

Tet



The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the Vietnam War. On the night of Jan. 30-31, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong attacked cities, towns, and military bases all over South Vietnam, striking in more than 100 locations from the Demilitarized Zone to the Mekong Delta. The synchronized attacks came at the beginning of the Lunar New Year holiday, traditionally a time for mutual cease-fire, when security was relaxed.

The offensive was defeated at every point. The North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong suffered enormous casualties, and the Viet Cong were destroyed as a cohesive fighting force. It was a clear-cut military victory for the United States and South Vietnam.

In US public and political opinion, though, Tet was transformed into a defeat. Within months, the United States had tacitly conceded the war to be lost, curtailed operations, and started planning for a pullout. The political damage was so great that President Lyndon

Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election.

The press and television are often blamed for this astounding misjudgment of the Tet Offensive, but that is too simplistic. The public was indeed misled by sensational and erroneous news reports, but the White House, Pentagon, and Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) were equally at fault for what happened. By their inept words and actions, they gave credibility to the distorted output of the news media.

In a larger sense, Tet accelerated a chain of circumstances that was already under way. Public support for the Vietnam War was slipping and Tet greased the skids. The events of 1968 flowed from strategic decisions made earlier by the United States and North Vietnam.

The long-running war in Indochina entered a new phase in 1960 when the North Vietnamese Communist Party declared the liberation of South Vietnam to be a "strategic task."

There was a division of opinion about how liberation of the south was to be accomplished. One faction of the party

leadership—which included Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, hero of the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954—favored a strategy of insurgency and guerilla warfare. Another faction—led by Le Duan, first secretary of the party, and Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, commander of operations in southern South Vietnam—advocated direct, main force action.

Giap's view prevailed until January 1967, when the party plenum called for "decisive victory in the shortest time possible," shifting official support to Le Duan and Thanh and their main force position. However, B-52s bombed Thanh's headquarters in South Vietnam, wounding him critically. He was carried across the border to Cambodia and flown to Hanoi, where he died July 6.

Giap was left to plan the main force attack, even though it went against his own strategic principles. He laid out an operation with three objectives: a general uprising in the south, disintegration of the South Vietnamese armed forces, and convincing the Americans that the war was unwinnable.

North Vietnam's 1968 offensive failed, but public opinion converted it into a defeat for the United States.

By John T. Correll

The US attrition strategy in South Vietnam was in its third year. In April 1965, fearful of drawing Russia and China into the war, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara had downgraded the air campaign against North Vietnam to secondary status after only a month of halfhearted effort. They insisted that the war be decided in the south, even though it was directed and sustained from the north.

In the summer of 1965, the MACV commander, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, implemented an attrition strategy with "search and destroy" tactics. Focused as it was on ground operations in the south, the strategy could do no more than react to North Vietnam's initiative. US forces won firefights and local battles, but made no strategic progress. MACV used "body counts" and "kill ratios" to show how the enemy was being whittled down by attrition, but the numbers were implausible and MACV lost credibility. (For more about the attrition strategy and its consequences, see "The In-Country War," *Air Force Magazine*, April 2007.)

The US presence in South Vietnam increased steadily and by December 1967, there were almost 500,000 American military members in country. Of these, 397,534 were Army and Marine Corps ground forces.

In September 1967, a public opinion poll found—for the first time—that more Americans opposed war than supported it. The President reacted by stiffening his determination. He spoke with disdain of those who wanted to "cut and run."

The White House stepped up efforts to put the best possible face on the war with a "Success Campaign" in the fall of 1967. Walt W. Rostow, Presidential advisor on national security affairs, was put in charge of an interdepartmental Psychological Strategy Committee to promote a positive image.

Westmoreland was called back from Vietnam to help. The most notable of his appearances was a speech at the National Press Club on Nov. 21. "The enemy has not won a major battle in more than a year," Westmoreland said. "In general, he can fight his large forces only at the edges of his sanctuaries." He said the enemy was "certainly losing" and that his hopes were "bankrupt." The Press Club speech went down in history because of 14 words. "We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view," Westmoreland said.

