

# The Tet Offensive 1968 Vietnam

**The Tet Offensive** was a military campaign conducted between 30 January and 23 September 1968, by forces of the **Viet Cong**, or National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese army, or **People's Army of Vietnam**, against the forces of the **Republic of Vietnam**, (South Vietnam), the **United States** and their allies during the **Vietnam War**. The purpose of the offensive was to strike military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam and to spark a general uprising among the population that would then topple the **Saigon**, government, thus ending the war in a single blow.

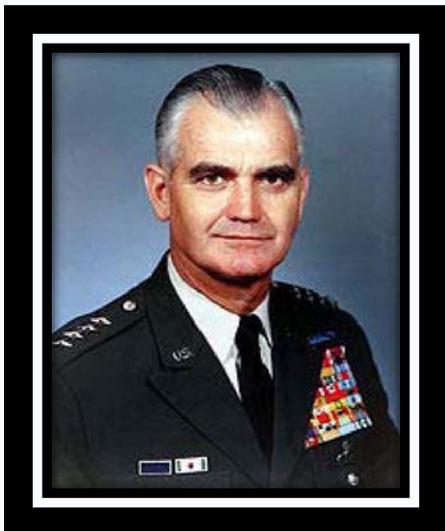
The operations are referred to as the **Tet Offensive** because they began during the early morning hours of 31 January, the day of the most important Vietnamese holiday, **Tet Nguyen Dan**, which celebrates the first day of the year on a traditional lunar calendar. Both North and South Vietnam announced on national radio broadcasts that there would be a two-day cease-fire in honor of Tet also called "Spring Festival." In Vietnamese, the offensive is officially called *Cuộc Tổng tiến công và nổi dậy năm 1968* ("The General Offensive and Uprising 1968"). The common name is (*Xuân*) *Mậu Thân* ("[spring] Year of the Monkey"). The Vietcong launched a major offensive beginning with a wave of attacks began on the morning of 30 January in the I and II Corps Tactical Zones. This early attack did not, however, cause undue alarm or lead to widespread allied defensive measures. When the main communist operation began the next morning, the offensive was countrywide in scope and well coordinated, with more than 80,000 Vietcong troops striking more than 100 towns and cities, including 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five of the six autonomous cities, 72 of 245 district towns, and the national capital. The offensive was the largest military operation yet conducted by either side up to that point in the war.

The initial Vietcong attacks stunned allied forces and took them by surprise, but most were quickly contained and beaten back, inflicting massive casualties on the communists. The exceptions were the fighting that erupted in the old imperial capital of **Hue** where intense fighting lasted for a month, and the continuing struggle around the U.S. combat base at **Khe Sanh**, where fighting continued for two more months. Although the offensive was a military disaster for Vietcong forces, it had a profound effect on the American administration and shocked the American public, which had been led to believe by its political and military leaders that the communists were, due to previous defeats, incapable of launching such a massive effort.

The majority of Western historians have concluded that the offensive ended in June, which easily located it within framework of U.S. political and military decisions that altered the American commitment to the war. In fact, it continued, through two more distinct phases. The second phase began on 5 May and continued until the end of the month. The third began on 17 August and only ended on 23 September

## Light at the end of the tunnel

**Order of battle and communist capabilities** During the fall of 1967, two questions weighed heavily on the minds of the American public and the administration of **President Lyndon B Johnson**: Was the U.S. strategy of attrition working in Vietnam and who was winning the war? According to General **William C. Westmoreland**, the commander of the **Military Assistance Command Vietnam, (MACV)**, the answer could be found by the solution to a simple equation. Take the total number of communist troops estimated **incountry** and subtract those killed or captured during military operations to determine the "crossover point" at which the number of those eliminated exceeded those recruited or replaced. There was a discrepancy, however, between MACV and the **Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) order of battle**, estimates concerning the strength of communist guerrilla forces within South Vietnam. In September, members of the MACV intelligence services and the CIA met to prepare a Special National Intelligence Estimate that would be utilized by the administration as a gauge of U.S. success in the conflict.



**General William C. Westmoreland COMUSMACV,**

Provided with an enemy intelligence windfall accrued during Operations ***Cedar Falls and Junction City***, the CIA members of the group believed that the number of communist guerrillas, irregulars, and cadre within the South could be as high as **430,000**. The MACV Combined Intelligence Center, on the other hand, maintained that the number could be no more than **300,000**. Westmoreland was deeply concerned about the possible perceptions of the American public to such an increased estimate, since Vietcong troop strength was routinely provided to reporters during press briefings. According to MACV's chief intelligence, General Joseph McChristian, the new figures "would create a political bombshell," since they were proof positive that the communists "had the capability and the will to continue a protracted war of attrition.

In May, **MACV** attempted to obtain a compromise from the **CIA** by maintaining that Vietcong militias did not constitute a fighting force but were essentially low level fifth columnists used for information collection. The agency responded that such a notion was ridiculous, since the militias were directly responsible for half of the casualties inflicted on U.S. forces. With both groups in deadlock, George Carver, CIA deputy director for Vietnamese affairs, was asked to

mediate the dispute. In September, Carver devised a compromise: The CIA would drop its insistence on including the irregulars in the final tally of forces and add a prose addendum to the estimate that would explain the agency's position—George Allen, Carver's deputy, laid responsibility for the agency's capitulation at the feet of **Richard Helms**, the director of the CIA. He believed that "it was a political problem..Helms] didn't want the agency...contravening the policy interest of the administration."

## Successes Offensive

During the second half of **1967** the administration had become alarmed by criticism, both inside and outside the government, and by reports of declining public support for its Vietnam policies. According to public opinion polls, the percentage of Americans who believed that the U.S. had made a mistake by sending troops to Vietnam had risen from 25 percent in 1965 to 45 percent by **December 1967**. This trend was fueled not by a belief that the struggle was not worthwhile, but by mounting casualty figures, rising taxes, and the feeling that there was no end to the war in sight. A poll taken in November indicated that **55 percent** wanted a tougher war policy, exemplified by the public belief that "it was an error for us to have gotten involved in Vietnam in the first place. But now that we're there, let's win - or get out. This prompted the administration to launch a so-called "**Success Offensive**", a concerted effort to alter the widespread public perception that the war had reached a stalemate and to convince the American people that the administration's policies were succeeding. Under the leadership of National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow the news media then was inundated by a wave of effusive optimism. Every statistical indicator of progress, from "kill ratios" and "body counts" to village pacification was fed to the press and to the Congress. "We are beginning to win this struggle" asserted Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey on **NBC's "Today Show" in mid-November**. "We are on the offensive. Territory is being gained. We are making steady progress. At the end of November, the campaign reached its climax when Johnson summoned Westmoreland and the new U.S. Ambassador, **Ellsworth Bunker to Washington D.C.**, for what was billed as a "high level policy review". Upon their arrival, the two men bolstered the administration's claims of success. From Saigon, **pacification Chief Robert Komer** asserted that the pacification program in the countryside was succeeding. Sixty-eight percent of the South Vietnamese population was under the control of Saigon while only seventeen percent was under the control of the Vietcong. General Bruce Palmer, one of Westmoreland's three Field Force commanders, claimed that "the Viet Cong has been defeated" and that "He can't get food and he can't recruit. He has been forced to change his strategy from trying to control the people on the coast to trying to survive in the mountains.

Westmoreland was even more emphatic in his assertions. **At an address at the National Press Club on 21 November, he reported that, as of the end of 1967, the Vietcong was "unable to mount a major offensive...I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965** the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing...We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view. By the end of the year the administration's approval rating had indeed crept up by eight percent, but an early January Gallup poll indicated that forty-seven percent of the American public still disapproved of the President's handling of the war. The American public, "more confused than convinced, more doubtful than despairing...adopted a 'wait and see' attitude.

During a discussion with an interviewer from magazine, Westmoreland defied the communists to launch an attack: "I hope they try something, because we are looking for a fight.

## Northern decision

### Party politics

Planning in **Hanoi**, for a winter-spring offensive during 1968 had begun in early 1967 and continued until early the following year. There has been an extreme reluctance among communist historians to discuss the decision-making process that led to the *General Offensive General Uprising*, even decades after the event. In official North Vietnamese literature, the decision to launch *Tet Mau Than* was usually presented as the result of a perceived U.S. failure to win the war quickly, the failure of the American bombing campaign against the North Vietnam, and the **anti-war sentiment** that pervaded the population of the U.S. The decision to launch the general offensive, however, was much more complicated.

The decision signaled the end of a bitter, decade-long debate within the Party leadership between first two, and then three factions. The moderates believed that the economic viability of North Vietnam should come before support of a massive and conventional southern war and who generally followed the Soviet line of peaceful coexistence by reunifying Vietnam through political means. Heading this faction were party theoreticians **Truo Truong Chinh**, and **Minister of Defense Vo Nguyen Giap**, The militants, on the other hand, tended to follow the foreign policy line of the **People's Republic of China**, and stridently called for the reunification of the nation by military means and that no negotiations should be undertaken with the Americans. This group was led by the "brothers Le" - Party First Secretary **Le Duan** and **Le Duc Tho**. From the early to mid-1960s, the militants had dictated the direction of the war in South Vietnam. General **Nguyen Chi Thanh**, the head of **COSVN**, communist headquarters for the South, was another prominent militant. Strangely, the followers of the Chinese line centered their strategy against the allies on large-scale, main force actions rather than the protracted guerrilla war espoused by **Mao Zedong**. Under **Thanh's** command, the North Vietnamese had matched the American military escalation in the South **tit-for-tat**.

**By 1966-1967**, however, after the infliction of massive casualties by the allies, stalemate on the battlefield, and destruction of the northern economy by **U.S. air power**, there was a dawning realization that, if current trends continued, Hanoi would eventually lack the resources necessary to affect the military situation in the South. As a result, there were more strident calls by the moderates for negotiations and a revision of strategy. They felt that a return to guerrilla tactics was more appropriate since the U.S. could not be defeated conventionally. They also complained that the policy of rejecting negotiations was in error. The Americans could only be worn down in a war of wills during a period of "fighting while talking." During 1967 things had become so bad on the battlefield that **Lê Duẩn** ordered **Thanh** to incorporate aspects of protracted guerrilla warfare into his strategy.

During the same period, a counterattack was launched by a new; third grouping (the centrists) led by **President Ho Chi Minh**, **Le Duc**. And Foreign Minister **Nguyễn Duy Trinh**, who called for negotiations. From October 1966 through April 1967, a very public debate over military strategy

took place in print and via radio between Thanh and his rival for military power, **Giáp**. **Giáp** had advocated a defensive, primarily guerrilla strategy against the U.S. and South Vietnam. Thanh's position was that **Giáp** and his adherents were centered on their experiences during the **First Indochina War**, and that they were too "conservative and captive to old methods and past experience... mechanically repeating the past.

The arguments over domestic and military strategy also carried a foreign policy element as well, because North Vietnam was totally dependent on outside military and economic aid. The vast majority of its military equipment was provided by either the **Soviet Union** or **China**. **Beijing** advocated that North Vietnam conduct a protracted war on the Maoist model, fearing that a conventional conflict might draw them in as it had in Korea. They also resisted the idea of negotiating with the allies. **Moscow**, on the other hand, advocated negotiations, but simultaneously armed Hanoi's forces to conduct a conventional war on the Soviet model. **North Vietnamese foreign policy**, therefore consisted of maintaining a critical balance between war policy, internal and external policies, domestic adversaries, and foreign allies with "self-serving agendas.

To "break the will of their domestic opponents and reaffirm their autonomy vis-à-vis their foreign allies" hundreds of pro-Soviet, party moderates, military officers, and intelligentsia were arrested on **27 July 1967**, during what came to be called the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair. All of the arrests were based on the individual's stance on the Politburo's choice of tactics and strategy for the proposed General Offensive. This move cemented the position of the militants as Hanoi's strategy: The rejection of negotiations, the abandonment of protracted warfare, and the focus on the offensive in the towns and cities of South Vietnam. More arrests followed in November and December.

