COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE STRATEGY AND THE DEFENSE OF SOUTH VIETNAM

by

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Throughout the Vietnam War, the most mysterious figure among the communist military high command was a man known by his *nom de guerre*, Tran Van Tra. Rarely appearing in public, although known to American intelligence services, General Tra was believed to be responsible for the planning of both the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 drive toward Saigon that was contained at An Loc.[1] Beyond that, not much was known with certainty about Tra's role and responsibility in the communist southern command.

The mysteries surrounding Tra's war career were lifted, however, with the publication of his memoirs, *Ending the Thirty Years' War*, in 1982.[2] During the First Indochina War, General Tra began his long and extraordinary career in guerrilla and mobile warfare as commander of Vietminh forces in French Cochinchina (basically the Mekong Delta). After the Geneva agreement in 1954, he was regrouped to the north, like many of his comrades in the southern command, leaving behind the political and military infrastructure of the Vietminh. In 1963, with the insurgency movement in the south on the rise, Tra was sent back to the south by Ho Chi Minh to command all Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam. He was responsible for organizing the Viet Cong into main force units and securing their bases. During the next two years, Tra conducted a mobile war against the South Vietnamese army which threatened to bring down the Saigon regime until American ground troops were introduced in 1965. With the much heavier involvement of large North Vietnamese units in the war, Hanoi reorganized communist forces into four different commands: the Tri-Thien region (the two provinces south of the DMZ, including Hue); the Central Highlands; the coastal lowlands from Da Nang to Cam Ranh Bay; and COSVN (the Central Office for South Vietnam), comprising the southern half of South Vietnam (see Map 1). While the other three regions were placed under the direct control of Hanoi, COSVN retained substantial independence in planning and operations. COSVN was placed under the command of General Nguyen Chi Thanh, a rising star in the Politburo and chairman of the Central Military-Party Committee until he died in 1967, reportedly in a bombing raid. From then until 1975, General Tra commanded COSVN forces and became the guiding hand behind the communist offensives of 1968, 1972, and 1975.[3]

The point of examining Tra's career is to appreciate his unique perspective on the war. Here is a man truly experienced in both guerrilla and conventional warfare, one who spent 12 years at COSVN—the mobile and

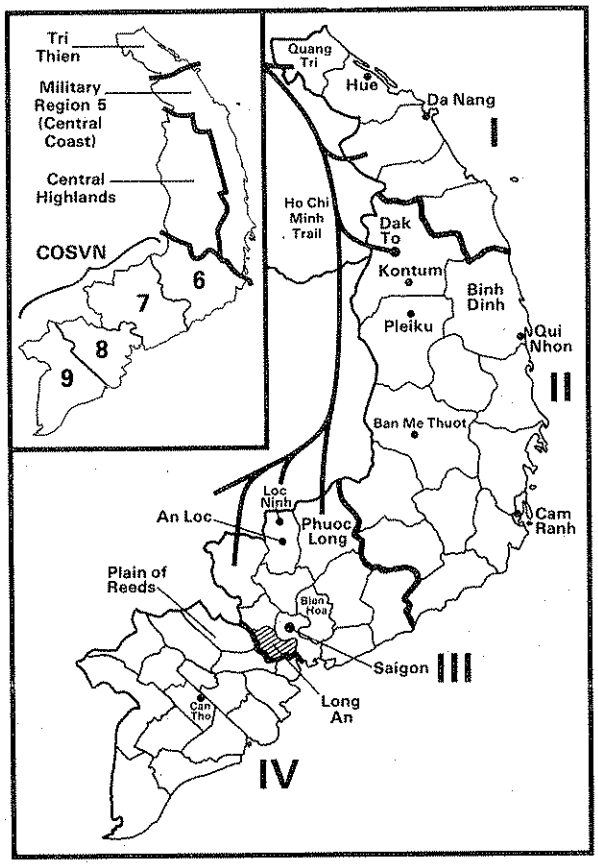
elusive southern command that allied troops never managed to track down, even during Operation Junction City in 1967 and the Cambodian incursion in 1970. As the military commander at COSVN, Tra was responsible for the conduct of the big-unit war in the jungles and mountains as well as the guerrilla war in the Mekong Delta, an experience quite unlike his colleagues in the other commands. Tra was thus in a unique position to enunciate and execute a form of warfare in Vietnam whose character and underlying principles have baffled strategists.

Unlike Giap's turgid tracts on revolutionary war, Tra's memoirs were written in a vibrant literary style, replete with accounts of the planning and conduct of the war in his theater of operations. Tra also presented in his book the clearest statement yet by the communists of the basic principles underlying their strategy and operational art during the war. Most importantly, Tra's special relationship with the southern cadres, as well as his intimate knowledge of the thinking of the central command in Hanoi, gives one a rare look at the viewpoints of the different participants on strategies for the war. Here one can find a spectrum of opinions that correspond remarkably to the debates among American strategists about the character of the war. Some communist officials in the south advocated a protracted guerrilla war against the Americans and South Vietnamese and saw the gaining of control of the rural areas as the vital step before victory, and the populated lowlands and river deltas as the main battlefields. Others, especially members of the North Vietnamese General Staff and some field commanders in the other regions, viewed the war in an essentially conventional light, i.e. as an attrition struggle between two armies. Tra makes clear in his book that he, together with some leading figures in the Politburo, held a third, quite different, position. Tra presents his views in the form of a series of debates at crucial points of the war and on the strategic rationales for the planning of each campaign. Although the focus of the book is on the 1973-75 period, Tra constantly harks back to the lessons that he learned in earlier campaigns in trying to come up with an offensive plan in 1974-75.

This article examines the basic principles of communist strategy and operational art as enunciated by Tra and others in the communist high command.[4] Their statements on this subject will be compared and contrasted with the perceptions and analyses of American and South Vietnamese participants in the war. Tra's own assessment of American and South Vietnamese strategy and its effectiveness will also be analyzed and compared to alternative strategies suggested but not implemented during the war.