(Contrary to an often-told tale, Westmoreland did not say he saw "light at the end of the tunnel." It was Gen. Henri Navarre, the commander of French forces in Vietnam in 1953, who said that.) Other Administration spokesmen carried the "success" message far and wide.

Downgraded Numbers

In circumstances that are still disputed, MACV, in November and December 1967, reduced its official estimates of enemy strength. Whatever the intent, the effect was to shore up the erroneous belief that the attrition strategy was working. The downgraded numbers were not known to the public but they helped Administration decision-makers convince themselves.

In late 1967, the North Vietnamese launched exploratory attacks around the Demilitarized Zone and along the Laotian and Cambodian borders to draw Americans away from the urban areas of South Vietnam and to screen infiltration. US intelligence, watching the increased enemy troop movements, expected offensive action of some kind, possibly around Tet.

The first major attack fell on Khe Sanh, a combat base 16 miles below the DMZ and 10 miles due east of Laotian border, occupied by 6,000 US marines and South Vietnamese rangers. Westmoreland decided, against some advice to the contrary, to make a strong stand there.

Khe Sanh was in a strategic corner of South Vietnam, close to infiltration routes from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but that was not its real importance. If the North Vietnamese Army attacked Khe

Sanh in mass, Westmoreland would get the set-piece battle he had wanted ever since he adopted the attrition strategy. It would be a costly fight, but superior US firepower would finally have a chance to destroy the enemy.

The North Vietnamese moved against Khe Sanh on Jan. 21 with two regular Army divisions supported by another two divisions nearby, a force of 20,000 to 30,000 troops. Khe Sanh was soon encircled and under siege. With land access cut off, the combat base depended on air support for its existence. Bombers and fighters pounded the enemy positions, and artillery from US fire bases at the Rock Pile and Camp Carroll provided further support.

News media in the United States followed the fight at Khe Sanh intently, and it took on great symbolic importance. According to Westmoreland, President Johnson developed a "fixation" about Khe Sanh. He had a large aerial photo and a terrain model set up in a White House situation room and he studied them for hours at a time during the 77-day siege.

In the middle of the unfolding action at Khe Sanh, the North Koreans captured the US intelligence ship *Pueblo* Jan. 23 and imprisoned the crew, adding to US difficulties in Asia.

Mutual cease-fires for Tet had been observed since 1963, and these had come to be regarded as a holiday truce. In November 1967, the National Liberation Front—the Viet Cong—proclaimed a seven-day cease-fire for the upcoming Tet holiday. On Jan. 25, the Viet Cong put out a public appeal for observance of the Tet cease-fire.

The Americans anticipated that the enemy would violate the truce. South Vietnam had taken over security for the cities in December and some US forces had been moved into rural areas. Fortunately, Westmoreland—at the urging of Lt. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, US commander in the III Corps area which included Saigon—recalled 15 combat battalions from border assignments and repositioned them closer to Saigon. This gave Weyand 27 battalions near the capital. The United States persuaded South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to reduce the cease-fire to 36 hours, but half of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was on leave.

The enemy made the first of many military blunders on Jan. 30, when local commanders, who apparently misunderstood their instructions, instigated attacks on seven cities in the northern



Peter Arnett of the Associated Press (with cameras) produced controversial reports on two major events. Walter Cronkite (right) told his TV audience that the US was "mired in stalemate."



part of South Vietnam. These premature attacks gave MACV still more warning of the offensive about to unfold.

The main offensive began in the small hours of Jan. 31. Some 80,000 enemy troops struck all over South Vietnam, including assaults on 64 district capitals and many smaller towns as well as military bases. The forces in the southern part of the country were mostly Viet Cong, and the North Vietnamese Army carried the effort in the northern part.

