containment
policy in Vietnam – as it can be seen in the quotation above. As a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{37} BARR (1991), 20.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 20.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. 20.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. 20.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 20.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 21.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. 21.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. 20.
\end{flushright}
result, the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964 that „had given President Johnson authority to send troops to Vietnam“.46 The Resolution was very important because the USA determined to „defend South Vietnam against communism“.47 Besides, President Johnson also „used the authority given to him by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to expand, or escalate, U.S. involvement in Vietnam“.48 The president „[sent] combat soldiers to fight with the South Vietnamese against the [...] Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army“.49 By sending American troops to South Vietnam, Johnson wanted to make the South Vietnamese army and government stronger until they can fight on their own against the communists.50 Concerning Johnson’s policy, Roger Barr mentions that „by preventing defeat, Johnson believed he was accomplishing his goal of containing communism“.51

In contrast to the efforts of the USA, the communists also made attempts to win the war in Vietnam, for example, on August 2 and 4, 1964, „North Vietnamese patrol boats [...] attacked“ the American destroyer ships Maddox and the USS Turner Joy in the „Gulf of Tonkin off the North Vietnamese coast.”52 Despite the fact that „[n]either ships were damaged,” the happenings, i.e. „the idea that the Vietnamese would directly attack U.S. ships,” made President Johnson angry, therefore he „ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese air bases and oil storage depots.“53 Besides, the communist leader, Ho Shi Minh’s guerilla army also made the fighting of the American and South Vietnamese troops more difficult.54 The communists used a special tactic in the war: they built traps and they could hide themselves in the jungle and in the homes of local people.55 They could attack the American troops suddenly from different directions from the forest because they knew the jungle very well, thus they managed to baffle U.S. soldiers, and this actually „[allowed] them to pursue their own tactics“.56 In addition, the communists also built traps with bombs that exploded

46 BARR (1991), 74.
48 Ibid. 27.
49 Ibid. 27.
50 Ibid. 27.
51 Ibid. 27.
52 Ibid. 25.
53 Ibid. 25.
54 Ibid. 32-33.
55 Ibid. 32.
56 Ibid. 32-33.
immediately when U.S. soldiers stepped on it.57 As Roger Barr points out, „Such weapons made the Americans even less effective in the unfamiliar jungle, giving the Communists a distinct advantage“.58

The communists also ensured their own supplies through the Ho Shi Minh trail.59 North Vietnam supported the Vietcong in South Vietnam with a huge number of guns, equipment, and armed forces through a path known as the Ho Shi Minh Trail.60 As it can be seen in the Appendix section of this essay (see on page 18), the map depicts the Ho Shi Minh Trail – it is indicated on the map with the arrows stretching from North Vietnam through the two neighboring countries: Laos and Cambodia on the west, toward South Vietnam, and the trail entered South Vietnam from the west.61 Furthermore, as the map also shows, the major conflicts between the Vietcong and the South Vietnamese happened primarily at those points where the Ho Shi Minh Trail enters South Vietnam – as it can be seen on the map. In addition, concerning the Ho Shi Minh Trail, Roger Barr points out that „by locating this supply route outside of North and South Vietnam in more neutral territory, the Communists had a better chance of getting their supplies far to the south where they were needed“.62

The event that became known as the Tet Offensive was also an effort the communists made against the USA: from January to April 1968, „the Communists attacked the American base […] near the DMZ“63 from where the Americans observed the communists „along the DMZ and the Ho Shi Minh Trail in Laos“.64 During these attacks, the communists demolished „the main ammunition stores, and damaged some aircraft“.65 Furthermore, they also attacked the big South Vietnamese cities, the American embassy in Saigon where they killed several American diplomats, „the South Vietnamese presidential palace […] and the headquarters of the South Vietnamese army,“ as well as „U.S. commander Westmoreland’s compound at the American Airbase“ where twenty-three Americans

57 BARR (1991), 33.
58 Ibid. 33.
59 Ibid. 29.
60 Ibid. 29. The trail „was named in honor of North Vietnam’s revolutionary hero,” Ho Shi Minh. BARR (1991), 29.
61 Ibid. 29.
62 Ibid. 29.
63 The DMZ, i.e. the demilitarized zone, was „the neutral area along the border between North and South Vietnam.” BARR (1991), 41.
64 BARR (1991), 41.
65 Ibid. 41.
were murdered and eighty-five were injured. But despite these severe attacks from the North Vietnamese army and the Vietcong, the U.S. troops fought back and managed to win these battles against the communists.