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNIST STRATEGY

Long after it ended, the Vietnam War still eludes neat categorization. A common



Map 1. Communist and South Vietnamese Military Regions.

view is that the war is a variant, albeit unique, of Mao's concept of revolutionary war. In this view, revolutionary war can be conceived as a military crescendo consisting of three phases: organization and political mobilization, guerrilla warfare, and the final climactic confrontation, where guerrilla units are converted into big units to defeat the enemy's conventional forces. The first phase, in which the primary objective is to build up an underground organization and infrastructure in the outlying areas, is essentially defensive in character. The second phase sees a rising tempo of guerrilla warfare to push for more control of the countryside up to a point of equilibrium, where the insurgents gain enough control of the surrounding countryside to threaten the cities and the connecting lines of communication. The last phase is entirely offensive and the most decisive, when the insurgents concentrate their forces for a military or political decision.[5]

This model contains a fair resemblance to what happened in South Vietnam during 1959-64, before the massive introduction of US combat troops into the war. In fact, it was the realization that the communists were about to move into this final phase (with the help of the political turmoil in 1963 and North Vietnamese regular regiments) that prompted the American action. What happened afterward, however, represents a substantial and qualitative departure from Mao's model of a conflict rising in intensity and stakes. Throughout 1965-75, large-scale battles occurred simultaneously with small-scale guerrilla attacks, at times with equal intensity. In fact, there is a consensus among American analysts that the Vietnam War was a "double war" of two components: the big-unit war and the "other war"—the war for population control—with the corresponding strategies of attrition and pacification. The disagreement among these analysts is on the timing and emphasis of these two strategies, not on the characterization of the war as such.[6]

This compartmentalization of the war clearly is not shared by Tra, or for that matter, by the leadership in Hanoi. They look at the Vietnam War as a war of syntheses (*chien tranh tong hop*).[7] Of these syntheses, the most crucial, in military terms, were:

- The synthesis of the three types of forces, deployed both in the front and the rear of the enemy.
- The synthesis of operations in the three strategic areas: the jungles and mountains, the lowlands and river deltas, and the cities.
- A unique version of the blitzkrieg, which stressed the *synchronization* of an offensive on the basis of the two spatial syntheses to create the conditions for a total collapse of the enemy.

The Synthesis of the Three Types of Forces

The first synthesis involved main, local, and guerrilla forces. Main forces were regular troops organized in regiments and divisions, which could break up and disperse or regroup depending on the circumstances. Sometimes they could even fight in small units as guerrillas. As a rule, these troops were under the control of COSVN or a military sub-regional command.[8] Local forces were usually organized in companies and battalions, under the direct control of provincial committees, and were similarly deployed flexibly in combat. These forces could be employed to support guerrillas in their usual missions or main force units in their operations. They could thus be used to counter pacification or for conventional battles. Guerrillas, besides performing their classic missions, constituted a source of manpower for local and main forces.[9]

The strategic disposition (*chien luoc*) that allowed this synthesis to develop its effects fully is called the *cai rang luoc*. This untranslatable term evokes the image of a comb with its teeth sinking deep into a lock of hair. At the forefront of this deployment are the guerrilla units and the party cells, usually interspersed with the enemy in an intricate pattern. The smallest unit at each locality forms a link with—and can rely on the

support of—a chain of larger units, all the way up to battalions or even larger formations. These mutually supporting links in the chain extend all the way from the "liberated" to the contested and the "enemy-controlled" areas. These units, according to Tra, form

> a system which cannot afford to lose a single link in the chain. This is the magical formation of our people's revolutionary war, causing the enemy to suffocate, creating tension and fear in him night and day, so that he sees a need to create a defense and a strong military force everywhere before he can become confident.[10]

Once established, this system would allow the main, local, and guerrilla forces to function in a mutually supporting manner. Lacking motorized and air transport and the control of the main lines of communication, especially in the populated lowlands, for example, the main force units could not move around en masse at will and thus would have to rely on a chain of supply put in place by the supporting political and military infrastructure.[11] Besides fulfilling this supporting function, local and guerrilla forces could also play a crucial role in offensive operations and participate directly in attacks on critical targets behind the front line of the battle, in coordination with a frontal assault by main forces. On the other hand, local guerrilla units, benefiting from the continuous support of local (and sometimes main force) units familiar with the local terrain and the appropriate tactics, could provide a counterforce to the pacification strategy. It was this coordination between main, local, and guerrilla forces that would prove so intractable to the pacification strategy. An area could be secure one day and become insecure, practically on the next day, because of the mobility of the local and main force units operating in support of the guerrillas. This successful infiltration of main force units would reduce the effectiveness of government territorial units and tie down ARVN divisions in territorial security missions. As South Vietnamese General Ngo Quang Truong pointed out, the reverse was also true, because "when the shield or screen provided by ARVN and US units on the outside was solid and reliable, allowing no chance for enemy main force units to penetrate, then the Regional and Popular forces were most effective."[12]

This system led ARVN to station forces everywhere to maintain security, tying down large numbers of troops in contested and even Saigon-controlled areas, neutralizing the South Vietnamese advantage in number. Moreover, guerrilla operations, always with the suspected support of larger units behind them, could ring up "false alarms," forcing large sweep operations that turned up with nothing, compounding the frustration and exhaustion of ARVN units responsible for confronting the VC or NVA main forces.[13] All in all, this strategic disposition and system of coordination was intended to create maximum uncertainty and insecurity and to tie down the bulk of government forces in territorial security missions, thus inducing all the elements of friction that eventually wear down a much larger military machine.

How was this basic synthesis and strategic disposition put into practice by Tra and other communist commanders? Their different reactions to the new situation in South Vietnam after the Paris peace agreement in 1973 illuminate the difficulty of maintaining it without strong and viable local and guerrilla forces. For example, General Tra attributed the stalemate in the Quang Tri and Hue area south of the DMZ after 1973 to the failure to adhere to this basic strategy.[14]

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Instead of maintaining the usual three zones ("liberated," contested, and "enemy controlled"), the regional commander willingly pulled back his force to the agreed line to consolidate his rear and thus unwittingly created a war with fronts. In the process, he risked being pushed back when the balance of conventional forces swung to ARVN's favor. What Tra neglected to mention was the fact that the Viet Cong guerrillas and infrastructure, together with their mini-bases (*lom*) in the region, were effectively rooted out by the successful pacification campaigns from 1969 to 1972. During that period, communist main forces were put at bay far beyond the populated areas by the solid shield of US and ARVN forces, thus cutting the connections between these three types of forces and disrupting their coordination.[15] On Tra's part, he favored this forward deployment so much that he allowed local commanders in the Mekong Delta to continue pushing back government forces in the contested areas and insisted that the system of 60 or so guerrilla bases around Saigon be preserved at all costs. Without the maintenance of this system, Tra thought, the repenetration of the NVA and VC into the Delta in 1974 would not have been possible and Thieu would have consolidated his strategic defense in the Mekong and Saigon areas.[16] On this point, General Cao Van Vien, the South Vietnamese chairman of the Joint General Staff, lamented, "The standstill ceasefire thus gave the Communists a chance to stay mixed with the South Vietnamese positions in an intricate pattern which had always been the enemy scheme."[17] Moreover, "the Communists would certainly try, as soon as the ceasefire was announced, to break down into small units and penetrate our villages and hamlets."[18]