## General Offensive, General Uprising

The operational plan for the *General Offensive, General Uprising* had its origin as the "COSVN proposal" at Thanh's southern headquarters in April 1967 and had then been relayed to Hanoi the following month. The general was then ordered to the capital to explain his concept in person to the Military Central Commission. At a meeting in July, **Thanh** briefed the plan to the Politburo. On the evening of **6 July**, after being given permission to begin preparations for the offensive, **Thanh** attended a party and died of a heart attack after having drunk too much.

After cementing their position during the Party crackdown, the militants sped up planning for a major conventional offensive to break the military deadlock. They concluded that the Saigon government and the U.S. presence were so unpopular with the population of the South that a broad-based attack would spark a spontaneous uprising of the population, which, if the offensive was successful, would enable the communists to sweep to a quick, decisive victory. Their basis for this conclusion included: a belief that the South Vietnamese military was no longer combat effective; the results of the fall 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election (in which the **Nguyen Van Thieu/Nguyen Cao Ky**' ticket had only received 24 percent of the popular vote); the Buddhist Uprisings of 1963 and 1966; well-publicized anti-war demonstrations in Saigon; and continuous criticism of the **Thieu** government in the southern press. Launching such an offensive would also finally put an end to what have been described as "dovish calls for talks,

criticism of military strategy, Chinese diatribes of Soviet perfidy, and Soviet pressure to negotiate - all of which needed to be silenced.



**North Vietnamese Defense Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp**

In October, the Politburo decided on the Tet holiday as the launch date and met again in December to reaffirm its decision and formalize it at the 14th Plenary session of the Party Central Committee in January 1968. The resultant *Resolution 14* was a major blow to domestic opposition and "foreign obstruction." Concessions had been made to the center group, however, by agreeing that negotiations were possible, but the document essentially centered on the creation of "a spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest time possible.

Contrary to Western belief, General Giáp did not plan the offensive himself. Thanh's original plan was elaborated on by a party committee headed by Thanh's deputy, **Pham Hung**, and then modified by **Giáp**. The Defense Minister may have been convinced to toe the line by the arrest and imprisonment of most of the members of his staff during the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair. Although Giáp went to work "reluctantly, under duress," he may have found the task easier due to the fact that he was faced with a *fait accompli*. Since the Politburo had already approved the offensive, all he had to do was make it work. He combined guerrilla operations into what was basically a conventional military offensive and shifted the burden of sparking the popular uprising to the Vietcong. If it worked, all would be well and good. If it failed, it would be a failure only for the Party militants. For the moderates and centrists it offered the prospect of negotiations and a possible end to the American bombing of the North. Only in the eyes of the militants, therefore, did the offensive become a "go for broke" effort. Others in the Politburo were willing to settle for a much less ambitious "victory."

The operation would involve a preliminary phase during which diversionary attacks would be launched in the border areas of South Vietnam to draw American attention and forces away from the cities. **The General Offensive, General Uprising** would then proceed by launching simultaneous actions in most of the urban areas of South Vietnam and attacks on major allied bases, with particular emphasis focused on the cities of Saigon and Hue. Concurrently, a

substantial threat would be made against the U.S. combat base at **Khe Sanh**. The **Khe Sanh** actions would draw North Vietnamese forces away from the offensive into the cities, but Giáp considered them necessary in order to protect his supply lines and divert American attention. Attacks on other U.S. forces were of secondary, or even tertiary importance, since Giáp considered his main objective to be weakening or destroying the South Vietnamese military and government through popular revolt. The offensive, therefore was aimed at influencing the South Vietnamese public, not that of the U.S. There is conflicting evidence as to whether, or to what extent, the offensive was intended to influence either the March primaries or the November presidential election in the U.S.



**Vietcong troops pose with new AK-47 assault rifles and American field radios**

According to General **Tran Van Tra**, the new military head of **COSVN**, the offensive was to have three distinct phases: **Phase I**, scheduled to begin on 31st **January** was to be a country-wide assault on the cities conducted primarily by Vietcong forces. Concurrently, a propaganda offensive to induce ARVN troops to desert and the South Vietnamese population to rise up against the government would be launched. If outright victory was not achieved, the battle might still lead to the creation of a coalition government and the withdrawal of the Americans. If the general offensive failed to achieve these purposes, **follow-up** operations would be conducted to wear down the enemy and lead to a negotiated settlement; **Phase II** was scheduled to begin on **5 May**; and **Phase III** on **17 August**.

Preparations for the offensive were already underway. The logistical build-up began in mid-year, and by **January 1968**, **81,000 tons of supplies and 200,000 troops**, including seven complete infantry regiments and 20 independent battalions made the trip south on the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. This logistical effort also involved the re-arming the Vietcong with new **AK-47 assault rifles** and **B-40 rocket-propelled grenade launchers**, which granted them superior firepower over their less well-armed ARVN opponents. To pave the way and to confuse the allies as to its intentions, Hanoi launched a diplomatic offensive. Foreign Minister Trinh announced on **30**

**December**, that Hanoi *would* rather than *could* open negotiations if the U.S. unconditionally ended Operation *Rolling Thunder*, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. This announcement provoked a flurry of diplomatic activity (which amounted to nothing) during the last weeks of the year.

South Vietnamese and U.S. military intelligence estimated that North Vietnamese in South Vietnam during **January 1968 totaled 323,000 men, including 130,000 North Vietnamese regulars, 160,000 Vietcong** and members of the infrastructure, and **33,000 service and support troops**. They were organized into nine divisions composed of **35 infantry and 20 artillery or anti-aircraft artillery regiments**, which were, in turn, composed of 230 infantry and six **sapper** battalions.

## Allied unpreparedness

### Suspicious and diversions

Signs of impending communist action did not go unnoticed among the allied intelligence collection apparatus in Saigon. During the late summer and fall of **1967** both South Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence agencies collected clues that indicated a significant shift in communist strategic planning. It was an Australian army officer, Major Peter Young, and a US intelligence officer, Jack Fitzgerald, that first put forward the idea of a major offensive by North Vietnam. At a dinner party in Saigon in July 1967 which was attended by several key military personnel and the deputy CIA director in South Vietnam, Young and Fitzgerald put forward their "**Major Offensive theory**" in which they stated that North Vietnam could not defeat the US in open battle nor could they afford to continue sending young lives to "the American meat grinder". As such they hypothesized that a short, sharp nationwide attack aimed at cities to trigger a revolution in the south was highly probable. There was no substantial evidence to support it at the time, however, and so it was largely ignored. By mid-December, mounting evidence convinced many in Washington and Saigon that something big was underway. During the last three months of the year intelligence agencies had observed signs of a major communist military buildup. In addition to captured documents (**a copy of Resolution 13**, for example, was captured by early October), observations of enemy logistical operations were also quite clear: in October the number of trucks observed heading south through **Laos on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail** jumped from the previous monthly average of **480 to 1,116**. **By November this total reached 3,823 and, in December, 6,315**. On the **20 December**, Westmoreland cabled Washington that he expected the **Vietcong** "to undertake an intensified countrywide effort, perhaps a maximum effort, over a relatively short period of time.



### **USA Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, commander of II Field Force, Vietnam**

Despite all the warning signs, however, the allies were still surprised by the scale and scope of the offensive. According to ARVN Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung the answer lay with the allied intelligence methodology itself, which tended to estimate the Vietcong's probable course of action based upon their capabilities, not their intentions. Since, in the allied estimation, the Vietcong hardly had the capability to launch such an ambitious enterprise: "There was little possibility that the enemy could initiate a general offensive, regardless of his intentions. The answer could also be partially explained by the lack of coordination and cooperation between competing intelligence branches, both South Vietnamese and American. The situation from the U.S. perspective was best summed up by an MACV intelligence analyst: "If we'd gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn't have been believed. It wouldn't have been credible to us.

From spring through the fall of 1967, the U.S. command in Saigon was perplexed by a series of actions initiated by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong in the border regions. **On 24 April a U.S Marine Corps**, patrol prematurely triggered a North Vietnamese offensive aimed at taking the airstrip and combat base at **Khe Sanh**, the western anchor of the Marine's defensive positions in **Quang Tri Province**. By the time the action there had ended in May, 940 North Vietnamese troops and 155 Marines had been killed. For 49 days during early September and lasting into October, the North Vietnamese began shelling the U.S. Marine outpost of **Con Thien**, just south of the **Demilitarized Zone**, or **DMZ**. The intense shelling (**100-150 rounds per day**) prompted Westmoreland to launch Operation *Neutralize*, an intense aerial bombardment campaign of **4,000 sorties** into and just north of the demarcation line.

**On 27 October**, an ARVN battalion at Song Be, the capital of **Phuoc Long Province**, came under attack by an entire North Vietnamese regiment. Two days later, another North Vietnamese Regiment attacked a U.S. Special Forces border outpost at **Loc Ninh**, in **Binh Long Province**. This attack sparked a ten-day battle that drew in elements of the **U.S Infantry Division** and the **ARVN 18th Division** and left **800 North Vietnamese troops** dead at its conclusion. The most severe of what came to be known as "the Border Battles" erupted during October and November

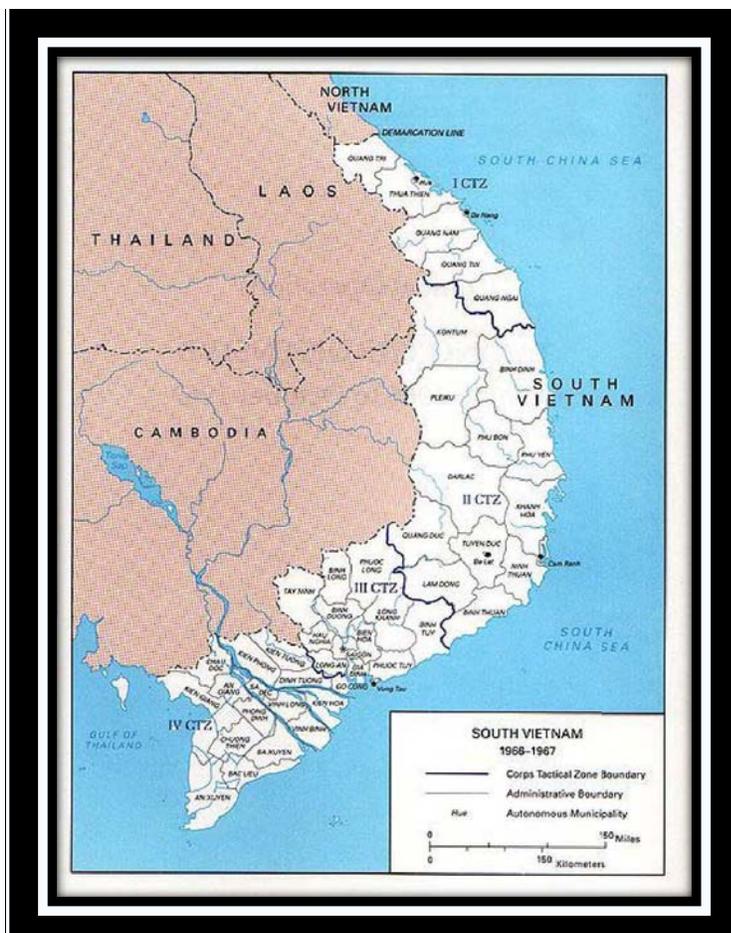
around **Dak To**, another border outpost in **Kontum Province**. The clashes there between the four regiments of the 1st North Vietnamese Division, the **U.S 4th Infantry Division**, the **U.S Airborne Brigade**, and **ARVN infantry and Airborne elements**, lasted for **22 days**. By the time the fighting was over, between **1,200 and 1,600 North Vietnamese** and **262 U.S.** troops had lost their lives, **MACV** intelligence was confused by the possible motives of the North Vietnamese in prompting such large-scale actions in remote regions where U.S. firepower and aerial might could be applied indiscriminately. Tactically and strategically, these operations made no sense. What the Vietcong had done was carry out the first stage of their plan: to fix the attention of the U.S. command on the borders and draw the bulk of U.S. forces away from the heavily populated coastal **lowlands and cities**.