The U.S. containment policy and military actions in the case of the Vietnam War were shaped and directed primarily by the American presidents as well as by the major political and military leaders like President Eisenhower who talked about the *domino theory* that played a crucial role in shaping *America’s global containment structure*. Furthermore, Eisenhower also *defined South Vietnam’s survival as a major American security interest*. But actually, as Edward Cuddy points out, *Eisenhower played a major role, arguably the most crucial role of all presidents, in America’s slide down the “slippery slope” into Vietnam*.

President Kennedy was also crucial political leader in the Vietnam War since he *was nonetheless determined to continue the struggle in Vietnam*. In his speech in September 1961, the president mentioned that

> „South Viet-Nam is already under attack – sometimes by a single assassin, sometimes by a band of guerrillas, recently by full battalions. The peaceful borders of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and India have been repeatedly violated. And the peaceful people of Laos are in danger of losing the independence they gained not so long ago.”

As it can be seen in the quotation above, President Kennedy highlighted the fact that South Vietnam was endangered both because of the spread of communism and because of the attack of the communist army. In the quotation above, Kennedy also pointed out that other countries in Southeast Asia, such as „Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and India” are also endangered because of the communism when he said that *people of Laos are in danger of losing the independence* – as it can be seen in the quotation above.

In addition, President Kennedy also emphasized the importance

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67 Ibid. 46.
69 CUDDY (2003), 355.
70 Ibid. 352.
71 KIMBALL (1990), 35.
72 quoted in KIMBALL (1990), 35.
of U.S. support in Southeast Asia. In September, 1963, when a reporter asked him about the support that the U.S. sent to South Vietnam, Kennedy told in the interview that

„[i]f you reduce your aid, it is possible you could have some effect upon the government structure there. On the other hand, you might have a situation which could bring about a collapse.“

As it can be seen in the above quotation, Kennedy highlighted the importance of the support that the USA gave to South Vietnam, namely, as Kennedy mentioned, without the help of the USA, the government of South Vietnam would collapse – as it can be seen in the quotation above.

President Lyndon B. Johnson also shaped U.S. containment policy during the Vietnam War because he started several military operations against the communists like „a series of covert attacks on North Vietnam,” as well as „Operation „Rolling Thunder”, that was „the air war against North Vietnam, launched in March 1965“. As Edward Cuddy says, Johnson also faced the decision „either abandon South Vietnam to communism or send in American forces to save it“. But Johnson remarked that

„[i]f we ran out on Southeast Asia, [...] I could see trouble ahead in every part of the globe” opening “the path to World War III.”

Thus, Johnson decided to send „huge weapons supplies and 23,000 military advisers” to South Vietnam. In addition, he also „launched covert 34-A attacks against North Vietnam” and „expanded presidential war – making powers with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution“. On the other hand, he also mislead the American public when he, as Roger Barr says, „kept the details of his actions secret and lied to the very people who had elected him [...] in order to pursue a Vietnam policy that became more and more unpopular“. But in general, as Cuddy points out, „[a]mong the presidents who led America to war in Vietnam, no one was so

73 KIMBALL (1990), 37.
74 quoted in KIMBALL (1990), 37.
75 CUDDY (2003), 352.
76 Ibid. 361.
77 quoted in CUDDY (2003), 362.
78 Ibid. 365.
79 Ibid. 365.
80 BARR (1991), 90.
deeply ensnared by predecessors’ policies as Johnson”.