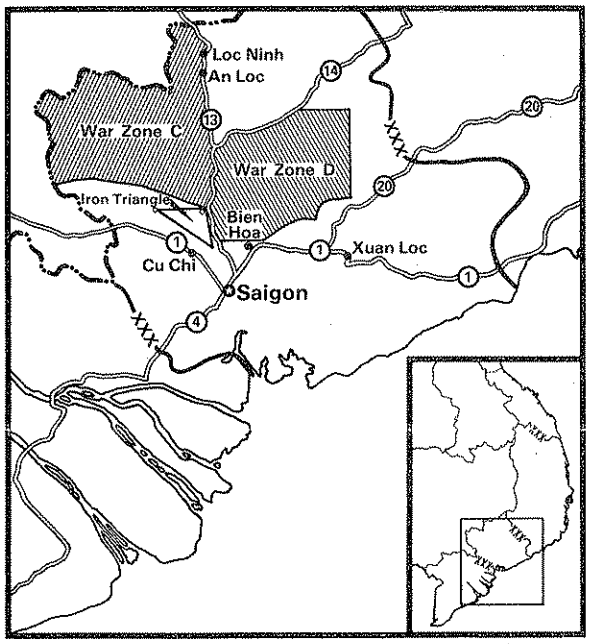
Likewise, after the decimation of the VC ranks during Tet in 1968, Tra was willing to disperse main force units into the Mekong Delta to preserve the VC infrastructure. Tra cited the example of Long An province, the focal point of pacification in 1968-69, and a strategic area linking Saigon with the Mekong Delta (see Map 1). To preserve the VC infrastructure and guerrilla movement in the province, Tra sent in a main force regiment (with continuous reinforcements for losses) to fight as guerrillas to protect the infrastructure and as regrouped units to counter the US and South Vietnamese campaign of pacification. Despite the heavy losses, Tra felt that the survival of the infrastructure in a strategically important area was worth the price. As a result, although the VC overtly controlled only four percent of the population in Long An, the VC infrastructure there was still intact.[19] This nucleus of organization would become the seed of a new guerrilla movement after 1972. In 1975, the three to four local force regiments there formed a surprise prong of attack against the southern defense line of Saigon during the final offensive.[20]

Heavy as the cost of preserving the infrastructure may have been, it was even more costly and difficult, Tra pointed out, to reenter an area once the infrastructure was lost.[21] Whenever communist forces were withdrawn from a contested area, together with the VC infrastructure, whether it was on their own initiative or not, recreating their bases and infrastructure was "much more difficult than to do so in areas where the infrastructure was previously nonexistent."[22] This surprising assessment implies that if pacification was to be successful, priority should have been given to permanently rooting out the VC infrastructure in an area (even if defended by main force units). This task, once accomplished, would have yielded far more results than a large sweep operation lasting a few days, leaving local defense to territorial units after government big units had left.[23] Simply put, the destruction of the VC infrastructure and the associated mini-bases was a much greater loss to the Viet Cong in terms of their future effectiveness than the casualties suffered by the local combat troops, which could be offset by the influx of main force units.

We have seen how the three types of communist forces were used together to counter the pacification strategy and tie down the bulk of government forces in territorial security missions. On the other hand, this synthesis of forces also helped communist main forces in their big-unit war by

preventing South Vietnamese infantry divisions from massing in one place for a prolonged operation without endangering the security of their usual area of responsibility. Since territorial security was not their primary mission, communist main forces could mass in their predetermined zone of operation and strike at the South Vietnamese weak points.[24]

To appreciate the dilemma posed to military planners in Saigon by this strategy, one can look at the example of the ARVN 22nd Division in the populated, coastal Binh Dinh province adjoining the strategic Central Highlands (see Map 1). In 1964, the division was deployed as a counter-guerrilla force and concentrated on small-unit operations for pacification. As General Westmoreland pointed out, as "progress began to become evident, two main-force enemy regiments debouched from the hills and virtually destroyed the spread-out South Vietnamese units in detail, making a shambles of the pacification program. It took well over a year to recover what was lost."[25] He used this case to argue against the Marines' emphasis on pacification and the view that "the real war is among the people and not among these mountains."[26] On the other hand, in 1972 the 22nd Division was redeployed to help stem the communist Easter offensive in the Central Highlands, and thus left behind a large gap for the local Viet Cong and NVA main force units to exploit. A large part of Binh Dinh province was occupied by communist forces for more than two months before government units, released from the Central Highlands front, could drive the communists from the area. In general, ARVN infantry divisions could not be extricated from their territorial missions to serve as a mobile reserve because they acted as the "primary forces that kept territorial security from deteriorating."[27] In 1975, the 22nd Division was again pinned down in an indecisive struggle for control of Binh Dinh province and thus was unable to reinforce government troops in the Central Highlands.



Map 2. COSVN Strongholds North of Saigon in 1967.

The Synthesis of Operations in the Three Strategic Areas

The above argument about where the "real war" was brings one naturally to an extremely important principle underlying communist strategy: the synthesis of operations in the three strategic areas—the jungles and mountains, the lowlands and river deltas, and the cities.[28] In the communists' view, their strategy had always been offensive in character, and a strategic offensive posture was assumed in all three strategic areas. In this offensive strategy, the main forces decided the war. Since the jungles and mountains formed a natural terrain for the massing of troops and the establishment of their bases and sanctuaries, it was there that the war would be decided. Tra rejected the view that the war could only be decided once the populous plains and river deltas had been "liberated." In his view, this strategy of "using the countryside to surround the towns" would put the communist main forces, the decisive forces, at a disadvantage.[29] From "plenty of experiences," he knew that the increasingly mechanized communist main forces could not mass effectively for large-scale battles in the river deltas because of the muddy terrain and the

lack of control by communist forces of the main lines of communication. It was difficult for infantry units to advance without using the roads, let alone tanks. For that reason, the best way to deploy main forces in the deltas was to form them into light infantry regiments without heavy artillery.[30] The jungles and mountains, therefore, became the decisive strategic area, because that was where the mechanized main forces could mass into divisions and maximize their effectiveness. Only twice during the war, in 1962 and in 1974, did the river deltas become the primary strategic objectives in the communist offensive plans.[31] These two periods, one notices, immediately preceded the years Hanoi was planning the final offensives to decide the war. The purpose of designating the populous river deltas and lowlands as the primary strategic objective was to disperse and tie down ARVN forces in counter-guerrilla efforts, thus preventing them from massing effectively against communist main force units during the final offensive.

The way Tra targeted the river deltas as the primary strategic objective during the 1973-74 dry season also illuminated the principle of the second "synthesis." Targeting the deltas here, Tra explained, did not mean that COSVN main forces should be committed to the Mekong Delta on a large scale, because of the reasons discussed above.[32] Rather, Tra would order the divisional commanders to quickly organize and train a number of companies and battalions to reinforce the military sub-regional commands. In the region west of the Mekong River, because of heavy government pressures there, he would detach one whole regiment from a main force division to be sent there. The timing and intensity of the COSVN forces' offensive were to be closely coordinated with other forces in the river deltas to prevent the concentration of ARVN forces and the mobile reserve units in operations in the Mekong Delta.[33] Two COSVN divisions, therefore, would come out from their bases in War Zone C and War Zone D for a probing attack against the Iron Triangle and an area northeast of Saigon (see Map 2). Thus the offensive would both tie down the III Corps forces, preventing them from reinforcing those in the plains and river deltas, and punch holes in the middle defense line of Saigon.[34] In the IV Corps area, Tra would deploy one understrength NVA division and sapper units to the Plain of Reeds to tie down the efficient ARVN 9th Division. This would leave only the weakened ARVN 21st Division in the area west of the Mekong, together with its territorial units, to combat the combined main and local forces there.