The Viet Cong committed 35 battalions to the Saigon area, targeting the Presidential Palace, Tan Son Nhut Air Base (where the MACV compound was located), the ARVN armor and artillery command headquarters, and the US Embassy. At Tan Son Nhut, about 1,000 defenders, mainly security police, held an attacking force of 3,000 to a minor penetration until US Army reinforcements arrived at dawn. On the outskirts of Saigon, two VC infantry battalions and a reinforced rifle company achieved a minor penetration at Bien Hoa Air Base, but Air Force security police beat back the attack.

The Viet Cong captured the government radio station in Saigon around 3 a.m. They came with radio technicians and tapes proclaiming a general uprising and the liberation of Saigon, but the government, following the emergency plan, shut down the transmitter 14 miles away. The VC could not broadcast their tape.

The attacks caused great destruction

and disruption throughout South Vietnam, with numerous civilian casualties and throngs of refugees. On Feb. 1, President Thieu declared nationwide martial law.

The Embassy Fight

Neither side understood at first how important the attack on the US Embassy would be in the legend of Tet. The Viet Cong sent only 19 inexperienced men to do the job. One US officer called it "a piddling platoon action." MACV, focused

on larger battles elsewhere, regarded the fight at the embassy as a relatively minor affair until the telephone calls started coming from Washington.

The embassy complex consisted of a six-story concrete-reinforced chancery building and several other structures, surrounded by an eight-foot wall. At 2:45 a.m., a Viet Cong sapper team attacked the compound, blew a hole in the wall, and gained access to the grounds. They blasted the building with rockets and a fragmentation grenade, but they did



US bombers drop ordnance close to South Vietnamese troops defending Khe Sanh. News reports compared Tet to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

not get inside. The Viet Cong leaders were killed and the others took cover, returning the fire directed at them from nearby rooftops.

Peter Arnett of the Associated Press was one of the first reporters on the scene. In the street, he encountered two soldiers who did not know any more than he did but who guessed the enemy was inside the chancery. At 7:25 a.m. (6:25 p.m. in New York), Arnett filed his first report: "US military police on the scene said it was believed about 20 Viet Cong suicide commandos were in the embassy compound and held part of the first floor of the embassy building."

Five minutes later, at 6:30 p.m., the Huntley-Brinkley Report on NBC-TV went on the air, with Chet Huntley souping up the AP dispatch. "Twenty suicide bombers are reported to be holding the first floor of the embassy," Huntley said. He added that "snipers are in the buildings and on rooftops near the embassy and are firing on American personnel inside the compound," which was the exact opposite of what was actually happening.

Westmoreland arrived at the embassy just after 9 a.m., toured the complex, and told reporters that all of the sappers had been killed or captured and that none of them had gotten inside the building. Nevertheless, UPI reported from Saigon at 10 a.m. that a VC suicide squad had stormed the embassy "and occupied the first five floors." Arnett and AP reported Westmoreland's statement and added that according to "some sources," the embassy had been penetrated. Not until 7 p.m. Saigon time did AP say flatly that the attackers had failed to get into the embassy building.

By then, the morning newspapers were out in the United States. An eight-column banner headline on the front page of the *Washington Post* said, "Vietcong Invade US Embassy." The *New York Times* headline said, "Foe Invades US Saigon Embassy."

The facts of the attack never quite overtook the emotional jolt of the first reports. Arnett later called the invasion story a minor error.

On Feb. 1, the day after the attack on the embassy, Westmoreland appeared at the late afternoon press briefing, the "Five O'Clock Follies," at the Joint US Public Affairs Office in Saigon. He said there was evidence the enemy was "about to run out of steam" and that 5,800 enemy troops had been killed in the first two days. It was the familiar MACV "body count" exercise, complete with numbers



After Tet, President Johnson (left) pulled out of the Presidential race. Gen. Earl Wheeler (right), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, encouraged sending 200,000 more troops to Vietnam.

the reporters didn't believe, and it led them to discount Westmoreland's other assurances as well.