General William Westmoreland also played a crucial role in the Vietnam War because he was “the military commander in charge of U.S. troops in Vietnam”. He “commanded U.S. forces in the Vietnam War” during the presidency of Johnson. Furthermore, William Hosh also points out that during the war, Westmoreland “implemented a strategy of attrition, using overwhelming firepower to try to kill enemy troops at a rate faster than they could be replaced”. Hosh also highlights that despite all his efforts to win the war against the communists in Vietnam, when the United States seemed not to win, “Westmoreland was recalled to Washington and given the post of army chief of staff”.

President Richard Nixon, along with Henry Kissinger, was also a crucial political leader who “[aimed] to achieve „peace with honor” in the Vietnam War”. The president gradually withdrew the American soldiers from Vietnam while he also started his “policy of „Vietnamization”. Furthermore, Nixon’s political decisions were not liked by the American public therefore Americans started to demonstrate against the war. Concerning achieving peace, Hosh points out that, with the help of Henry Kissinger, the “agreement was finally reached in January 1973 and signed in Paris”. In addition, Nixon also “ended all draft calls in 1972, and in 1973 the draft was abolished in favour of an all-volunteer military”.

As William Hosh points out, Henry Kissinger, “as an adviser for national security affairs and secretary of state, was a major influence in the shaping of foreign policy from 1969 to 1976 under presidents Nixon and Ford”. Furthermore, Kissinger also “played a major role in Nixon’s Vietnamization policy—the disengagement of U.S. troops from South Vietnam and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces”, which will be mentioned later in the essay.

Despite the fact that the USA was not involved in the war when
Gerald Ford became president in 1974,\textsuperscript{93} he also tried to help South Vietnam but the War Powers Act did not allow him to do so.\textsuperscript{94} In January 1975, not only did President Ford ask the U.S. Congress for help to defend South Vietnam,\textsuperscript{95} but he also pointed out that if the communists occupy South Vietnam, then

\begin{quote}
\textit{\[T]he results would be an alien world in which the costs for our survival would dwarf anything we have ever known.}\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

But finally, as Christopher Jespersen writes, \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteleft Thieu	extquoteright\textquoteright's regime collapsed in April 1975 because Congress refused to appropriate the military assistance sought by the Nixon and Ford administrations\textquoteright\textquoteright}\.\textsuperscript{97}

Not only political leaders, but the media and the American public also influenced U.S. containment policy in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{98} After a journalist from the \textit{Washington Post} returned from Vietnam, she wrote concerning \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteleft Johnson	extquoteright\textquoteright's war policy\textquoteright\textquoteright} that

\begin{quote}
\textit{\[m]aybe \textquoteleft\textquoteleft we shouldn\textquoteright\textquoteleft t have been there in the first place,\textquoteright\textquoteright [...]. But \textquoteleft\textquoteleft we were there,\textquoteright\textquoteright leaving \textquoteleft\textquoteleft no choice but to help the South Vietnamese\textquoteright\textquoteright\textquoteright\textquoteleft\textquoteleft fight Communist guerillas.}\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

As the above quotation shows, the American media expressed its dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War. Furthermore, many Americans in general were also disappointed and disillusioned by the war and by its serious consequences like the huge number of casualties.\textsuperscript{100} As the Table in the Appendix section of the essay (see on page 19) shows, the most people died in 1968: altogether more than 14,000 Americans, but in 1967 and 1969 nearly 10,000 Americans died in the war each year – as the Table depicts. In addition, many Americans \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteleft protested Johnson	extquoteright\textquoteright's action on both moral and strategic grounds\textquoteright\textquoteright}\.\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, the fact that \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteleft Johnson routinely kept what was going on in Vietnam a secret\textquoteright\textquoteright} and \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteleft each month he sent more troops to Vietnam,\textquoteright\textquoteright} made many Americans angry and disillusioned.\textsuperscript{102}

As a result of the serious consequences of the war in the USA,
American political leaders like Nixon and Kissinger „recognized that the war must be ended”. President Nixon also knew that if the USA withdrew in a way that was not honorable, it „would destroy U.S. credibility with other countries and damage its world standing”. Kissinger also emphasized that the United States must not seem to be beaten when it withdraws from Vietnam. Concerning the quick withdrawal from Vietnam, Kissinger pointed out that 

„[h]owever we get into Vietnam, [...] whatever the judgment of our actions, ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world. Any other solution may unloose forces that would complicate the prospects of international order.”