The success of the anti-pacification campaign during the dry season of 1973-74 (from December to May) caused the Central Military-Party Committee in Hanoi (headed by Giap) to issue a resolution in April 1974 calling for a step-up of this campaign to push for more control of the plains and river deltas.[35] Specifically the command of the Tri-Thien region south of the DMZ was asked to recreate the "three zones formation," disrupting "the enemy's front-line formation," while tying down the two marine and airborne divisions there to prevent them from being redeployed elsewhere.[36] In the IV Corps area, the remaining ARVN division in the Mekong Delta had to break up into battalion-sized units to help defend the outposts, many of which were overextended in VC-controlled areas. At the end of 1974, government forces had to abandon many of these overextended outposts and tried to defend only company-sized ones.[37] This had a tremendous psychological effect on the population of the area, because to them "the outpost was the symbol of governmental authority, an indication of the government's determination to stay with them and provide protection."[38] The result of this offensive, Tra claimed, was to push communist control of the population in the COSVN area nearly back to the level achieved before Tet in 1968.[39]

The key to understanding Tra's dry-season plan in 1973-74 lies in Sun Tzu's discussion of the actions of two instruments of force at the disposal of the generals: the normal, direct, or *cheng*, force and the

extraordinary, indirect, or *ch'i*, force.[40] The normal force fixes or distracts the enemy, and the extraordinary force strikes when and where it is not expected. Thus,

> the force which confronts the enemy is the normal; that which goes to his flanks the extraordinary . . . . *I make the enemy conceive my normal force to be the extraordinary and my extraordinary to be the normal.* Moreover, the normal may become extraordinary and vice versa . . . . Generally, in battle, use the normal force to engage; use the extraordinary to win.[41]

Tra used the main force divisions in War Zone C and War Zone D as normal forces to fix and distract Saigon forces and to engage ARVN's strongest divisions, whereas the local and guerrilla forces (reinforced by some main forces) acted as the extraordinary forces to gain their strategic objective in the Mekong Delta. Judging by the deployment of ARVN units, it seems that Saigon thought the reverse was true. In 1975, the main force divisions did reverse their role and became the extraordinary forces, the forces of "decision," and the guerrillas the normal, the forces of "distraction." Bogged down in their territorial security missions in the Mekong Delta, the ARVN divisions there were unable to redeploy to defend Saigon.[42]

The Tet Offensive serves as another example of the working of this synthesis. Throughout 1967, most American forces were drawn into fighting in the jungled mountains of South Vietnam, from Khe Sanh and the DMZ to Dak To in the Central Highlands and the Iron Triangle and War Zone C in the III Corps area.[43] Thus, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong divisions in this strategic area acted as normal forces fixing the bulk of allied combat troops to allow the Viet Cong guerrillas and local forces (or main forces in regiment-sized or smaller units) to strike at the cities for a decision.[44] The towns and cities of South Vietnam were certainly the weakest links in the defense. Only 10 to 20 percent of ARVN forces were estimated to be present in their garrisons when the attacks began, almost simultaneously, throughout South Vietnam.[45]

Hanoi's Blitzkrieg Theory

Hanoi's war strategy had a temporal aspect as well. In this theory, an offensive should be synchronized to maximize its effects, to prevent the concentration of allied defense forces in any one place or in any enclave and thus spread them as thin as possible throughout the country. Throughout the war, the communists carried out their general offensives simultaneously over the length of South Vietnam in order to defeat the allied forces in detail by not allowing units from one region to reinforce another or mass for a concentrated defense. Moreover, this principle of synchronization was dictated because, although communist main forces were engaged in "an entirely mobile mode of combat, they were only mobile within a specific region and coordinated closely with the localities," and thus they were "never mobile throughout the theater of operations or detached from the localities."[46] Therein lay the communist advantage, because "all localities were guided and coordinated closely from the center in a united fashion." Therefore, the success of an offensive depended critically on whether the planned disposition of communist forces allowed them to achieve an overwhelming superiority over the enemy in the objective area while at the same time preventing enemy reinforcements from the other regions from reversing this situation. In this scheme, forces-in-place, striking simultaneously at their predetermined targets, could win a rapid victory entirely by themselves if some strategic objectives had been achieved that created the conditions for the total collapse of the enemy. Here Tra distinguished between an offensive for "total annihilation" and one for "total collapse." To strike for "total collapse" meant:

> There will still be a *coup de main* to rapidly undermine the enemy so that he no longer possesses the will and capability to resist or

> counter-attack, thus leading him to total collapse, total defeat—despite the fact that his troops are still numerous and well-equipped. This *coup de main* does not necessarily mean the destruction of the bulk of enemy vital forces but only certain parts of them. It also means the occupation of certain localities with strategic significance. This *coup de main* thus creates a decisive situation causing the enemy to lose his morale and will to fight, to become chaotic, and when he faces a relentless offensive and uprising will collapse in parts and then in totality.[47]

This strike for total collapse lay behind the Tet Offensive in 1968, but the communists could not achieve that goal because, Tra thought, the strategic objectives established by Hanoi were far beyond the capabilities of his available forces, despite "marvelous planning and execution." The objectives, Tra pointed out, were due mainly to "illusions based on subjective wishes." However, Tet was a "realistic and large-scale exercise" to enable the communists to refine their offensive principle and understand "the enemy's laws of action."

Tet was thus the first manifestation of Hanoi's version of the blitzkrieg (*than toc*, or "lightning speed"), which stressed the synchronization of an offensive undertaken by forces-in-place to achieve rapid victory through the total collapse of the enemy. The emphasis was on the *disruption* of the enemy's defensive plans rather than the *destruction* of enemy forces. The speed of an offensive was attained by the operational successes of forces-in-place, over a large span of territory. On this point, Tra states that *than toc* meant:

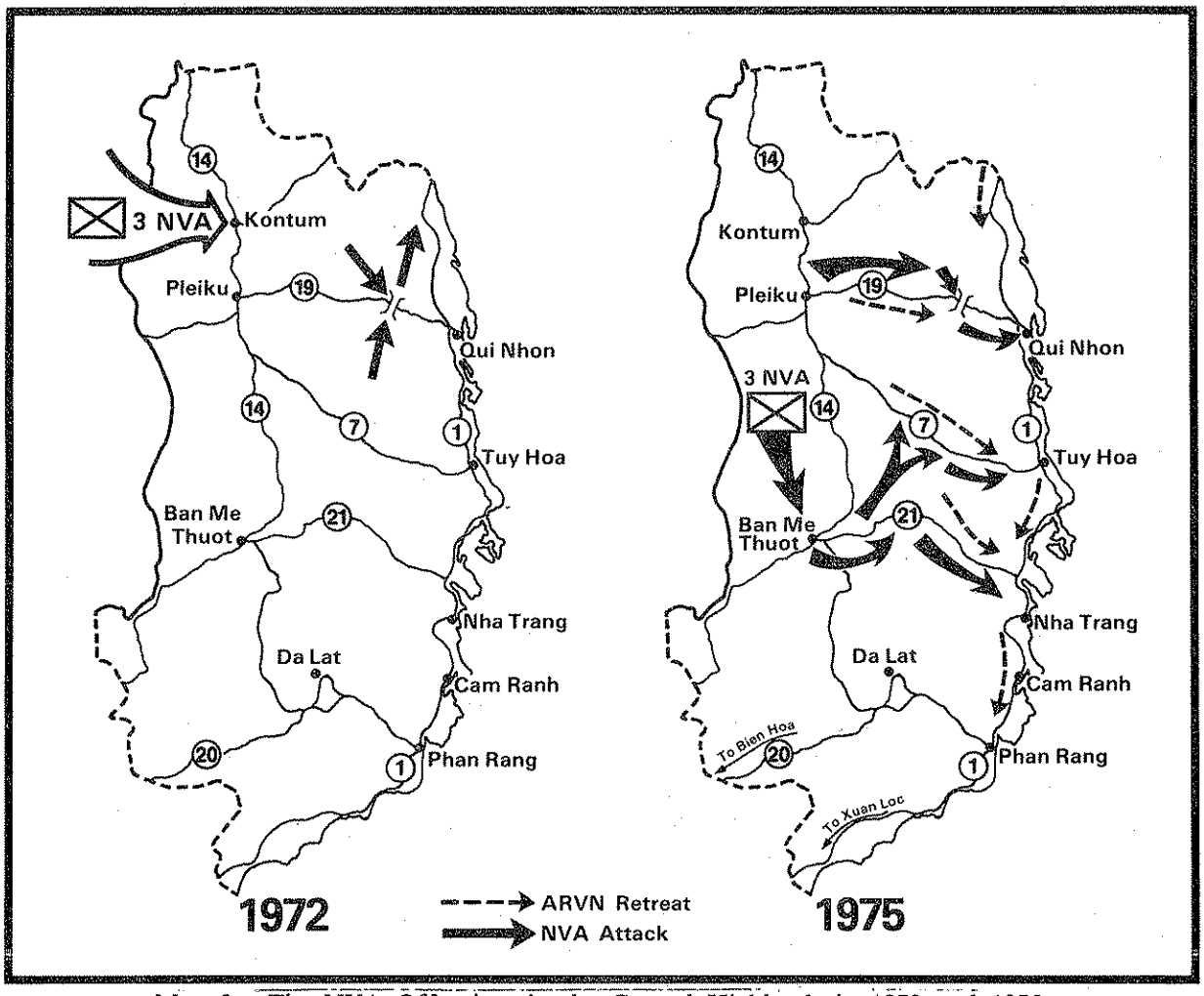
> covering a wide space in a short time, lightning actions in combat, in operations and, more importantly, in a strategic period, in the way of ending a war. Don't think of it as a lightning offensive from afar with the use of mobile main forces because, then, one would never comprehend its working.[48]

Even the 1975 offensive fell into this pattern because the attacks on the Central Highlands occurred at the same time as other communist actions in the northern quarters, the central coastal lowlands, and COSVN. In fact, the offensive on Saigon started on 10 March, roughly the same time as the attack on Ban Me Thuot, with COSVN forces making probing attacks around the northern and western defense lines. After the fall of Da Nang at the end of March, Hanoi allowed Tra to use the NVA division held in reserve and two other divisions to attack Xuan Loc, a strategic town guarding the approaches to Bien Hoa and Saigon from the Central Highlands in the north and the coastal lowlands in the northeast. Under direct order from Le Duan and Giap, Tra was to use these three divisions to attack Xuan Loc to clear this choke point for NVA divisions rushing down from the north and the northeast.[49] At the same time, the rest of COSVN was to try to cut off Route 4 connecting Saigon with the Mekong Delta.[50] Thus, Hanoi's objective was to isolate and cut off Saigon defense forces from the Delta and defeat them in detail. Another objective was to prevent a retreat of Saigon forces to the Mekong Delta to create an enclave defense. It was only three weeks later that the bulk of the NVA invasion forces could arrive in the Saigon area, together with their supplies, for a final assault.[51]

In addition to the coordinated strikes of forces-in-place in different areas of operations (i.e. over the whole theater), there was also, at the operational level, a strict coordination between forces striking deep inside the operational depth of the enemy and the main assault forces on the front line. During Tet in 1968, the seizure of key military and political targets inside Saigon was carried out by specialized forces and small raiding detachments in conjunction with attacks on the major defensive strongholds on the outskirts of Saigon. This principle of "attacking on the rear to collapse the front" (or, more metaphorically, "blossoming lotus") was also applied to the offensive in the Central Highlands in 1975. It was the reason

Hanoi chose to attack Ban Me Thuot in the rear of Kontum and Pleiku to collapse ARVN forces in the front, in conjunction with communist forces poised on the outside (see Map 3).[52] In the battle of Ban Me Thuot, the disruption of South Vietnamese defense in depth was achieved not only through the actions of forward detachments and specialized forces, but also by the use of tank forces to complete the breakthrough and deeply penetrate the operational depth in conjunction with these forward units.[53]

In summary, the principles underlying Hanoi's strategy during the war encompassed the two spatial syntheses and a unique version of the blitzkrieg in its timing. Each of these syntheses contained inseparable components which relied on each other for support. To maintain the integrity and maximize the effectiveness of each part of the syntheses required the preservation of all of their components. To prevent the working of these syntheses, then, one needed to sever the connections between each component, since



Map 3. The NVA Offensives in the Central Highlands in 1972 and 1975.

In 1972, three NVA divisions were blocked at Kontum after they had managed to overrun Dak To. The attackers were beaten back with the help of US airpower.

In 1975, three NVA divisions (including the 320th Division) secretly bypassed Kontum and Pleiku to attack Ban Me Thuot after isolating the city by blocking off Routes 14 and 21. After the fall of Ban Me Thuot, Thieu ordered a retreat from Kontum and Pleiku. Route 7 was chosen for surprise because it was a long-unused road and Route 19 was cut off. The 320th Division, however, managed to catch up with the retreating ARVN units and cut them up. The remaining divisions in Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot then pushed toward the coast.

the sum total of the parts was much less than the whole. To concentrate solely on the big-unit war or on population control, therefore, was to allow these syntheses to continue without disruption.