**Westmoreland** was more concerned with the situation at **Khe Sanh**, where, on **21 January**, a force estimated at between **20,000-40,000 North Vietnamese troops** had besieged the **U.S. Marine garrison**. **MACV**, was convinced that the communists planned to stage an attack and overrun the base as a prelude to an all-out effort to seize the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. To deter any such possibility, he deployed 250,000 men, including half of **MACV's U.S. maneuver battalions**, to the I Corps Tactical Zone.

This course of events disturbed **Lieutenant General Trederrick C Weyand**, commander of U.S. forces in **II Corps**, which included the Capital Military District. **Weyand**, a former intelligence officer, was suspicious of the pattern of communist activities in his area of responsibility and notified **Westmoreland** of his concerns on 10 January; **Westmoreland** agreed with his estimate and ordered **15 U.S. battalions** to redeploy from positions near the Cambodian border back to the outskirts of Saigon. When the offensive did begin, a total of **27 allied maneuver battalions** defended the city and the surrounding area. This redeployment may have been one of the most critical tactical decisions of the war.

## **Before the storm**

By the beginning of **January 1968**, the U.S had deployed **331,098** Army personnel and **78,013** Marines in nine divisions, an armoured **cavalry regiment**, and two separate brigades to South Vietnam. They were joined there by the **1st Australian Task Force**, a **Royal Thai Army regiment**, two **South Korean, infantry divisions**, and a **South Korean Marine Corps brigade**, South Vietnamese strength totaled **350,000 regulars** in the **Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps** They were in turn supported by the **151,000-man Regional Forces** and **149,000-man Popular Forces**, which were the equivalent of regional and local militias.



**South Vietnam, Corps Tactical Zones**

In the days immediately preceding the offensive, the preparedness of allied forces was relatively relaxed. North Vietnam had announced in October that it would observe a seven-day truce from 27 January to 3 February, in honor of the Tet holiday, and the South Vietnamese military made plans to allow recreational leave for approximately one-half of its forces. General Westmoreland, who had already cancelled the truce in I Corps, requested that its ally cancel the upcoming cease-fire, but **President Thieu** (who had already reduced the **cease-fire to 36 hours**), refused to do so, claiming that it would damage troop morale and only benefit **communist propagandists**

**On 28 January 11 Vietcong cadre** were captured in the city of **Qui Nhon** while in possession of two pre-recorded audio tapes whose message appealed to the populace in "already occupied **Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang**. The following afternoon, **General Cao Van Vien**, chief of the **ARVN General Staff**, ordered his four corps commanders to place their troops on alert. Yet, there was still a lack of a sense of urgency on the part of the allies. If Westmoreland had a grasp of the potential for danger, he did not communicate it very well to others. On the evening of 30 January, **200 U.S. colonels**, all of whom served on the **MACV intelligence staff**, attended a pool party at the officer's quarters in Saigon. According to **James Meecham**, an analyst at the Combined Intelligence Center who attended the party: "I had no conception **Tet** was coming, absolutely zero... Of the **200-odd colonels** present, not one I talked to knew **Tet** was coming, without exception.

The general also failed to communicate his concerns adequately to Washington. Although he had warned the President between **25 and 30 January** that "widespread" Vietcong attacks were in the offing, his admonitions had tended to be so oblique or so hedged with official optimism that even the administration was unprepared. No one - in either Washington or Vietnam - was expecting what happened.

## Offensive

### "Crack the Sky, Shake the Earth"

Whether by accident or design, the first wave of attacks began shortly after midnight on **30 January** as all five provincial capitals in **II Corps and Da Nang, in I Corps**, were attacked. **Nha Trang** headquarters of the U.S. I Field Force, was the first to be hit, followed shortly by **Ban Me Thuot Kontum. Hoi An Tuy Hoa Da Nang, Qui Nhon, and Pleiku**. During all of these operations, the Vietcong followed a similar pattern: mortar or rocket attacks were closely followed by massed ground assaults conducted by battalion-strength elements of the Vietcong, sometimes supported by North Vietnamese regulars. These forces would join with local cadres who served as guides to lead the regulars to the most senior South Vietnamese headquarters and the radio station. The operations, however, were not well coordinated at the local level. By daylight, almost all communist forces had been driven from their objectives.

**General Phillip B Davidson**, the new **MACV** chief of intelligence, notified **Westmoreland** that "This is going to happen in the rest of the country tonight and tomorrow morning. All U.S. forces were placed on maximum alert and similar orders were issued to all **ARVN units**. The allies, however, still responded without any real sense of urgency. Orders cancelling leaves either came too late or were disregarded.



**U.S. Marines battle in Hamo village**

At **03:00** on the morning of **31 January** communist forces assailed **Saigon, Cholon and Gia Dinh** in the **Capital Military District; Quảng Trị** (again), **Hue, Quang Tin, Tam Ky, and Quang Ngai** as well as U.S. bases at **Phu Bai and Chu Lai in I Corps; Phan Thiet, Tuy Hoa**

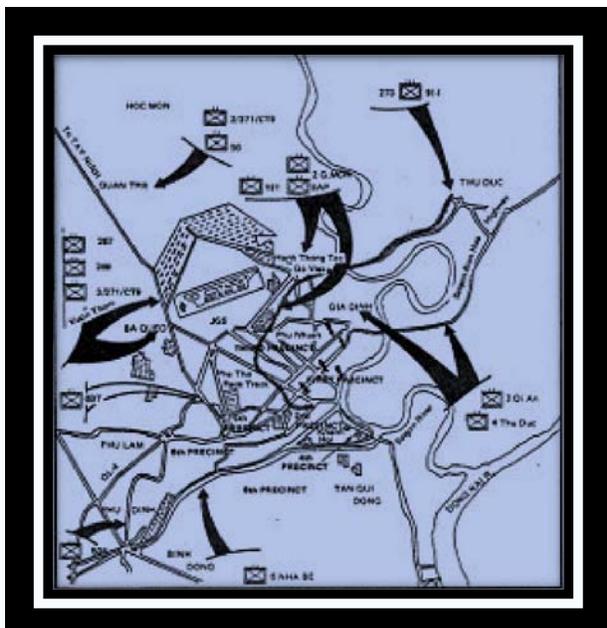
and U.S. installations at **Bong Son** and **An Khe** in **II Corps**; and **Can Tho** and **Vinh Long** in **IV Corps**. The following day, **Bien Hoa**, **Long Thanh**, **Binh Durong** in **III Corps** and **Kien Hoa**, **Dinh Tuong**, **Go Cong**, **Kien Giang**, **Vinh Binh**, **Ben Tre** and **Kien Tuong** in **IV Corps** were assaulted. The last attack of the initial operation was launched against **Bac Lieu** in **IV Corps** on 10 Feb. A total of approximately **84,000 Vietcong troops** participated in the attacks while thousands of others stood by to act as reinforcements or as blocking forces. Communist forces also mortared or rocketed every major allied airfield and **attacked 64 district capitals** and scores of smaller towns.

In most cases the defense against the *General Offensive, General Uprising* was a South Vietnamese affair. Local militia or ARVN forces, supported by the National Police, usually drove the attackers out within two or three days, sometimes within hours; but heavy fighting continued several days longer in **Kontum**, **Buôn Ma Thuột**, **Phan Thiết**, **Cần Thơ**, and **Bến Tre**. The outcome in each instance was usually dictated by the ability of local commanders - some were outstanding, some were cowardly and/or incompetent. During this crucial crisis, however, **No South Vietnamese unit broke or defected to the Vietcong**

According to Westmoreland, he responded to the news of the attacks with optimism, both in media presentations and in his reports to Washington. According to closer observers, however, the general was "stunned that the communists had been able to coordinate so many attacks in such secrecy" and he was "dispirited and deeply shaken." According to Clark Clifford, at the time of the initial attacks, the reaction of the U.S. military leadership "**approached panic**". **Although Westmoreland's appraisal of the military situation was correct, he made himself look foolish by continuously maintaining his belief that Khe Sanh was the real objective of the communists and that 155 attacks by 84,000 troops was a diversion** (a position he maintained until at least *Washington Post* reporter **Peter Braestrup** summed up the feelings of his colleagues by asking "How could any effort against Saigon, especially downtown Saigon, be a diversion?")

## Saigon

Although Saigon was the focal point of the offensive, the communists did not seek a total takeover of the city. Rather, they had six primary targets to strike in the downtown area: the headquarters of the **ARVN General Staff**; the Independence Palace, the **American Embassy**, the **Long Binh Naval Headquarters**, and the **National Radio Station**. These objectives were all assaulted by small elements of the local C-10 Sapper Battalion. Elsewhere in the city or its outskirts, ten Vietcong Local Force Battalions attacked the central police station and the Artillery Command and the Armored Command headquarters (both at **Go Vap**). The plan called for all these initial forces to capture and hold their positions for 48 hours, by which time reinforcements were to have arrived to relieve them.



## Attacks on Saigon

The defense of the Capital Military Zone was primarily a South Vietnamese responsibility and it was initially defended by eight ARVN infantry battalions and the local police force. By 3 Feb they had been reinforced by five ARVN Ranger Battalions, five Marine Corps, and five ARVN Airborne Battalions. U.S. Army units participating in the defense included the 716th Military Police Battalion, seven infantry battalions (one mechanized), and six artillery battalions.

Faulty intelligence and poor local coordination hampered the communist attacks from the outset. At the Armored Command and Artillery Command headquarters on the northern edge of the city, for example, the communists planned to utilize captured tanks and artillery pieces to further support the offensive. To their dismay, they found that the tanks had been moved to another base two months earlier and that the breech blocks of the artillery pieces had been removed, rendering them useless. One of the most important Vietcong targets was the National Radio Station. Vietcong troops had brought along a tape recording of **Hồ** announcing the liberation of Saigon and calling for a "General Uprising" against the **Thiệu** government. The building was seized and held for six hours but the occupiers were unable to broadcast due to the cutting off of the audio lines from the main studio at the tower (which was situated at a different location) as soon as the station was seized. **The U.S. Embassy in Saigon**, a massive six-floor building situated within a four acre compound, had only been completed in September. **At 02:45** it was attacked by a **19-man sapper team** that blew a hole in the eight-foot high surrounding wall and charged through. With their officer killed in the initial attack and their attempt to gain access to the building having failed, however, the sappers simply milled around in the chancery grounds until they were all eliminated by reinforcements. **By 09:20** the embassy and its grounds were secured.

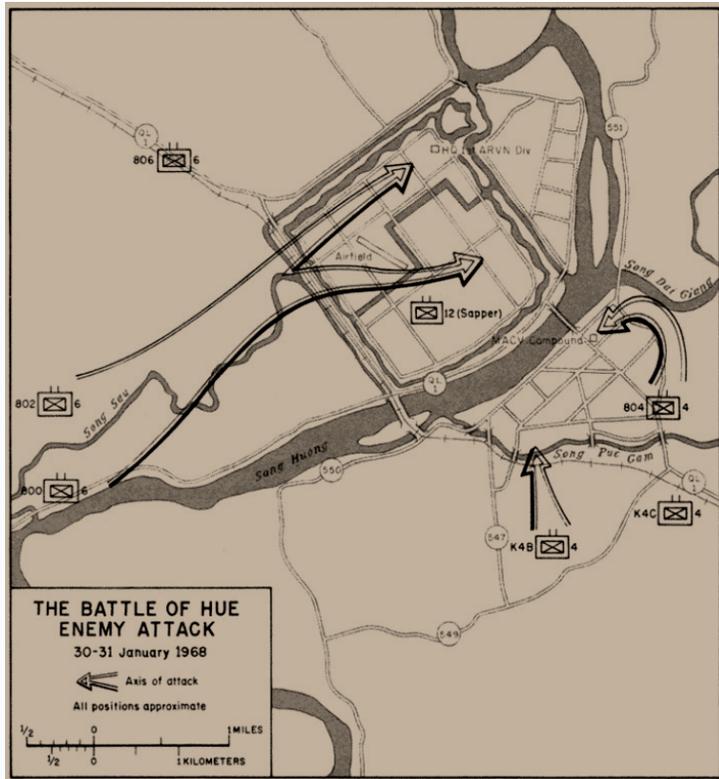
Throughout the city, small squads of **Vietcong** fanned out to attack various officers and enlisted men's billets, homes of **ARVN officers**, and district police stations. Provided with "blacklists" of military officers and civil servants, they began to round up and execute any that could be found. **Brutality beget brutality. On 1 February, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan**, chief of the National

Police Force, publicly executed a Vietcong officer captured in civilian clothing in front of a photographer and film cameraman. What was not explained in the wake of the distribution of the captured images was that the suspect had just taken part in the murder of one of Loan's most trusted officers and his entire family.