What credibility Westmoreland had left was blown away when his request for an additional 206,000 troops was leaked to the *New York Times*. The story behind the story was amazing in itself.

Wheeler's Agenda

In early February, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked Westmoreland if he needed reinforcements. Wheeler said it might be possible to raise the limits previously imposed.

Wheeler did not disclose his actual agenda. By 1968, about half of the US armed forces were tied down fighting or supporting the Vietnam War. Other forces were covering obligations and requirements elsewhere and the strategic reserve was at a low level. Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs had been unable to convince the President to mobilize the National Guard and Reserve to rebuild the strategic reserve. A big troop increase in Vietnam would put pressure on him to agree.

Encouraged by Wheeler, Westmoreland asked for an increase of 206,756 troops and 17 additional fighter squadrons. In Westmoreland's mind, the number was based on a change in strategy that would permit ground operations across the DMZ and against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. There was no

chance that such a strategy would be adopted and it played no part in the furor that followed.

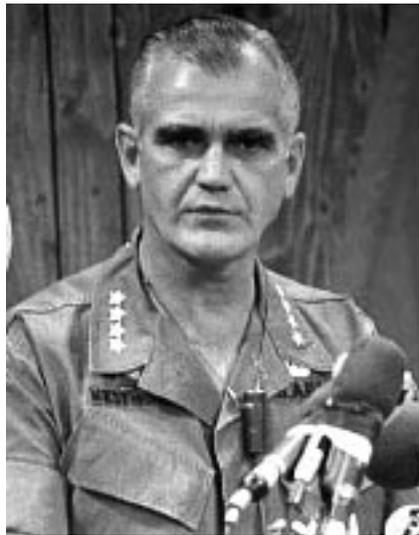
Daniel Ellsberg of the RAND Corp. obtained a copy of the top secret paper proposing the increase, and in a preview of his leaking the Pentagon Papers to the news media in 1971, he gave it to the *New York Times*, where it was the lead story on the front page on Sunday, March 10.

Wheeler's gambit had backfired. If the enemy was about to run out of steam and the Tet Offensive was nothing to worry about, why should Westmoreland need 206,000 more troops?

"Except at Hue and Khe Sanh," Westmoreland said, "most of the combat that could be considered part of the Tet Offensive was over by Feb. 11." In the locations where the attacks continued, the action was hot and heavy.

There was hard fighting, house to house, in the old imperial capital at Hue. The enemy captured the city and the US marines and the ARVN were not able to oust them until March 2. Fighting continued elsewhere. By the end of March, Tan Son Nhut had been attacked half a dozen times, including a rocket bombardment on Feb. 18. The US Air Force flew more than 16,000 sorties in support of US and allied ground forces during Tet.

The biggest single battle was Khe Sanh, and there is disagreement about its significance in the North Vietnamese strategy. Westmoreland thought it was



North Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap (far left) planned the offensive. US Army Gen. William Westmoreland was MACV commander at the time. Just before the attacks, US Army Maj. Gen. Frederick Weyand (right) repositioned 15 combat battalions closer to Saigon, blunting an objective of the offensive.

the main effort. Writing in *Vietnam Magazine* in 1993, he said, “I believed then, and I continue to believe, that the ‘General Uprising’ was in reality a feint, a secondary attack.” Giap said otherwise. “Khe Sanh was not important to us,” he said. “It was only a diversion.”

In February, Wheeler asked Westmoreland whether “tactical nuclear weapons should be used if the situation in Khe Sanh should become that desperate.” Westmoreland said he did not need nuclear weapons at that point. “Although I established a small secret group to study the subject, Washington so feared that some word of it might reach the press that I was told to desist,” Westmoreland said. Lyndon Johnson later denied that use of nuclear weapons had ever been considered.

Air support for the combat base at Khe Sanh was massive. On an average day, it consisted of 350 tactical fighter sorties, 60 B-52 bombers, a dozen C-123 and C-130 airlifters, plus forward air controllers, reconnaissance missions, and gunships.