ALTERNATIVE COUNTER-STRATEGIES

Tra's assessment of allied strategy follows directly from the logic of communist theory about the war. The greatest common mistake on the American and South Vietnamese side, Tra stated, was the strategy of "defending the whole country," trying to secure and control every nook and cranny of South Vietnam.[54] This strategy played right into the hands of Hanoi, because the essence of communist strategy was to "stretch and pull" allied defense forces as thin as possible and then to strike on the weak links at a time and place of their own choosing.[55] Therefore, throughout the war allied strategy allowed the basic forward deployment and strategic disposition of communist forces, and in turn prevented the development at any one place of a coherent, consolidated defense line, i.e. a war with fronts.

Search and Destroy Strategy

To some extent, it can be argued that General Westmoreland's search and destroy strategy did succeed in pushing communist main forces from their bases of operations in the jungled mountains of South Vietnam after 1968 and thus severed the links between them and local forces in the populated areas in the lowlands. Together with the decimation of the Viet Cong ranks in 1968, the solid shield of American and South Vietnamese divisions along the border with Cambodia and Laos allowed an unprecedented period of security in the countryside. Yet the Viet Cong infrastructure, the political wing of the Viet Cong, continued its activities and thus formed a nucleus for future guerrilla operations. As it turned out, "the elimination of the VCI proved to be a task much more difficult than the destruction of enemy combat units."[56] It was only a matter of time before the communist main forces tried to reenter South Vietnamese territories from their bases in Cambodia and Laos to reestablish their links with the lowlands. In fact, this was precisely what the communists had in mind during the 1972 offensive, as Tra himself admitted. Again, the offensive in the jungles and mountains along the length of South Vietnam drew away government forces and left a gaping hole in the countryside for the communist anti-pacification campaign to exploit. This basic objective explained the communist method of attacking on all three fronts at once, since it allowed the reestablishment of the intricate formation Hanoi had always desired. Had Hanoi wanted to occupy as much territory as possible for a negotiated partition of South Vietnam, then it would have made sense for communist divisions to concentrate their attacks in the northern quarters.[57]

Although search and destroy operations from 1968 to 1971 did succeed in temporarily disrupting communist bases of operations, they could not prevent the infiltration of small units into the deltas to support guerrillas there. Moreover, they failed to stop communist main forces from returning to their former sanctuaries when insufficient allied forces were stationed there to prevent it. Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City in 1967 against the Iron Triangle and War Zone C amply demonstrated this fact. According to Tra himself, whose COSVN forces and command center were the key targets of this campaign, his favorite tactic when faced with such an imminent massive assault was to disperse his large units from the area to reassemble at a chosen time and place for a counteroffensive.[58] To harass and slow the assaulting forces right at the edges of his sanctuaries, Tra would leave behind snipers and light infantry units. To preserve whatever they could of their logistic channels, logistic units would stay behind together with the VC infrastructure to undertake their own defense while holding onto these channels. Tra claimed that these tactics allowed COSVN forces to mount a prompt counteroffensive against units of the 1st and 25th Infantry, and

the 1st Cavalry Divisions, as well as the Tet Offensive in 1968—Tra's answer to General Westmoreland.[59] According to General Hay of the Big Red One, COSVN forces were not destroyed because it was "extremely difficult" to establish an impenetrable seal against infiltration by VC units "thoroughly familiar with the dense jungle terrain."[60] His assistant, General Rogers, also noted that the option to fight belonged to the enemy because of this, and that soon afterward, "the Iron Triangle was again literally crawling with what appeared to be Viet Cong."[61] Bringing the war to the jungle thus meant fighting the communist main forces in terrain entirely favorable to them.

In 1970, the Cambodian incursion again succeeded only in temporarily disrupting COSVN bases near the border, moving their sanctuaries into northeastern Cambodia.[62] Pushing the communist main forces from their bases along the jungled mountains of South Vietnam so that pacification could proceed successfully in the lowlands and deltas was an entirely laudable goal. But it could be achieved only at enormous costs in providing firepower and logistic support for combat units, and it required overwhelming superiority in manpower.[63] When this superiority could no longer be achieved, then the mobile, big-unit war could be continued only at the expense of territorial security in the rear.

In fact, Hanoi viewed "this contradiction between population and territorial control and mobile combat" as a common affliction for both the Americans and the South Vietnamese.[64] This assessment of allied strategic weakness was a recurrent motif during the war. Nevertheless, US superior firepower and mobility helped alleviate this "contradiction," for, as South Vietnamese General Cao Van Vien pointed out, these were "the very things that helped maintain *tactical* balance against an enemy who held the initiative."[65] In fact, General Vien added, "the ability to hold territory [South Vietnamese strategists] felt, was a direct function of aid level."[66]

After 1973, with the withdrawal of US air and combat support and the steep reduction in the mobility and firepower of ARVN, this "contradiction" reached an acute phase. In Tra's view, Thieu's strategy of "trying to hold onto every hamlet and village" to deny the communists control of any populous area spread his forces too thin throughout the country and kept them on the defensive.[67] Moreover, this strategy gave rise to a serious depletion of a mobile strategic reserve to counter communist probes around Saigon and the repenetration of the NVA and VC main forces into the Delta in 1974. It also prevented the massing of enough forces to attack the enemy in any one direction without the fear of being exposed in another.[68] And when a weak spot in the defense was overrun, like the case of Phuoc Long at the end of 1974, there were no reserves left to rescue the defenders. As a result, throughout 1974, along the entire length of South Vietnam, there was no consolidated enclave of defense to prevent communist infiltrations and probings.

The Strategy of Defense with Mobile Regional Forces

The South Vietnamese solution to this problem of depleting a mobile reserve due to the commitment to hold territory was to upgrade the Regional Forces to carry out a dual function. According to General Vien, the plan was to establish:

> mobile regional group commands, each capable of controlling from two to four Regional Force battalions and one four-piece artillery battery relieved from territorial duties . . . . The JGS [Joint General Staff] plan called for the activation of twenty-seven such groups by June 1975. This effort was intended to free regular divisions from territorial concerns and give the military regions a sizable combat force to confront enemy territorial units.[69]

These mobile regional groups, therefore, would be involved in both territorial security missions and mobile combat to support or reinforce the ARVN divisions in the military region. However, General Truong considered the plan as being implemented too late:

> This should have been done in 1971, when most U.S. infantry divisions had been withdrawn and the enemy was grouping the local forces into battalions and regiments and preparing for mobile conventional warfare . . . . If we had achieved this at that time, then ARVN infantry divisions would not have found themselves overextended when replacing U.S. units being redeployed. They could have become more mobile and would have constituted a formidable deterrent to invasion.[70]

The creation of such dual forces proficient in both anti-guerrilla and mobile conventional warfare clearly was not an easy task, especially when these battalion-sized units were previously used for defending outposts and in guard duties. However, the peculiar form of warfare in Vietnam, with the three types of communist forces, called for such intermediate forces on the South Vietnamese side. In fact, these mobile regional groups were similar in concept to the French *Groupement Mobile* during the First Indochina War. Jean Ferrandi, the French G-2 officer in Hanoi during the war, saw these forces as General De Lattre's response in 1951 to the new "mobile warfare stage" that Giap's forces were entering. In De Lattre's conception, these units would be flexible and mobile enough to be capable of "being engaged at any point in the territory and then ensuring incessantly growing security on our rear."[71] He also ordered the construction of a series of fortified outposts around the perimeter of the Red River Delta—the famous De Lattre Line—to control Vietminh infiltration into the Delta and create an enclave of defense. The "mobile groups" would be available for reinforcement anywhere an attack should occur.