Outside the city proper, two Vietcong battalions attacked the U.S. logistical and headquarters complex at **Long Binh. Bien Hoa Air Base**, was struck by a battalion, while the adjacent ARVN III Corps headquarters was the objective of another. **Tan Son Nhut Air Base**, in the northwestern part of the city, was attacked by three battalions. Fortunately for the allies, a combat-ready battalion of ARVN paratroopers, awaiting transport to Da Nang, went instead directly into action and halted the attack. A total of **35 communist battalions**, many of whose troops were undercover cadres who had lived and worked within the capital or its environs for years, had been committed to the Saigon objectives. By dawn, most of the attacks within the city center had been eliminated, but severe fighting between Vietcong and allied forces erupted in the Chinatown neighborhood of **Cholon** around the **Phu Tho** racetrack, which was being utilized as a Vietcong staging area and command and control center. Bitter and destructive house-to-house fighting erupted in the area and, on **4 February**, the residents were ordered to leave their homes and the area was declared a free fire zone. Fighting in the city came to a close only after a fierce battle between **ARVN Rangers and Vietcong forces** on 7 March.

Except at Huế and mopping-up operations in and around Saigon, the first surge of the offensive was over by the second week of February. The U.S. estimated that during the first phase ( 30 January – 8 April) approximately **45,000 communist soldiers** were killed and an unknown number were wounded. For years this figure was held as excessive, but it was confirmed by Stanley Karnow in Hanoi in 1981 Westmoreland claimed that during the same period 32,000 communist troops were killed and another **5,800 captured**. The South Vietnamese suffered **2,788 killed, 8,299 wounded, and 587 missing in action**. U.S. and other allied forces suffered **1,536 killed, 7,764 wounded, and 11 missing**

## Hue



## Hue and the Citadel

At **03:40** on the foggy morning of **31 January**, allied defensive positions north of the Perfume River in the city of Hue were mortared and rocketed and then attacked by two battalions of the 6th North Vietnamese Regiment. Their target were the ARVN 1st Division headquarters located in the Citadel, a three-square mile complex of palaces, parks, and residences that were surrounded by a moat and a massive earth and masonry fortress built in 1802. The undermanned ARVN defenders, led by **General Ngo Quang Truong**, managed to hold their position, but the majority of the Citadel fell to the communists. On the south bank of the river, the 4th North Vietnamese Regiment attempted to seize the local MACV headquarters, but was held at bay by a makeshift force of approximately **200 Americans**. The rest of the city was overrun by communist forces which initially totaled approximately **7,500 men**. Both sides then rushed to reinforce and resupply their forces. Lasting **26 days**, the battle of **Hue** became one of the **longest and bloodiest single battles of the Vietnam War**.

During the first days of the **North Vietnamese** occupation, **allied intelligence** vastly underestimated the number of communist troops and little appreciated the effort that was going to be necessary to evict them. **General Westmoreland** informed the **Joint Chiefs** that "the enemy has approximately three companies in the **Hue Citadel** and the marines have sent a battalion into the area to clear them out." Since there were no U.S. formations stationed in Hue, relief forces had to move up from **Phu Bai**, eight kilometers to the southeast. In a misty drizzle, **U.S. Marines** of the **1st Marine Division** and soldiers of the **1st ARVN Division** and **Marine Corps** cleared the city street by street and house by house, a deadly and destructive form of urban combat that the U.S. military had not engaged in since the **Battle of Seoul** during the

Korean War, and for which its men were not trained..Due to the historical and cultural significance of the city, American forces did not immediately apply air and artillery strikes as widely as it had in other cities.



**U.S. Marines advance past an M-48 tank during the battle for Hue**

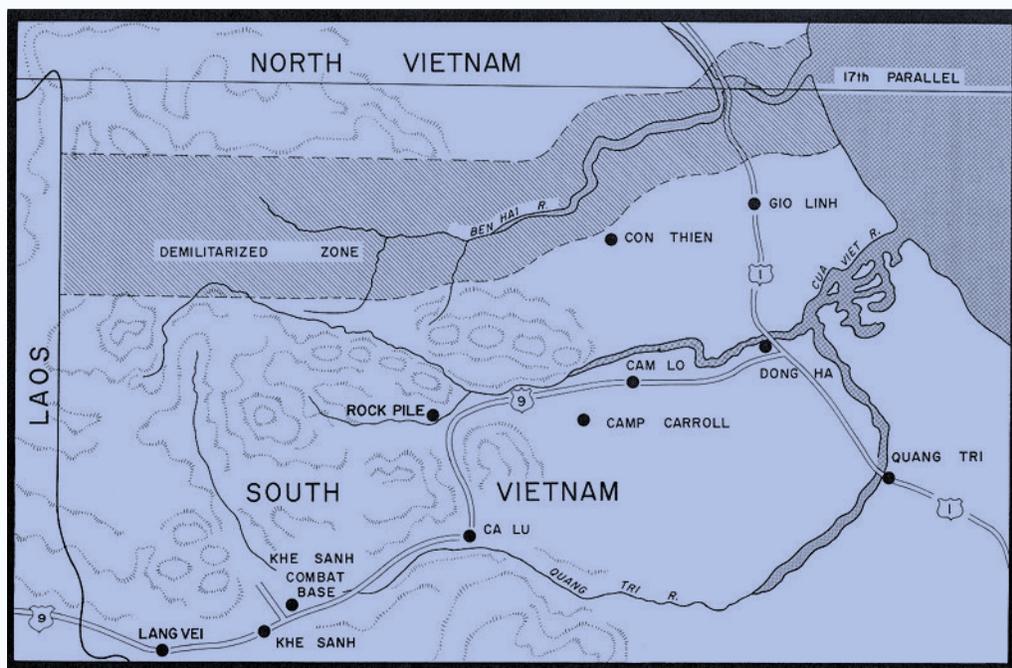
Outside Hue, elements of the **U.S. Air Cavalry Division** and the **101 Airborne Division**, fought to seal communist access and cut off their lines of supply and reinforcement. By this point in the battle **16 to 18 communist battalions (8,000-11,000 men)** were taking part in the fighting for the city itself or the approaches to the former imperial capital. Two of the North Vietnamese regiments had made a forced march from the vicinity of **Khe Sanh** to **Hue** in order to participate. During most of **February**, the allies gradually fought their way towards the **Citadel**, which was only taken after four days of intense struggle. The city was not declared recaptured by **U.S. and ARVN** forces until 24 February, when members of the **2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment, 1st ARVN Division** raised the **South Vietnamese flag** over the Palace of Perfect Peace.

During the intense action, the allies estimated that North Vietnamese forces had **between 2,500 and 5,000 killed** and **89 captured** in the city and in the surrounding area **216 U.S. Marines** and soldiers had been killed during the fighting and **1,609** were wounded. **421 ARVN troops** were killed, another **2,123 were wounded**, and **31 were missing** More than **5,800 civilians** had lost their lives during the battle and **116,000** were left homeless out of an original population of **140,000**. In the aftermath of the recapture of the city, the discovery of several mass graves (the last of which were uncovered in **1970**) of South Vietnamese citizens of Hue sparked a controversy that has not diminished with time. The victims had either been clubbed or shot to death or simply been buried alive. The official allied explanation was that during their initial occupation of the city, the communists had quickly begun to systematically round up (under the guise of **re-education**) and then execute as many as **2,800 South Vietnamese civilians** that they believed to be potentially hostile to communist control. Those taken into custody included South Vietnamese military personnel, present and former government officials, local civil servants, teachers, policemen, and religious figures. **Historian Gunther Lewy** claimed that a captured Vietcong document stated that the communists had "eliminated **1,892 administrative personnel, 38 policemen, 790 tyrants.**

This thesis achieved wide credence at the time, but the **Massacre at Hue**, came under increasing press scrutiny later, when press reports exposed that South Vietnamese "revenge squads" had also been at work in the aftermath of the battle, searching out and executing citizens that had supported the communist occupation. The North Vietnamese later further muddied the waters by stating that their forces had indeed rounded up "reactionary" captives for transport to the North, but that local commanders, under battlefield exigencies, had executed them for expediency's sake. **General Truong**, commander of the **1st ARVN Division** and hero of the battle, believed that the captives had been executed by the communists in order to protect the identities of members of the local Vietcong infrastructure, whose covers had been blown. The fate of those citizens of Hue discovered in the mass graves will probably never be known with certainty, but it was probably the result of a combination of all of the above circumstances.

## Khe Sanh

The attack on Khe Sanh, which began on **21 January**, may have been intended to serve two purposes - as a real attempt to seize the position or as a diversion to draw American attention and forces away from the population centers in the lowlands, a deception that was "both plausible and easy to orchestrate. In **General Westmoreland's** view, the purpose of the Combat Base was to provoke the North Vietnamese into a focused and prolonged confrontation in a confined geographic area, one which would allow the application of massive U.S. artillery and air strikes that would inflict heavy casualties in a relatively unpopulated region. By the end of **1967**, **MACV** had moved nearly half of its maneuver battalions to **I Corps** in anticipation of just such a battle.



Northern Quảng Trị Province

**Westmoreland** (and the American media, which covered the action extensively) often made inevitable comparisons between the actions at **Khe Sanh** and the **Battle of Dien Bien Phu** where

a French base had been besieged and ultimately overrun by **Viet Minh**, forces under the command of General Giáp during the First Indochina War. **Westmoreland**, who knew of **Nguyen Chi Thanh's** penchant for large-scale operations (**but not of his death**), believed that this was going to be an attempt to replicate that victory. He intended to stage his own "**Dien Bien Phu** in reverse.

**Khe Sanh** and its **6,000 U.S. Marine Corps, Army, and ARVN** defenders was surrounded by two to three North Vietnamese divisions, totaling approximately **20,000** men. Throughout the siege, which lasted until **8 April**, the allies were subjected to heavy mortar, rocket, and artillery bombardment, combined with sporadic small-scale infantry attacks on outlying positions. With the exception of the overrunning of the U.S. Special Forces camp at **Lang Vei**, however, there was never a major ground assault on the base and the battle became largely a duel between American and North Vietnamese artillerists, combined with massive air strikes conducted by U.S. aircraft. American air support included massive bombing strikes by **B-52's**. By the end of the siege, **U.S Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy aircraft** had dropped **39,179 tons** of ordnance in the defense of the base. The overland supply route to the base had been cut off, and airborne resupply by cargo aircraft became extremely dangerous due to heavy North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire. Thanks to innovative high-speed "**Super Gaggles**," which utilized fighter-bombers in combination with large numbers of supply helicopters, and the Air Force's utilization of **C-130 Hercules**, cargo aircraft employing the innovative **LAPES** delivery method, aerial resupply was never halted.