As it can be seen in the quotation above, Kissinger emphasized that it is crucial that the USA withdraw from Vietnam with honor because the „international order” and the peace in the whole world can be maintained only in this way – as it can be seen in the quotation above. Therefore, with the purpose of achieving „an honorable peace,” Nixon’s peace strategy included three parts: Vietnamization, the expansion of the war, and détente.

In the case of Vietnamization, the USA gave South Vietnam high-quality weapons and ensured the training of the South Vietnamese soldiers. Nixon wanted to make the South Vietnamese army stronger, so they could fight against the communists and defend South Vietnam without American help. In the meantime, Nixon announced the gradual withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam with the purpose of „[reducing] the number of American casualties”. The president also talked to the American public on television about his plans:

„[...] we really only have two choices open to us if we want to end this war:
— I can order an immediate, precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the effects of that action.
— Or we can persist in our search for a just peace, through a

104 BARR (1991), 68.
105 HERRING (1986), 223-224.
106 quoted in HERRING (1986), 223.
107 BARR (1991), 68.
108 HOSH (2010), 132.
109 BARR (1991), 70.
110 Ibid. 70.
negotiated settlement if possible or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization [...]

I have chosen this second course. [...] It is a plan which will end the war [...] not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and in the world...I have chosen a plan for peace. [...]"11

As it can be seen in the excerpt from Nixon’s speech above, the president emphasized that Vietnamization and discussions about peace are much more important than a quick withdrawal because these will lead to a peace in Vietnam as well as in the whole world – as it can be seen in the quotation above.

Besides Vietnamization, Nixon also decided to expand the war.112 His goal was „to destroy communist sanctuaries in neighboring countries” such as in Cambodia and Laos because they supported the North Vietnamese in the South.113 Therefore, Nixon „authorized secret bombing raids inside Cambodia to destroy Communist sanctuaries,” but this strategy was not successful because the „bomings did not destroy all the communist troops and supplies in Cambodia”.114 Then, in 1970, Nixon „authorized a ground invasion of Cambodia,” which meant that „the South Vietnamese troops aided by the American troops [...] crossed the border into Cambodia [...] to completely destroy North Vietnamese supplies and troops”.115

In the case of „encouraging detente,” Nixon’s goal was to reduce the tensions with the Soviet Union and China.116 In 1969, the USA talked to the Soviet Union about the limitation on arms while Nixon was also weakening „the trade embargo against China,”117 and finally „[a]n agreement [...] for both countries was reached in May 1972”.118 Nixon’s intention with detente was „to expand the war into Cambodia and Laos without drawing in the SU or China,” and he also wanted to „encourage the Soviet Union and China to pressure North Vietnam to end the war”.119

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111 quoted in HOSH (2010), 135.; The speech is known as Nixon’s „The Pursuit of Peace in Vietnam” speech that was announced on November 3, 1969. HOSH (2010), 135.
113 Ibid. 71.
114 Ibid. 71.
115 Ibid. 71-72.
116 Ibid. 76.
117 This political decision from the USA was important because since 1949, „when the Communists had taken control of” China, the USA „had had no diplomatic or trade relationship with” the country. BARR (1991), 76.
118 BARR (1991), 76.
119 Ibid. 76.
Despite Nixon’s peace strategies, the way toward peace was not easy because “[t]he peace talks” that started “in 1969 had continued without progress”.120 A year later, in 1970, Nixon sent Henry Kissinger to talk secretly to the North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho about peace but they could not agree for two years.121 Finally, in 1972, Kissinger and Tho accepted a proposal by October 8th that included an armistice in Southeast Asia, the withdrawal of the American “troops within sixty days,” the release of the American prisoners who were caught in the war, as well as a government in South Vietnam led by Thiéu.122 Since the proposal also included that the United States had to leave Vietnam, the South Vietnamese president, Thiéu did not accept the proposal because “he needed American support to stay in power”.123