The Enclave Strategy

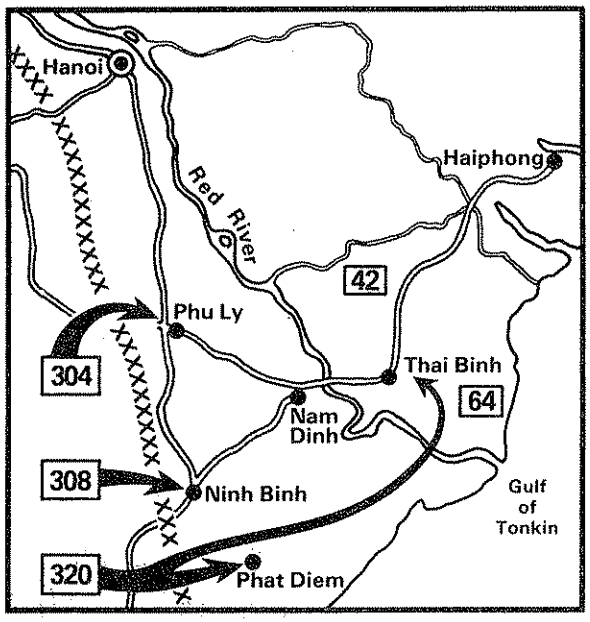
De Lattre's concept brings one to another alternative strategy proposed during the war by General James Gavin in 1965-66. The idea was "to hold several enclaves on the coast, where sea and air power can be made fully effective. By enclaves I suggest Cam Ranh Bay, Da Nang, and similar areas where American bases are being established."[72] Otherwise, he argued, presciently, in almost the same words that Tra would use years later, "we are stretching current U.S. resources beyond reason in our endeavors to secure the entire country of South Vietnam from the Vietcong penetration. This situation, of course, is caused by the growing Vietcong strength."[73] According to Gavin's biographer, he also envisioned highly mobile defense forces which would move out from their enclaves on the coast to patrol the periphery, secured against attacks by the use of new weaponry and systems.[74]

General Tra himself mentioned what he called "the Gavin plan," designating a strategy of gradual retreat from overextended territories to set up an enclave defense around the Mekong Delta, in the worst circumstances.[75] In fact, what the communist high command and leadership feared most about Thieu's counterplan in 1974, Tra revealed, was a resort to an enclave strategy to consolidate a defense line around the Mekong Delta, with the back of the enclave facing the coast, close to the support of American naval air power.[76] This was exactly what some leaders in South Vietnam envisioned early in 1974 when it became clear that US support for the war would be on the wane. Prime Minister Khiem and General Vien began to push for "truncation," which eventually would involve a pullback from the Central Highlands and the northern coastal provinces and an evacuation of the population in the areas concerned.[77] Thieu rejected the plan outright only to come back to it in March 1975 after the fall of Ban Me Thuot, when, according to both the communist General Tra and the South Vietnamese General Vien, that strategic retreat was already too late.

The communist leaders in Hanoi were sufficiently concerned about this plan to order a step-up in the anti-pacification campaign in the Delta even during the rainy season of 1974 and to push communist control of the area back to the 1968 level.[78] Tra clearly felt that the anti-pacification efforts during 1973-74 had paid off well enough to the communists to foil the

development of the enclave strategy. By the time Thieu tried to implement this strategy in late March 1975, Tra's forces were already locked deep in the Mekong Delta because of their earlier successes in repenetrating and expanding areas under their control in 1974. In 1973-74, despite his realization that the Mekong Delta campaigns were "essential to the survival of South Vietnam," Thieu could not commit enough forces to root out communist bases of operations and solidify control there, especially in the swampy areas west of the Mekong River. Moreover, having lost the outer defense line in northern War Zone C to Tra's forces, Thieu should have tried to close the gaps in the middle defense line north and west of Saigon, two areas Tra repeatedly exploited to tie down the bulk of III Corps forces there. The defense of the northern quarters pinned down South Vietnam's best divisions and depleted her mobile strategic reserves, leaving them in a position to be cut off from the south. The faulty disposition of South Vietnamese forces thus made them vulnerable to Hanoi's strategy in 1975, which did not aim at a frontal attack to win by attrition but a decisive strike on the rear to collapse the front. In 1975, an offensive for "total collapse" completely foiled any hope for the realization of a "Gavin plan" by South Vietnam in 1975.[79]

The success of an enclave defense, therefore, depended on the ability by the defense forces to defeat this principle of "attacking in the rear to collapse the front," first in parts and then in totality. In terrain unfavorable for the deployment of large units and lacking control of the lines of communication (such as the Mekong Delta, and during the First Indochina War, the Red River Delta), communist main force units were adept at breaking into smaller units to infiltrate through the outer defense line and then regroup for a strike at a command center or a town. This usually was done in conjunction with bigger units poised on the outside. This method lay behind communist offensives against the deltas and cities during the Vietminh campaign against the southern edge of the Red River Delta in 1951, Tet in 1968 against the cities, and the final offensive in 1975 against Ban Me Thuot and Saigon. The Day River Campaign in 1951 against the De Lattre Line illustrated the success of an enclave strategy against such tactics (see Map 4). Achieving a measure of surprise, two Vietminh divisions attacked two strong outposts on the southern edge of the De Lattre Line to allow the 320th Division, commanded by General Van Tien Dung, to infiltrate into the southern part of the Delta to occupy the Catholic diocese of Phat Diem and disrupt French control of the area together with two Vietminh regiments previously infiltrated. The 320th Division, then, was to regroup and push back for an attack on the outer line. The offensive was



Map 4. The Battle for Control of the Southern Red River Delta.