When the **Tet Offensive** began, feelings ran high at **MACV** that the base was in for a serious attack. *In I Corps*, the **Tet** truce had been cancelled in apprehension of just such an occurrence. It just never happened. The offensive passed **Khe Sanh** by and the intermittent battle continued there as usual. **Westmoreland's** fixation upon the base continued even as the battle raged around him in Saigon. **On 1 February**, as the offensive reached its height, he wrote a memo for his staff (but never delivered) claiming that "The enemy is attempting to confuse the issue...I suspect he is also trying to draw everyone's attention from the area of greatest threat, the northern part of I Corps. Let me caution everyone not to be confused.

In the end, a major allied relief expedition (**Operation Pegasus**) reached **Khe Sanh** on **8 April**. But North Vietnamese forces were already withdrawing from the area. Both sides claimed that the battle had served its intended purpose. The U.S. estimated that **8,000 North Vietnamese troops** had been killed and considerably more wounded, against **730 American lives** lost and another **2,642 wounded**.

## **Phases II and III**



**U.S. Marines move through the ruins of the hamlet of Dai Do after several days of intense fighting**

To further enhance their political posture at the Paris talks, which opened on **13 May**, the North Vietnamese opened the second phase of the *General Offensive* in late April. U.S. intelligence sources estimated between February and May the North Vietnamese had dispatched **50,000** men down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to replace losses incurred during the earlier fighting. Some of the most prolonged and vicious combat of the war opened on **29 April** and lasted until **30 May**, when the **8,000 men** of the **320th North Vietnamese Division**, backed by artillery from across the DMZ, threatened the U.S. logistical base at **Dong Ha**, in northwestern **Quảng Trị Province**. In what became known as the **Battle of Dai Do**, the North Vietnamese clashed savagely with U.S. Marine, Army, and ARVN forces before withdrawing. The North Vietnamese lost an estimated **2,100 men** after inflicting casualties on the allies of **290 killed and 946 wounded**. During the early morning hours of **4 May**, communist units initiated the second phase of the offensive (known by the South Vietnamese and Americans as "**Mini-Tet**") by striking **119** targets throughout South Vietnam, including Saigon. This time, however, **allied intelligence** was better prepared, stripping away the element of surprise. Most of the communist forces were intercepted by allied screening elements before they reached their targets. 13 Vietcong battalions, however, managed to slip through the cordon and once again plunged the capital into chaos. Severe fighting occurred at **Phu Lam**, (where it took two days to root out the **267th Vietcong Local Force Battalion**), around the **Y-Bridge**, and at **Tan Son Nhut**. By **12 May**, however, it was all over. Vietcong forces withdrew from the area leaving behind over **3,000 dead**.





**Kham Duc during the evacuation**

**Phase III** of the offensive began on **17 August**, and involved attacks in **I, II, and III Corps**. Significantly, during this series of actions only North Vietnamese forces participated. The main offensive was preceded by attacks on the border towns of **Tay Ninh , An Loc** and **Loc Ninh**, which were initiated in order to draw defensive forces from the cities. A thrust against **Da Nang** was preempted by the **U.S. Marines** on **16 August**. Continuing their border-clearing operations, three North Vietnamese regiments asserted heavy pressure on the **U.S. Special Forces camp** at **Bu Prang, in Quang Duc Province**, five kilometers from the **Cambodian** border. The fighting lasted for two days before the North Vietnamese broke it off and the fighting resulted in **776** North Vietnamese, **114 South Vietnamese**, and two **Americans killed**.

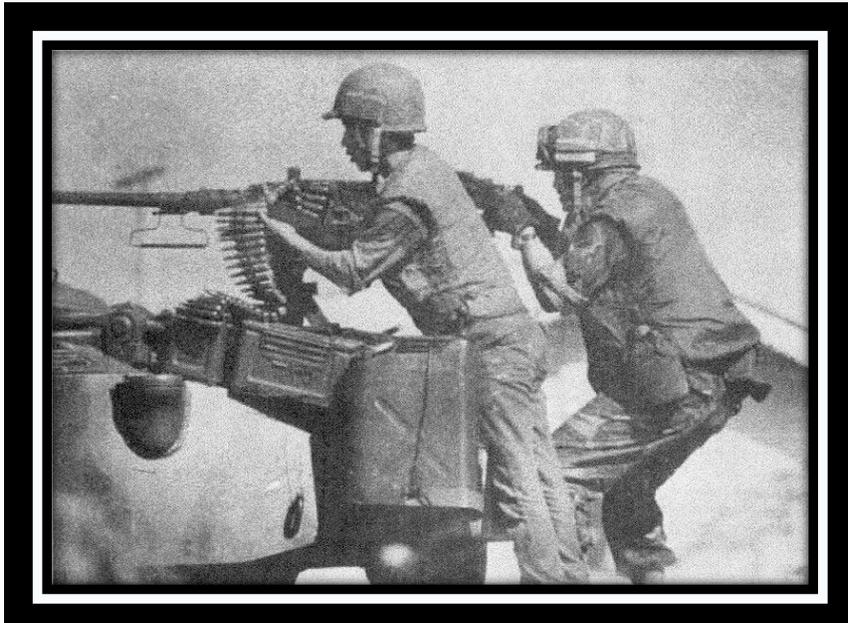
Saigon was struck again during this phase, but the attacks were less sustained and once again easily repulsed. As far as MACV was concerned, the August offensive "was a dismal failure. In five weeks of fighting and after the loss of **20,000 troops**, not a single objective had been attained during this "final and decisive phase." Yet, as historian Ronald Spector has pointed out "the communist failures were not final or decisive either. During the same period **700 U.S. troops were killed in action**."

The horrendous casualties and suffering endured by communist units during these sustained operations was beginning to tell. The fact that there were no apparent military gains made that could possibly justify all the blood and effort just exacerbated the situation. During the first half of **1969**, more than **20,000** communist troops rallied to allied forces, a threefold increase over the **1968** figure on **5 April 1969**, **COSVN** issued *Directive 55* to all of its subordinate units: "**Never again** and under no circumstances are we going to risk our entire military force for just such an offensive. On the contrary, we should endeavor to preserve our military potential for future campaigns."

## **Aftermath**

## North Vietnam

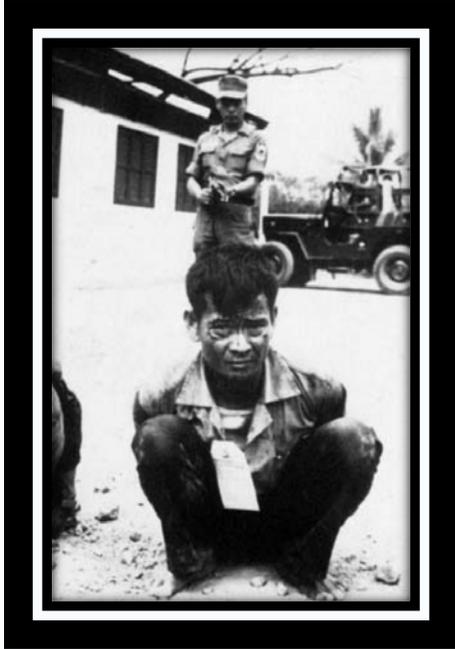
The leadership in Hanoi must have been initially despondent about the outcome of their great gamble. Their first and most ambitious goal, producing a general uprising, had ended in a dismal failure. In total, approximately **85,000-100,000** communist troops had participated in the initial onslaught and in the follow-up phases. Overall, during the "Border Battles" of **1967** and the nine-month winter-spring campaign, **75,000-85,000** communist troops had been killed in action.



**South Vietnamese troops in action near Tan Son Nhut Air Base**

The keys to the failure of **Tet** are not difficult to discern. Hanoi had underestimated the strategic mobility of the allied forces, which allowed them to redeploy at will to threatened areas; their battle plan was too complex and difficult to coordinate, which was amply demonstrated by the **30 January**, attacks; their violation of the principle of mass, attacking everywhere instead of concentrating their forces on a few specific targets, allowed their forces to be defeated piecemeal; the launching of massed attacks headlong into the teeth of vastly superior firepower; and last, but not least, the incorrect assumptions upon which the entire campaign was based. According to **General Tran Van Tra**: "We did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy, did not fully realize that the enemy still had considerable capabilities, and that our capabilities were limited, and set requirements that were beyond our actual strength.

The communist effort to regain control of the countryside was somewhat more successful. According to the **U.S State Department**, the **Vietcong** "made **pacification** virtually inoperative. In the **Mekong Delta** the Vietcong was stronger now than ever and in other regions the countryside belongs to the VC. **General Wheeler** reported that the offensive had brought counterinsurgency programs to a halt and "that to a large extent, the V.C. now controlled the countryside. Unfortunately for the **Vietcong**, this state of affairs did not last. **Heavy casualties** and the backlash of the



**A Vietcong guerrilla awaits interrogation following his capture in the attacks on Saigon.**

The **horrendous** losses inflicted on Vietcong units struck into the heart of the irreplaceable infrastructure that had been built up for over a decade. From this point forward, **Hanoi** was forced to fill one-third of the Vietcong's ranks with North Vietnamese troops. However, this change had little effect on the war, since North Vietnam had little difficulty making up the casualties inflicted by the **offensive**. Some **Western historians** have come to believe that one insidious ulterior motive for the campaign was the elimination of competing southern members of the Party, thereby allowing the northerners more control once the war was **won**.

It was not until after the conclusion of the first phase of the offensive that Hanoi realized that its sacrifices might not have been in vain. General Tran Do, North Vietnamese commander at the battle of Hue, gave some insight into how defeat was translated into victory:

"In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention - but it turned out to be a fortunate result.

Hanoi had in no way anticipated the political and psychological effect the offensive would have on the leadership and population of the **U.S.** When the northern leadership saw how the **U.S.** was reacting to the offensive, they began to propagandize their "**victory**". The opening of negotiations and the diplomatic struggle, the option feared by the Party militants prior to the **offensive**, quickly came to occupy a position equal to that of the military struggle.

On **5 May Truong Chinh** rose to address a congress of Party members and proceeded to castigate the Party militants and their bid for quick victory. His "faction-bashing" tirade sparked

a serious debate within the party leadership which lasted for four months. As the leader of the "main force war" and "quick victory" faction, **Lê Duẩn** also came under severe criticism. In August, Chinh's report on the situation was accepted *in toto*, published, and broadcast via **Radio Hanoi**. He had single-handedly shifted the nation's war strategy and restored himself to prominence as the Party's ideological conscience. Meanwhile, the Vietcong proclaimed itself the **Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam**, and took part in future Peace negotiations under this title. It would be a long seven years until victory.

## South Vietnam

South Vietnam was a nation in turmoil both during and in the aftermath of the offensive. Tragedy had compounded tragedy as the conflict reached into the nation's cities for the first time. As government troops pulled back to defend the urban areas, the Vietcong moved in to fill the vacuum in the countryside. The violence and destruction witnessed during the offensive left a deep psychological scar on the South Vietnamese civilian population. Confidence in the government was shaken, since the offensive seemed to reveal that even with massive American support, the government could not protect its citizens.



**Civilians sort through the ruins of their homes in Cholon, the heavily damaged Chinese section of Saigon**

The human and material cost to South Vietnam was staggering. The number of civilian dead was estimated by the government at **14,300** with an additional **24,000 wounded**. **630,000** new refugees had been generated, joining the nearly **800,000** others already displaced by the war. By the end of **1968**, one of every twelve South Vietnamese was living in a refugee camp. More than **70,000** homes had been destroyed in the fighting and perhaps **30,000** more were heavily damaged and the nation's infrastructure had been virtually destroyed. The South Vietnamese military, although it had performed better than the Americans had expected, suffered from lowered morale, with desertion rates rising from **10.5 per thousand** before **Tet** to **16.5 per thousand** by **July**.