But Nixon and Kissinger were determined to achieve peace in Vietnam with honor.124 Nixon managed to persuade Thiéu to accept the proposal — Nixon promised that the United States would help him if “North Vietnam violated the agreement”.125 In December 1972, Nixon also forced North Vietnam to be loyal to the agreement as he ordered the bombing of North Vietnam.126 Eventually, “a peace treaty very similar to the October proposal was signed” on January 27, 1973.127 According to this agreement, the United States had to remove its soldiers from Vietnam within two months, the “U.S. bases were to be dismantled, and the two sides would exchange prisoners of war”.128 In addition, the peace treaty also included a “cease-fire between North Vietnam and South Vietnam”.129

Despite the fact that the peace treaty “ended the United States’ longest war,” the fighting continued in Vietnam.130 Although the South Vietnamese army was much bigger and had better equipments than the army of the communists, South Vietnamese soldiers could not win the fights against the communists because “they were poorly led”.131 Moreover, since “[p]resident Thiéu remained unpopular with
his people” and the USA did not back him either, „his government began to deteriorate”.132 In addition, since the communists did not give up their goals as to reuniting the two Vietnams, they attacked some South Vietnamese cities.133 In a short time, they „took control of twelve provinces and eight million people” in South Vietnam.134 Actually, as Roger Barr points out, „South Vietnam territories began to collapse like a row of falling dominoes”.135

Even though the United States’ army had already left Vietnam, „American diplomats and their families were still stationed at the American embassy in Saigon”.136 Since „the Communists attacked the city of Saigon” on April 29, 1975, the remaining U.S. citizens and diplomats had to be evacuated from the embassy.137 On April 30, 1975, „the South Vietnamese government surrendered unconditionally,” and the communists „occupied Saigon without a struggle”.138 Afterward, „the country was officially united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam with its capital in Hanoi” and „Saigon was renamed Ho Shi Min City”.139 Concerning the struggle of the communists in Vietnam, Roger Barr points out that „[t]heir long struggle to reunite North and South Vietnam had finally ended with victory”.140

The failure in the case of the Vietnam War also changed American foreign policy as the Congress decided to limit the power of the president.141 Therefore, in 1973, when the war ended for the United States, the Congress „passed three pieces of legislation that reduced the support the United States could give to South Vietnam, and took power away from Nixon”.142 As a result of the decisions of the Congress, „U.S. bombing in all of Indochina” was entirely forbidden.143 In addition, the Congress also enacted the War Powers Act on November 7, 1973144 that actually „prohibited Nixon and all

132 BARR (1991), 84.
133 Ibid. 86.
134 Ibid. 87.
135 Ibid. 87.
136 Ibid. 87.
137 Ibid. 87-88; Graham Martin, the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, and his family were the last Americans who left Vietnam on April 30, 1975. BARR (1991), 88.
138 HOSH (2010), 146.
139 Ibid. 146.
140 BARR (1991), 88.
141 Ibid. 85.
142 Ibid. 85.
143 Ibid. 85.
144 Since the Congress was convinced that „both Johnson and Nixon had abused their presidential powers in running the Vietnam War, [...] they wanted to establish congressional control over the president’s power to wage war.” BARR (1991), 85.
future presidents from committing U.S. troops overseas for more than sixty days without congressional authority.” 145

In conclusion, as I presented in this essay, containment policy was the key point in the case of the Vietnam War but the United States did not succeed because it “had the wrong goals, used the wrong military strategy and employed weapons that proved ineffective in the end”. 146 Therefore, as Roger Barr says, actually “the United States had negotiated the Paris Accords primarily to allow it to withdraw from Vietnam without admitting defeat”. 147 Furthermore, Barr also highlights that “[p]erhaps most importantly, the United States failed in Vietnam because the war lost support among the American people”. 148 In addition, the failure of containment in Vietnam also had serious consequences because after the communists won in Vietnam, Cambodia “was also overthrown by Communists”. 149

146 Ibid. 102.
147 Ibid. 84.
148 Ibid. 102.
149 Ibid. 102.
Appendix

„US Fatalities In Vietnam War”

Gábor Völgyesi: U.S. Foreign Policy during the Cold War: The Failure of Containment in the case of the Vietnam War