The B-52s were especially effective. A formation of three B-52s could lay waste to an area more than a mile long and half a mile wide. The bombers struck enemy positions as close as a half-mile from the base, and the fighter and attack aircraft worked the area between. “The thing that broke their backs was basically the fire of the B-52s,” Westmoreland said.

The base was sustained by C-130s, C-123s, and C-7s running a gauntlet of machine gun fire from the hills and ridges to deliver or air-drop supplies to the garrison. Aircraft and helicopters also landed to evacuate the wounded.

Khe Sanh was compared constantly

with Dien Bien Phu, the remote mountain base in far northwestern North Vietnam where the French were besieged for 56 days in 1954.

“Almost to the end, it was a story heavily flavored with the suggestion of impending disaster—a disaster comparable to that suffered by the French garrison of Dien Bien Phu at the hands of General Giap in 1954,” said Peter Braestrup, who in 1968 was chief of the *Washington Post* bureau in Saigon.

“Invisible to the Press”

Such reports overlooked key differences. At Dien Bien Phu, the airstrip was destroyed by artillery early in the battle. The only way in was by parachute, and there was no way out. The Dien Bien Phu defenders were supported by only a handful of air support sorties, none of them by heavy bombers.

The B-52 strikes were “largely invisible to the press,” Braestrup said. Television couldn’t see them, so it didn’t show them. The emphasis was on the enemy attack. News reports and photos tended to depict the Marine Corps at Khe Sanh as hunkered down under fire. During the battle, *Newsweek* ran 29 photos from Khe Sanh. “About half—13—showed American or ARVN troops dead or wounded,” Braestrup said. “None showed US troops firing back.”

CBS correspondent Murray Fromson’s report from Khe Sanh on Feb. 14 was indicative of the prevailing tone. “Here, the North Vietnamese decide who lives and who dies,” Fromson said, “and sooner or later, they will make the decision that will seal the fate of Khe Sanh.”

When the siege ended on April 8, the North Vietnamese had been soundly defeated. Some 10,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops had been killed by airpower and another 5,000 were dead from artillery and small-arms fire. There was no more talk of Dien Bien Phu.

Braestrup later compiled the definitive study of the news media and Tet in *Big Story*, published in two large volumes in 1977. He examined 2,100 articles, telecasts, and commentaries from the three television networks, the news magazines, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

He found that 90 percent of the reports from Vietnam were from three locations: Saigon, Khe Sanh, and Hue. “The net result, in terms of media treatment, was that the fighting in Saigon, Hue, and Khe Sanh became the whole war, a war in which, seemingly, no or few ARVN forces fought and US forces were particularly hard pressed,” he said. “The overall—and inaccurate—impression given, especially on film, was that, well into March, the outcome on the Vietnam battlefield was very much in doubt.” Braestrup also found that there were more than twice as many negative reports and commentaries as positive ones.

Arnett, the Associated Press correspondent who reported the embassy invasion, scored again on Feb. 7. He was one of several newsmen visiting Ben Tre, a town of 35,000 in the Mekong Delta where the battle had lasted two days. The Viet Cong force of 2,000 outnumbered the local defenders by six to one and except for US air strikes, would have wiped them out. A substantial part of the town was destroyed in the fighting.



Arnett's report quoted an anonymous Air Force major, who said, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it." Nobody else heard it and Arnett would not reveal who the major was, but his statement became one of the most famous lines of the war.

Dan Southerland of UPI, at Ben Tre on the same trip, quoted an Air Force sergeant who said, "The Viet Cong were holed up in a lot of buildings and there was no way to get them out but to shell and bomb them out." Nobody much repeated what Southerland and the sergeant had to say.

On March 24, William Tuohy of the *Los Angeles Times* went to Ben Tre on follow-up and reported that "only 25 percent of the city—rather than the reported 80 percent—was actually destroyed by the Viet Cong attack and the Vietnamese artillery and US air strikes that followed. And the US advisory group doubts that the statement [reported by Arnett] was actually said in that form."