In the wake of the offensive, however, fresh determination was exhibited by the **Thieu government**. On **1 February** the President declared a state of martial law and, on **15 June**, the National Assembly passed his request for a general mobilization of the population and the induction of **200,000** draftees into the armed forces by the end of the year (a decree that had failed to pass only five months previously due to strong political opposition). This increase would bring South Vietnam's troop strength to more than **900,000** men. Military mobilization, anti-corruption campaigns, demonstrations of political unity, and administrative reforms were quickly carried out **Thieu** also established a National Recovery Committee to oversee food distribution, resettlement, and housing construction for the new refugees. Both the government and the Americans were encouraged by a new determination that was exhibited among the ordinary citizens of the Republic. Many urban dwellers were indignant that the Vietcong had launched their attacks during **Tet** and it drove many who had been previously apathetic into active support of the government. Journalists, political figures, and religious leaders alike - even the militant Buddhists - professed confidence in the government's plans.



**Nguyen Van Thieu was the president of South Vietnam**

**Thieu** saw an opportunity to consolidate his personal power and he took it. His only real political rival was **Vice President Ky**, the former Air Force commander, who had been outmaneuvered by **Thieu** in the presidential election of **1967**. In the aftermath of **Tet**, **Ky** supporters in the military and the administration were quickly removed from power, arrested, or exiled, A crack-down on the South Vietnamese press also ensued and there was a worrisome return of former President **Ngô Đình Diệm's Can Lao Party** members to high positions in the government and military. By the summer of **1968**, the President had earned a less exalted sobriquet among the South Vietnamese population, who had begun to call him "the little dictator.

**Thieu** had also become very suspicious of his American allies, unwilling to believe (as did many South Vietnamese) that the U.S. had been caught by surprise by the offensive. "Now that it's all over," he queried a visiting Washington official, "you really knew it was coming didn't you?" **Lyndon Johnson's unilateral decision on 31 March**, to curtail the **bombing of North Vietnam** only confirmed what **Thieu** already feared - the **Americans were going to abandon South Vietnam** to the communists. For **Thieu**, the bombing halt and the beginning of negotiations with the North brought not the hope of an end to the war, but "an abiding fear of peace. He was only mollified after an **18 July**, meeting with **Johnson in Honolulu**, where the **American president** affirmed that Saigon would be a full partner in all negotiations and that the **U.S.** would not "support the imposition of a coalition government, or any other form of government, on the people of South Vietnam.

## United States

The **Tet Offensive** created a crisis within the Johnson administration, which became increasingly unable to convince the American public that it had been a major defeat for the communists. The optimistic assessments made prior to the offensive by the administration and the **pentagon** came under heavy criticism and ridicule as the **credibility gap** that had opened in **1967** widened into a chasm.

The shocks that reverberated from the battlefield continued to widen: On **18 February 1968** MACV posted the highest U.S. casualty figures for a single week during the entire war - **543 killed, 2,547 wounded** On **23 February 1968**, the **U.S. Selective Service System** announced a new draft call for **48,000 men**, the second highest of the war. On **28 February 1968** **Robert S McNamara** the **Secretary of Defense** who had overseen the escalation of the war in **1964-1965**, but who had eventually turned against it, stepped down from office.

## Troop request

During the first two weeks of February, **Generals Westmoreland and Wheeler** communicated as to the necessity for reinforcements or troop increases in Vietnam. **Westmoreland** insisted that he only needed those forces either in-country or already scheduled for deployment and he was puzzled by the sense of unwarranted urgency in **Wheeler's** queries. **Westmoreland** was tempted, however, when Wheeler emphasized that the **White House** might loosen restraints and allow operations in **Laos, Cambodia**, or possibly even North Vietnam itself on **8 February**, **Westmoreland** responded that he could use another division "if operations in Laos are authorized". **Wheeler** responded by challenging **Westmoreland's** assessment of the situation, pointing out dangers that his on-the-spot commander did not consider palpable, concluding: "In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them **Wheeler's** bizarre promptings were influenced by the severe strain imposed upon the **U.S. military** by the Vietnam commitment, one which had been undertaken without the mobilization of its reserve forces. **The Joint Chiefs** had repeatedly requested national mobilization, not only to prepare for a possible intensification of the war, but also to ensure that the nation's strategic reserve did not become depleted. By obliquely ordering Westmoreland to demand more forces, **Wheeler** was attempting to solve two pressing problems. In comparison with **MACV's** previous communications, which had been full of confidence,

optimism, and resolve, **Westmoreland's 12 February** request for **10,500 troops** was much more urgent: "which I desperately need...time is of the essence. On **13 February 10,500** previously authorized **U.S. airborne troops** and marines were dispatched to South Vietnam. The **Joint Chiefs** then played their hand, advising President Johnson to turn down MACV's requested division-sized reinforcement unless he called up some **1,234,001 marine** and army reservists.

**Johnson** dispatched Wheeler to Saigon on **February 20** to determine military requirements in response to the offensive. Both **Wheeler** and **Westmoreland** were elated that in only eight days **McNamara** would be replaced by the hawkish **Clark Clifford** and that the military might finally obtain permission to widen the war. **Wheeler's** written report of the trip, however, contained no mention of any new contingencies, strategies, or the building up the strategic reserve. It was couched in grave language that suggested that the **206,756-man request** it proposed was a matter of vital military necessity **Westmoreland** wrote in his memoir that Wheeler had deliberately concealed the truth of the matter in order to force the issue of the strategic reserve upon the President. On **27 February Johnson and McNamara** discussed the proposed troop increase. To fulfill it would require an increase in overall military strength of about **400,000 men** and the expenditure of an additional **\$10 billion during fiscal 1969** and another **\$15 billion in 1970**. These monetary concerns were pressing. Throughout the fall of **1967** and the spring of **1968**, the U.S. was struggling with "one of the most severe monetary crises" of the period. Without a new tax bill and budgetary cuts, the nation would face even higher inflation "and the possible collapse of the monetary system" **Johnson's** friend **Clark Clifford** was concerned about what the American public would think of the escalation: "How do we avoid creating the feeling that we are pounding troops down a **rathole**?"

According to the **Pentagon Paper's "A fork in the road had been reached and the alternatives stood out in stark reality."** To meet **Wheeler's** request would mean a total **U.S. military** commitment to **South Vietnam**. "To deny it, or to attempt to cut it to a size which could be sustained by the thinly stretched active forces, would just as surely signify that an upper limit to the U.S. military commitment in South Vietnam had been reached.

## Reassessment

To evaluate **Westmoreland's** request and its possible impact on domestic politics, Johnson convened the "**Clifford Group**" on **28 February** and tasked its members with a complete policy reassessment. Some of the members argued that the offensive represented an opportunity to defeat the North Vietnamese on American terms while others pointed out that neither side could win militarily, that North Vietnam could match any troop increase, that the bombing of the North be halted, and that a change in strategy was required that would seek not victory, but the staying power required to reach a negotiated settlement. This would require a less aggressive strategy that was designed to protect the population of South Vietnam. The divided group's final report, issued on **4 March** failed to seize the opportunity to change directions..And seemed to recommend that we continue rather haltingly down the same road."

- A. On **1 March** Clifford had succeeded **McNamara as Secretary of Defense**. During the month, Clifford, who had entered office as a staunch supporter of the Vietnam commitment and who had opposed **McNamara's** de-escalatory views, turned against the

war. **According to Clifford:** "The simple truth was that the military failed to sustain a respectable argument for their position. Between the results of **Tet** and the meetings of the group that bore his name, he became convinced that **de-escalation** was the only solution for the **United States**. He was convinced that the troop increase would lead only to a more violent stalemate and sought out others in the administration to assist him in convincing the President to reverse the escalation, to cap force levels at **550,000 men**, to seek negotiations with **Hanoi**, and turn responsibility for the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. Clifford quietly sought allies and was assisted in his effort by the so-called "**8:30 Group**" - **Nitze, Warnke, Phil G. Goulding (Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs), George Elsey, and Air Force Colonel Robert E. Pursely**. On **27 February**, **Secretary of State Dean Rusk** had proposed that a partial bombing halt be implemented in North Vietnam and that an offer to negotiate be extended to **Hanoi** On **4 March**, **Rusk reiterated the proposal**, explaining that, during the rainy season in the **North, bombing** was less effective and that no military sacrifice would thus occur. This was purely a political ploy, however, since the North Vietnamese would probably again refuse to negotiate, casting the onus on them and "thus freeing our hand after a short period...putting the monkey firmly upon Hanoi's back for what was to follow



**ARVN Rangers moving through western Cholon, 10 May 1968**

While this was being deliberated, the troop request was leaked to the press and published in the **The New York Times** on **10 March**. The article also revealed that the request had begun a serious debate within the administration. According to it, many high-level officials believed that the **U.S. troop increase** would be matched by the communists and would simply maintain a stalemate at a higher level of violence. It went on to state that officials were saying in private that "widespread and deep changes in attitudes, a sense that a watershed has been reached. A great deal has been said by historians concerning how the news media made **Tet the "turning point"** in the public's perception of the war. Popular **CBS anchor Walter Cronkite** stated during a news broadcast on **February 27** "We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver

linings they find in the darkest clouds" and added that, "we are mired in a stalemate that could only be ended by negotiation, not victory. Far from suffering a loss of morale, however, the majority of Americans had rallied to the side of the president. **A Gallup poll in January 1968** revealed that **56 percent** polled considered themselves hawks on the war and **27 percent doves**, with **17 percent** offering no opinion. By early **February**, at the height of the first phase of the offensive, **61 percent declared themselves hawks, 23 percent doves, and 16 percent held no opinion.** Johnson, however, made few comments to the press during or immediately after the offensive, leaving an impression of indecision on the public. It was this lack of communication that caused a rising disapproval rating for his conduct of the war. By the end of February, his approval rating had fallen from 63 percent to 47 percent. By the end of March the percentage of Americans that expressed confidence in U.S. military policies in **Southeast Asia had fallen from 74 to 54 percent.**

By **22 March**, **President Johnson** had informed Wheeler to "forget the **100,000**" men. The President and his staff were refining a lesser version of the troop increase - a planned call-up of 62,000 reservists, 13,000 of whom would be sent to Vietnam. Three days later, at Clifford's suggestion, Johnson called a conclave of the **Wise Men** With few exceptions; all of the members of the group had formerly been accounted as hawks on the war. The group was joined by **Rusk, Wheeler, Bundy, Rostow, and Clifford.** The final assessment of the majority stupefied the group According to **Clifford**, "few of them were thinking solely of Vietnam anymore". All but four members called for disengagement from the war, leaving the President "deeply shaken.

**According to the *Pentagon Papers*, the advice of the group was decisive in convincing Johnson to reduce the bombing of North Vietnam.**

**Lyndon Johnson** was depressed and despondent at the course of recent events. The *New York Times* article had been released just two days before the **United States Democratic Party's New Hampshire Primary**, where the President suffered an unexpected setback in the election, finishing barely ahead of **Senator Eugene McCarthy**. Soon afterward, **Senator Robert F Kennedy** announced he would join the contest for the Democratic nomination, further **emphasizing the plummeting support for Johnson's administration in the wake of Tet.**

**The President was to make a televised address to the nation on Vietnam policy on 31 March**, and was deliberating on both the troop request and his response to the military situation. By **28 March**, **Clifford** was working hard to convince him to tone down his hard-line speech, maintaining force levels at their present size, and instituting Rusk's bombing/negotiating proposal. To Clifford's surprise, both **Rusk and Rostow** (both of whom had previously been opposed to any form of **de-escalation**) offered no opposition to **Clifford's** suggestions. **On 31 March President Johnson announced the unilateral** (although still partial) bombing halt during his television address. He then stunned the nation by declining to run for a second term in office. To Washington's surprise, on **3 April Hanoi** announced that it would conduct **negotiations**, which were scheduled to begin on **13 May**, in **Paris.**

**On 9 June President Johnson replaced Westmoreland as commander of MACV with General Creighton W Abrams.** Although the decision had been made in **December 1967** and **Westmoreland was made Army Chief of Staff**, many saw his relief as punishment for the entire Tet debacle. **Abrams'** new strategy was quickly demonstrated by the closure of the

"strategic" **Khe Sanh base and the ending of multi-division "search and destroy" operations.** Also gone were discussions of victory over North Vietnam. Abrams' new "One War" policy centered the American effort **on the takeover of the fighting by the South Vietnamese (through Vietnamization), the pacification of the countryside, and the destruction of communist logistics.** The new administration of **President Richard M Nixon** would oversee the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the continuation of negotiations.

## U.S. Secretary of State

Dean Rusk

**We can't help but take note of the fact that there was an intolerable violation of the recent New Year's cease-fire.**

**As 1968 began,** U.S. military leadership was still confident that a favorable peace agreement could be forced on the North Vietnamese. Despite growing calls at home for an immediate U.S. withdrawal, hawks like **Secretary of State Dean Rusk and General William Westmoreland** planned to keep the pressure on the North Vietnamese through increased bombing and other attrition strategies. Westmoreland claimed to see clearly 'the light at the end of the tunnel,' and Rusk believed that soon the shell-shocked Communists would stumble out of the jungle to the bargaining table. However, on **January 31, 1968,** the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong launched their massive Tet Offensive all across South Vietnam. In the first week of the offensive, countless Allied positions fell to the Communists, including the city of **Huø,** and for a short time, the **U.S. Embassy in Saigon.** By the end of **February,** most of the territory lost to the Communists was regained and the Viet Cong were destroyed, but the unexpected offensive had crushed U.S. hopes for an imminent end to the conflict. In **Tet's aftermath,** **President Lyndon Johnson** came under fire on all sides for his Vietnam policy. **On March 31,** he announced that the United States would begin de-escalation in Vietnam, **And Halt the bombing in North Vietnam.**

**Note: On March 31, President Lyndon B Johnson announced that the United States would begin de-escalation in Vietnam,**

**"And Halt the Bombing in North Vietnam" Read below what the leader of the North Vietnam Military said.**

General Giap was a brilliant, highly respected leader of the North Vietnam military. The following quote is from his memoirs currently found in the Vietnam war memorial in Hanoi

"What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi. You had us on the ropes. If you had pressed us a little harder, just for another day or two, we were ready to surrender! It was the same at the battles of TET. You defeated us! We knew it, and we thought you knew it. We were ready to surrender. You had won!"



General Vo Nguyen Giap

### "You Defeated Us"



"What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi.



The Vietnam War lasted twice as long as World War II and the USAF flew twice as many sorties in Southeast Asia as Army Air Forces carried out in World War II... American aircrews flew more than 1,248,000 fixed-wing combat sorties between 1965 and 1973... 6.2 million tons of munitions were dropped, three times the amount in World War II... USAF destroyed or damaged 9,000 military vehicles, 1,800 railcars, 2,100 bridges, and 2,900 anti-aircraft artillery guns (1965-68) USAF built an in-theater fleet of 1,840 combat and support aircraft (1969) augmented by US Navy carrier based planes and Marine aircraft..

IM 0587/68

Hanoi's Negotiating Position and  
Concept of Negotiations

6 May 1968



APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: JAN 2005

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*INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

*Hanoi's Negotiating Position and Concept of Negotiations*

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1  
6 May 1968  
No. 0587/68



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No. 0587/68

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
6 May 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Hanoi's Negotiating Position and  
Concept of Negotiations

Summary

Hanoi's negotiators will come to Paris reasonably confident that the negotiations can be used to advance Hanoi's basic objectives in Vietnam. The Communists see themselves more as revolutionaries opening a second front than as negotiators exploring the possibilities for compromise. Given their conviction that little can be gained at the bargaining table that has not been won on the ground, the North Vietnamese position in Paris will be governed largely by events in South Vietnam. Thus Hanoi almost certainly intends to intensify and maintain as much military pressure as possible, for psychological impact as well as for tactical reasons.

Hanoi sees itself leading from strength, even though it probably recognizes that its over-all position is not as strong as it had hoped it would be at this point in the struggle. Both military and political achievements in the South have fallen well short of Hanoi's stated objectives since the opening of its major offensive last fall. Although pressures for peace may bear more heavily on the US, North Vietnam will also be constrained by internal and external pressures.

Hanoi is likely to yield little on the bombing issue. Its negotiators will insist on a unilateral cessation of all hostile action by the US. Although the North Vietnamese are likely to reject, officially and openly, any variant of the San Antonio formula, they might acquiesce in some tacit understanding not to take advantage of a halt in the air strikes in order to keep the discussions going. We would not

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expect any significant de-escalation of the Communist military effort at this stage.

More formal negotiations probably will hinge on the question of Communist representation from South Vietnam. In this phase Hanoi will focus on its four points and the program of the National Liberation Front (NFL) as the basis of a political solution. Its immediate aim would be to determine how far the US is prepared to go in accepting a new coalition government with Communist representation.

Hanoi probably is not certain in its own mind just how the play will unfold and precisely what its positions will be on every issue. It probably is prepared, however, for a long and arduous campaign of fighting and talking, carrying perhaps through the US elections and possibly into a new American administration.

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General Considerations

1. Four fundamental considerations shape Hanoi's attitude toward negotiations and will materially influence the way Hanoi's negotiators play their hand in Paris:

- (a) Hanoi is much more interested in victory than settlement, hence its purpose in entering discussions is to further North Vietnam's basic objectives more than to work out a compromise acceptable to all parties engaged in the Vietnam struggle.
- (b) Hanoi's leaders presently believe that the widespread desire for peace and opposition to the Vietnam war, particularly within the US, places more political pressure on Washington than on Hanoi to be "forthcoming" in any talks.
- (c) Hanoi does not believe that diplomacy alone can achieve significant gains not securable or already secured by military and political struggle in South Vietnam itself.
- (d) Hanoi's view of the actual result of the settlements negotiated in 1954 and 1962 has made the Lao Dong's leaders chary of negotiations and, particularly, of less than optimum negotiated solutions.

Political Strategy

2. Hanoi's negotiators will be coming to Paris primarily to open another front of revolutionary struggle. They will be much more interested in exploiting this front's potential contribution to the success of the revolution--i.e., the acquisition or imposition of

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Communist control over South Vietnam--than engaging in a serious effort to de-escalate the war or negotiate a mutually agreeable solution. Hanoi is almost certainly suspicious of US intentions and determined not to yield on any significant point at least until the US position has been fully disclosed and US firmness thoroughly probed. Hanoi's initial intent, therefore, will be to "use" the talks aggressively to further its declared aims in South Vietnam. North Vietnam's leaders probably believe the US was "compelled" to restrict the bombing and enter into talks by mounting domestic political pressures and because Washington felt the tide was running against the allied position in South Vietnam. Hanoi hopes both trends can be intensified during the course of the Paris discussions. Hanoi will endeavor to turn the mere process of talking to its advantage by increasing pressure on the US to end the war without sticking on the terms of settlement, by exacerbating relations between Saigon and Washington, by undermining the Saigon government's confidence in the constancy of its principal ally, and by undermining the confidence of all non-Communist South Vietnamese in their government and their future. Hanoi's initial position and tactics will be tailored to a great extent by these aims.

#### Propaganda Considerations

3. Most of what Hanoi says and does in Paris will be aimed as much at the US and world press as at the American negotiators. Hanoi believes that peace sentiment in the US is widespread and politically potent. The North Vietnamese may exaggerate this factor but certainly intend to take full advantage of it. They probably calculate that once actual diplomatic contacts are opened, war-weariness (and opposition) will increase in the US and peace will become a matter of increasing political urgency as the casualties continue and the US election campaign develops. Hanoi probably expects that such consideration will ultimately lead to American concessions. To this end, Hanoi will endeavor to isolate the bombing issue and create the impression that complete termination of the bombing is all that stands in the way of serious negotiation on a peaceful settlement.

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The Talks and the Battlefield

4. The behavior of Hanoi's negotiators in Paris will be materially influenced and in certain aspects actually dictated by the course of events in South Vietnam. It is no accident that Hanoi's statement of 3 May proposing the Paris talks was shortly followed by country-wide attacks in South Vietnam. Throughout any talks there will be a closely coordinated correlation between action at the negotiating table and action on the battlefield. The current series of attacks illustrates Hanoi's obvious intention to use its military and political action potential in South Vietnam in a manner and with a timing designed to enhance its bargaining position. Hanoi will orchestrate military pressures as much for psychological and propaganda impact as for concrete or tactical considerations. The North Vietnamese will almost certainly believe that any apparent Communist gains or apparent allied reverses will probably be reflected in a weakening of the American negotiating position. In this context, the Communists will consider appearance at least as important as substantive reality, and hence they will almost certainly exert every effort (and accept severe casualties) to prevent any apparent manifestation of allied progress.

The Lessons of History

5. Hanoi's leaders have twice before ventured down the negotiation track--in 1954 and in 1962. In their opinion, both times they were euchred by events which developed in a manner contrary to all reasonable expectation. In 1954, under Russian and Chinese pressure, the Lao Dong politburo settled for half a loaf, confident that Diem's fledgling and beleaguered government was certain to collapse and hence South Vietnam would be theirs either through the 1956 elections or the simple absence of any effective non-Communist opposition. Reality's confounding of this near-certain calculation has forced Hanoi's leaders to embark upon and wage an eleven-year struggle for something they saw within their grasp fourteen years ago. In 1962 they bought a "settlement" in Laos in the confident belief that Souvanna was in their

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pocket. His subsequent behavior as a truly independent neutralist confounded Hanoi's eminently reasonable calculations.

6. Recent Vietnamese history, in short, has made Hanoi's leaders extremely chary of negotiations or of settlements that leave anything to the vagaries of chance. Hanoi's reading of this history will almost certainly influence its willingness to entertain any current settlement propositions that do not virtually guarantee Communist control over South Vietnam in a very short time frame.

Communist Strengths and Weaknesses

7. Hanoi's negotiators will come to the table reasonably confident of obtaining most of the objectives outlined above. Hanoi sees itself in a strong position, though its position is not one of unblemished confidence or unalloyed strength. On the contrary, in our view the over-all prospects for the Communists in South Vietnam have become more uncertain in recent months. Currently, their position is not at all what they thought it would be, let alone hoped for, when they conceived the winter-spring campaign last year. The GVN/ARVN have not only survived the Tet onslaught, but have proved more resilient than many thought possible. The military initiative has passed again to the US in many areas, even though the North Vietnamese have every intention of attempting to regain it. That Hanoi now counts on the early disintegration of the GVN and ARVN under new pressures is at least open to serious question. And the political atmosphere in the US, which must have been an important factor in Hanoi's calculations, has probably become more uncertain and ambiguous than it appeared in the period from the Tet attacks through President Johnson's address of 31 March.

8. Moreover, Hanoi is not entering into the upcoming phase with the support and encouragement of one of its principal allies--China. For this reason alone it must proceed carefully and avoid making its conduct at the talks a new subject of Sino-Soviet confrontation. The net effect of this fact probably is that Hanoi's flexibility is somewhat circumscribed, and the potential influence of the USSR is further

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limited. China's influence and leverage over Hanoi is also limited, however, though an early collapse of the talks would appear to justify China's reservations and objections, and probably open a new round of charges against the USSR for collusion with the US.

The Overview

9. In sum, Hanoi's negotiators will come to Paris believing that their position is a good one and that at a minimum the talks offer opportunities for political warfare. But they probably also realize that they do not yet hold all the high cards and probably cannot impose their terms. If they fail to achieve the significant gains they hope to register in South Vietnam during the course of the talks, they will then confront the hard choice of whether to stonewall in the face of adversity on the battlefield or settle for something short of their oft-stated objectives.

Objectives and Tactics

10. We think it realistic to accept Hanoi's declared objectives more or less at face value. Hanoi will open by seeking a full halt to the bombing and all other "acts of war" against the North. Unless it makes a presently unlikely major concession, only when all the bombing has stopped will Hanoi proceed to a second phase to deal with "related questions." These will almost certainly center around the essentials of its four points: a negotiated US withdrawal from Vietnam, the formation of a new government in Saigon as specified in the program of the NLF, the neutralization of South Vietnam, and a governmental structure built around the NLF or, at least, an NLF-dominated "alliance."