The coup de grace was delivered by Walter Cronkite, anchor of the CBS Evening News. As first reports of Tet streamed into the newsroom in New York, Cronkite exclaimed aloud, "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war." He went to Vietnam in February, saw the fighting still under way in Hue, talked to both officials in Saigon and troops in the field, and gave his opinion in a CBS news special Feb. 27.

"To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past," Cronkite said. "To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired

in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion."

Lyndon Johnson responded to the attacks with a continuation of his "Success Campaign." He sought to minimize importance of the Tet Offensive and made no effort to rally the nation. Talking with reporters at the White House on Feb. 1, he said the offensive had been expected, that there would be no change in US strategy, and that he had seen nothing in the Tet Offensive to change his evaluation of the situation in Vietnam.

Verdict of the Public

In a Gallup poll the last week in February, 61 percent—compared with 41 percent in November—said the United States was losing the war or standing still. In the New Hampshire primary in March, anti-war Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy got 42 percent of the vote versus 49 percent for Johnson. Also in March, the Johnson campaign adopted a "Peace With Honor" theme, which represented a softening of the President's position.

On March 25-26, Johnson convened a meeting of two dozen of his senior officials and advisors to get their counsel on the war. All but five of them favored disengagement or de-escalation.

On March 31, Johnson quit the Presidential race and ended the bombing over most of North Vietnam as a "first step to de-escalate the conflict." On June 26, Khe Sanh—where the use of tactical nuclear weapons had been considered four months previously—was abandoned. On July 1, Westmoreland was succeeded as MACV commander by Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., who promptly moved away from the attrition strategy, but the heart had gone out of the US commitment. Bombing of North Vietnam was completely stopped Nov. 1. The incoming Nixon Administration adopted a policy of "Vietnamization" of the war.

By the summer of 1969, "we were clearly on the way out of Vietnam by negotiation if possible, by unilateral withdrawal if necessary," said Henry A. Kissinger, the new national security advisor.

Giap's offensive failed. The "general uprising" did not occur. The South Vietnamese armed forces did not collapse or switch sides. Giap was counting

on a strong operation to impress the Americans, but that did not happen either. The public reaction in the United States was a lucky windfall for the North Vietnamese. It was not because of anything Giap accomplished in the offensive.

As Giap knew all along, his forces could not defeat the United States and ARVN in open battle. A bad strategy was weakened further when Giap chose to strike simultaneously in so many locations, spreading his force too thin for effective concentration. In "Tet II" or "mini Tet" in May, Hanoi sent 80,000 to 90,000 replacement troops south for a final effort. They attacked at 119 locations but gave it up when losses reached 4,000 a week.

In the final tally for Tet, between 40,000 and 70,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were killed and many more wounded. The Viet Cong were thereafter reduced to a marginal role in the conflict. Le Duan's "main force" faction lost credibility and North Vietnam returned to its previous emphasis on insurgency.

It is impossible to say what the effect of the slanted news reporting might have been if the US government had not bungled its response to the Tet Offensive. Harry G. Summers Jr., noted author of *On Strategy* and longtime editor of *Vietnam Magazine*, said that "the real reason for the debacle was the void created by President Lyndon Johnson's 'psychological defeat.' His two months of inaction after Tet allowed critics to define the terms of this perceived disaster."

The Administration's credibility, already low when Tet began, got steadily worse. Most of what the government did and said added to the impression that a defeat was in progress. It was as if the White House and the Pentagon had set out to undermine their own case. Tet was the catalyst that prompted Lyndon Johnson's own politicians and advisors to bail out on him.

Despite the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong losses, Tet did not change the military prospective that much. The best the US could do was to resume marching in place. Any chance of victory had been cut off years before with the decision to fight the war in the south. Tet altered the timetable but not the outcome. ■

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