11. The major questions for speculation are how these objectives and phases relate and what flexibility Hanoi will display in their tactical development. Hanoi has probably already devised a fairly clear scenario but, as indicated above, many of the basic decisions will still depend on developments on the ground in South Vietnam as well as on the response and reaction of the US in the course of the discussions.

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The Bombing Issue

12. As an opener Hanoi will insist that the only purpose of preliminary contacts is to determine the date for a cessation of all bombing, naval gunfire, artillery shelling, and reconnaissance against North Vietnam. Moreover, Hanoi's negotiators will insist that this be accomplished unilaterally and without reciprocity, and that US failure to accept these demands will mean an end to further discussion. North Vietnam will refuse to acknowledge any participation of its own forces in the South Vietnam struggle and thus will probably not officially or openly accept any variant of the San Antonio formula.

13. For several reasons, we do not believe, however, that Hanoi intends for the discussions to break down on the bombing issue. To begin with, Hanoi wants the present bombing restriction maintained and wants an end to all bombing. Furthermore, the statement of 3 May agreeing to talk in Paris and the appointment of Xuan Thuy as the negotiator suggest Hanoi has deliberately blurred the distinction between contacts and formal talks. Finally, Hanoi has a strong incentive to move the discussions on to some of the more critical substantive issues, that can affect the mood and outlook in Saigon and further unsettle the South Vietnamese (i.e., the formation of a coalition regime and a US withdrawal).

14. We think it likely, therefore, that the bargaining will be hard, but that Hanoi will find a way out of any impasse over the bombing issue. The North Vietnamese leaders probably now believe that the US position in this entire matter is not firm or fixed, and that Hanoi need not go beyond some kind of vague indication that it will not take advantage of a complete halt in air strikes. Assurances through third parties or in behind-the-scenes contacts would be one way. The North Vietnamese might also tacitly accept some continuing US reconnaissance, say below the 20th parallel, to verify that Hanoi is not accelerating its movement of men and materiel. In short, while avoiding overt commitments, Hanoi may try to create the impression that the US would be justified in "assuming" Hanoi will not take advantage to an end of all bombing.

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15. As an alternative route around this potential impasse, Hanoi might eventually settle for an agreement "in principle" to an end of the bombing, once an agreement had been reached on the place, level, and agenda of the next phase of talks. In this way, Hanoi could, if it desired, slide into "formal talks" without technically abandoning its initial position.

16. Whatever the agreement on the bombing, we would not expect any significant de-escalation of the Communist military effort at this juncture. Hanoi almost certainly believes the US is vulnerable on the bombing question and that there will be great public pressure in the US and the world at large not to allow the discussions to break down on this issue. Thus, unless extremely hard pressed in the South, Hanoi is not going to pay much of a price to end the bombing. The way the bombing issue is resolved will be read by Hanoi as a key indicator of the relative hardness or weakness of the entire US negotiating position.

Formal Talks

17. It is more difficult to look beyond the initial encounter over the bombing issue to the next stage of talks. In the formal talks Hanoi could develop any of three broad courses: it could proceed forthwith to discuss the full range of issues involved in Vietnam, but will probably not do so promptly unless the NLF participates and the GVN is excluded. Alternatively, Hanoi could insist on narrow discussions of bilateral issues--reparation for the bombing, prisoner exchange, etc. Except as a stalling device this holds no special advantage from Hanoi's standpoint. More likely, Hanoi would probably see the formal talks as focusing on US acceptance of North Vietnam's four points and the program of the NLF as the "basis" for a political solution of the Vietnamese war.

18. In the course of this debate, and perhaps at the very outset, Hanoi's negotiators would probably fix on the issue of political representation

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from South Vietnam and are certain to take a very adamant line in refusing to accept any participation by the present GVN. The North Vietnamese will probably insist that no discussion of a settlement can proceed very far without the formation of a new government in Saigon, representing all political forces, and its participation in the negotiations. As an ostensible concession, they might abandon the old position that only the NLF was the legitimate voice of the "people," and propose a new government be formed by representatives from the NLF, the new "Alliance for Peace," members of the present GVN (except Thieu or Ky) and perhaps even groupings currently in exile.

19. They might also propose adjourning the Paris talks while these South Vietnamese elements negotiated among themselves, or Hanoi might propose inviting them to join with the US and DRV. In either case, here is the fundamental issue at stake in Vietnam: who will hold real power in Saigon? In Hanoi's view the purpose of the formal talks with the US at this juncture will be to determine whether the US will, in fact, agree to the formation of a new government (and hence to scuttling the present constitutional structure) and how far the US will be prepared to go in accepting Communist influence in such a government.

20. There are a number of variants on this issue. For example, Hanoi might press for direct negotiations between the NLF and the US, or inclusion of the NLF in the Paris talks. In any case, this is likely to be the critical juncture of the talks and Hanoi's toughest position. Hanoi will hope that any discussions on Communist representation in Saigon will help precipitate the collapse of the Thieu-Ky government and one of Hanoi's primary objectives throughout the talks will be to exert political pressure on South Vietnam.

Other Issues

21. It is at this point that Hanoi would want to intensify military pressure. But it may also be inclined to make some concessions if it believed

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they would facilitate negotiations toward a government of "national union" in Saigon. Hanoi might hint that a cease-fire could be quickly arranged with establishment of a new government. And of course Hanoi's interest in a cease-fire would increase if its military position in the South seemed likely to deteriorate. Hanoi might slow down certain military operations in certain areas, especially along the DMZ. And it might hint that the US could retain some limited presence in Vietnam, or at least that a US withdrawal could be extended over a fairly long period. Probably, these questions would come up off-stage, since Hanoi will insist that questions directly related to the war in the South must be discussed with some representation by the NLF. The issue of a US withdrawal, however, could conceivably be discussed under the rubric of "aggression" against Vietnam, which is one of Hanoi's four points. It might even be discussed simultaneously with the question of formation of a coalition government.

22. Beyond this it is difficult to estimate Hanoi's position on such issues as Laos, a new Geneva conference, international guarantees, supervision, reunification, etc. Moreover, there are side issues which can always arise--the level of the talks, new sites, agenda. Hanoi could, if it chose, find a number of ways to becloud the issues and draw out the discussions at any phase, if the situation in South Vietnam warrants it.

23. In any case, it is unlikely that Hanoi has decided how to handle every issue or procedure or what outcome would ultimately be acceptable. Hanoi probably is preparing, however, for a lengthy and difficult process of fighting and talking subject to interruptions and breakdowns, lasting perhaps through the elections and the installation of a new American administration.

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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

JCS  
JCSM-567-67  
23 October 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Holiday Standdowns in Vietnam (U)

1. ~~(S)~~ Reference is made to:

a. American Embassy Saigon message to the Department of State, 8432/130935Z October 1967 (JCS 42411), in which the US Ambassador to South Vietnam submitted a recommended US position for a holiday military posture for Christmas, New Year's, and Tet 1967-68.

b. CINCPAC message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC 200132Z October 1967 (JCS 54974), in which CINCPAC strongly recommends no cease-fire or standdown of military operations during any holiday period.

c. JCSM-25-67, dated 18 January 1967, subject: "US Policy for TET 1967 (U)," and previous memorandums in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed the Tet and other standdowns because of the high military cost to US, Republic of Vietnam, and allied forces resulting from the relaxation of military pressures on the enemy.

2. ~~(S)~~ The Joint Chiefs of Staff are opposed to any stand-down during Christmas, New Year's or the Tet period.

3. ~~(S)~~ Past experience with holiday standdowns supports the judgment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a heavy price must be paid for any psychological or political advantages which might accrue to the Free World. In the past, these standdowns have resulted in increased casualties to US and allied forces. Similarly, increased casualties can be expected to result from a future standdown. These casualties cannot be justified on the basis of the value attached to traditional or religious observances.

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• S-E-C-R-E-T NO FOREIGN DISSEM/CONTROLLED DISSEM/NO DISSEM ABROAD/BACKGROUND USE ONLY (b)(3)  
 (classification) (dissem controls) 3A(b)(1)

IN VIETNAMESE), THE ENEMY PLANNED TO USE AT LEAST FOUR BATTALIONS IN HIS ATTACK ON SITE 85, WITH ONE BATTALION EACH ATTACKING HOUEI HOK (UH 8561), HOUEI MA (UH 6253), HOUEI MOUN (UH 5664), AND HOUEI KHA MOUN (UH 6868). ONE COMPANY WAS TO ATTACK EACH OF FOUR MAJOR TRAILS LEADING TO THE TOP OF PHOU PHA THI. IN ADDITION THE ENEMY CALLED A SERIES OF PROPAGANDA MEETINGS FOR OFFICIALS AT VILLAGE AND C. NTON LEVEL TO ANNOUNCE HIS INTENTION OF ATTACKING PHOU PHA THI IN THE NEAR FUTURE. NEO LAO HAK SAT OFFICIALS IN HOUA PHAN PROVINCE TOLD THOSE ATTENDING THE MEE... 3S THAT THEIR FORCES ASSISTED BY NORTH VIETNAMESE WOULD ATTACK IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH AND USE 120MM MORTARS AND FROM TEN TO TWENTY AIRCRAFT.

CONTAINED REFERENCES TO ENEMY PLANS <sup>AS RESPECTIVELY</sup> FOR THE ATTACK ON PHOU PHA THI.

2. SINCE THE ADC DEFENDERS OF PHOU PHA THI WERE THROWN BACK WITH SUCH HEAVY CASUALTIES WHEN THEY TRIED TO ELIMINATE ENEMY UNITS THAT HAD PENETRATED THE PERIMETER FROM PHOU HOUEI HAO (UH 735585) TO MUONG YUT, ADC COMMANDERS RESORTED

• S-E-C-R-E-T NO FOREIGN DISSEM/CONTROLLED DISSEM/NO DISSEM ABROAD/BACKGROUND USE ONLY

SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM/CONTROLLED DISSEM/NO DISSEM ABROAD/BACKGROUND USE ONLY (b)(3)

IN VIETNAMESE), THE ENEMY PLANNED TO USE AT LEAST FOUR BATTALIONS IN HIS ATTACK ON SITE 85, WITH ONE BATTALION EACH ATTACKING HOUEI HOK (UH 8561), HOUEI MA (UH 6253), HOUEI MOUN (UH 5664), AND HOUEI KHA MOUN (UH 6868). ONE COMPANY WAS TO ATTACK EACH OF FOUR MAJOR TRAILS LEADING TO THE TOP OF PHOU PHA THI. IN ADDITION THE ENEMY CALLED A SERIES OF PROPAGANDA MEETINGS FOR OFFICIALS AT VILLAGE AND C. NTON LEVEL TO ANNOUNCE HIS INTENTION OF ATTACKING PHOU PHA THI IN THE NEAR FUTURE. NEO LAO HAK SAT OFFICIALS IN HOUA PHAN PROVINCE TOLD THOSE ATTENDING THE MEETING THAT THEIR FORCES ASSISTED BY NORTH VIETNAMESE WOULD ATTACK IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH AND USE 120MM MORTARS AND FROM TEN TO TWENTY AIRCRAFT.

CONTAINED REFERENCES TO ENEMY PLANS FOR THE ATTACK ON PHOU PHA THI, RESPECTIVELY

2. SINCE THE ADC DEFENDERS OF PHOU PHA THI WERE THROWN BACK WITH SUCH HEAVY CASUALTIES WHEN THEY TRIED TO ELIMINATE ENEMY UNITS THAT HAD PENETRATED THE PERIMETER FROM PHOU HOUEI HAO (UH 735585) TO MUONG YUT, ADC COMMANDERS RESORTED

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**“Politics is War without Bloodshed” ‘while’ “War is Politics with Bloodshed”**