Two Vietminh divisions attacked the French strongholds at Phu Ly and Ninh Binh, while another, the 320th Division, slipped through the De Lattre Line (xxx) to occupy the Catholic diocese of Phat Diem. The 64th Regiment of the 320th Division, having infiltrated previously into Thai Binh, joined the independent 42nd Regiment to attack outposts and disrupt French control in the area. The 320th Division began to regroup and push back toward the De Lattre Line. Three French mobile groups were sent in to reinforce the southern area and push back the Vietminh units. Vietminh casualties were heavy, but both General Leclerc and General De Lattre lost their sons during the battle.

foiled because *Groupement Mobile* reinforcements prevented the taking of the two strong outposts and the exposed 320th Division was cut up by another such mobile group.[80] General Van Tien Dung again applied this "blossoming lotus" principle in Ban Me Thuot in 1975, this time with more success because of overwhelming superiority. The Day River Campaign, however, pointed out the importance of rooting out the internal infrastructure that allowed infiltrated main force units to roam about and regroup through its support. Moreover, the shield on the outside had to be solid and constantly reinforced by a mobile defense force. The lines of communication had to be well protected through a series of fortified outposts, as the success against NVA main force units in the Mekong in 1975 indicated. Last but not least, there had to be dual-function mobile groups to deal with both the guerrillas and the regrouped main force units inside the shield, in addition to more conventional forces to counter the big units on the outside. It is interesting to note that De Lattre's strategy foiled Giap's offensive on the Red River Delta in 1951, until he decided to bring the war to the mountains in 1952, which allowed the 320th and 316th Divisions to infiltrate again and occupy a swath of land posing as a dagger toward Hanoi.[81]

If Saigon had managed to realize its enclave strategy before the communist offensive in 1975, the question remains as to whether this truncated version of South Vietnam would have survived a determined communist onslaught. Some of the discussions that Tra had with the Politburo at the beginning of 1975 shed some light on the issue. According to Tra, Le Duc Tho, Kissinger's counterpart at the Paris peace talks, told him that Hanoi's materiel reserves were extremely thin, that because of the "complicated internal and external situations" they could not be much increased, and hence that an offensive for a decisive victory must take place by 1976 because Hanoi "should not and cannot prolong the war like before."[82] The most important objective, Tho said, was to prevent the successful development of an enclave strategy.[83] One can infer that Hanoi feared that the enclave strategy would involve a stalemate, which it wanted to avoid at all costs. In a following meeting with the Politburo, Truong Chinh, currently the second-ranked member of the Politburo, expressed concerns about the "enemy's tendency towards an enclave strategy centered around large cities," and he was afraid the communist forces could not penetrate these consolidated defense lines, especially with American support from the air, even on a limited level.[84] The optimists, represented by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, discounted the possibility of American intervention after Watergate. The offensive in 1975 was then approved.

IN CONCLUSION

If only one lesson were to be learned from the Vietnam War, then the thesis convincingly argued by Tra deserves to be remembered: America and South Vietnam lost the war *because their military strategy was wrong*. Stark and direct as this message may be, coming as it does from an experienced protagonist, it should not be taken lightly. And if one believes that the war constituted a new "mode" of warfare, as the other side seems to believe, then one should look at the war from now on through this new lens.

To repeat, it was a war of "syntheses": a synthesis of the three types of forces on the one hand, and the three strategic areas on the other. These syntheses worked, in the final analysis, to shape South Vietnamese force dispositions for the final strike for "total collapse." Even though the big-unit war in the jungles and mountains was decisive, Hanoi clearly considered the revolutionary war in the lowlands as *indispensable* to the success of the former.

The importance of the war in the lowlands can be seen by the way Hanoi sent its own best and brightest into the two Indochina wars. The ones who eventually rose to the top were the commanders in the lowlands. General Van Tien Dung, the commander of the 320th Division haunting the southern Red River Delta, became Giap's

replacement. Likewise, General Le Duc Anh, the little-known commander of communist forces in the areas west of the Mekong River, directed the Vietnamese forces that invaded Cambodia in 1978 and became an important Politburo member. Hanoi clearly valued the skills of generals who could apply the three types of forces to fight this peculiar form of warfare. On this point, Tra had the final word:

> A general in the current era, an era of revolution and science . . . not only has to know how to deploy his available forces in the most sensible formation but also to create his forces, organize them into different types of forces with different modes of combat. He needs to know how to combine every type of forces, military and political, internal and external. He has to know not just to deploy his forces for a frontal assault but also to strike the enemy in the rear.[85]

NOTES

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1. Walter S. Dillard, *Sixty Days to Peace: Implementing the Paris Peace Accords, Vietnam 1973* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1982), p. 58.
2. General Tran Van Tra, *Ket Thuc Cuoc Chien Tranh 30 Nam* (*Ending the Thirty Years' War*) (Ho Chi Minh City: Literature Publishing House of Ho Chi Minh City, 1982).
3. After 1975, Tra became the commander of Vietnamese forces around Saigon and the areas near the border with Cambodia. In March 1978, he became Vice Minister of Defense, whereas his deputy, General Le Duc Anh, later would command the invasion forces in Cambodia. Tra was made a member of the Central Military-Party Committee in 1979, as well as Deputy Chief of General Staff in 1980, until his removal from the Central Committee in 1982, reportedly over differences on policies toward Cambodia.
4. In addition to Tra's book, a number of articles on the Vietnam War written by other senior commanders have recently appeared in a military journal designed for an audience of middle and high-ranking officers. The most notable articles include General Hoang M. Thao's account of the 1972 offensive in the Central Highlands, "Planning a Battle," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (Journal of the People's Army—hereinafter *TCQDND*) (May 1983); General Pham H. Son, "Several Problems Concerning Warfare in Jungled Mountain Terrain," *TCQDND* (February 1983); and an account of the air defense of Hanoi during the Christmas bombing in 1972 by General Hoang V. Khanh, "Creativity: An Important Cause for the Victory," *TCQDND* (November 1982).
5. For a concise discussion of revolutionary war, see Sir Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945-1969* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), pp. 16-17.
6. *Some Lessons and Non-Lessons of Vietnam: A Conference Report*, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1983), pp. 32-38.
7. Tra, pp. 90, 136; see also the articles signed by Q. S., "Military Strategy," *TCQDND* (September 1981); and "Operations and Operational Art," *TCQDND* (November 1981).
8. For a discussion on communist military organizations in Vietnam, see Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, *Intelligence* (Washington: Indochina Monographs, US Army Center of Military History, 1976), p. 87.
9. After Tet, North Vietnamese troops became fillers to reinforce local guerrillas rather than the reverse.
10. Tra, p. 62.
11. Ibid., pp. 136-39.
12. General Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces* (Washington: Indochina Monographs, US Army Center of Military History), p. 90.
13. Phan Nhat Nam, *Doc Duong So 1* (*Along Route 1*) (Saigon: Dai Nga Publishing House, 1970). This war diary by an ARVN paratroop officer contains many interesting anecdotes and incidents that tell volumes about the way US and South Vietnamese troops fought the VC and NVA. His chapter about a joint operation with the US Marines, for example, highlighted the inappropriate tactics used against the VC by these American units in 1967. Marines would march in assault formation in inappropriate terrain. Landing zones for supplies became easy targets for VC mortars. In short, they did so many predictable things that the VC easily learned the habits of action of these units to lure them into traps and sniper fire. On the South Vietnamese side, every time a bridge near a district headquarters was destroyed by sappers, the military region would send down a reserve paratroop battalion for a fruitless sweep of the area for fear of a wider attack plan behind it.
14. Tra, pp. 61, 70, and 72.
15. Truong, pp. 90-94.
16. Tra, p. 88.
17. General Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1983), p. 29.
18. Ibid., p. 20.
19. Richard A. Hunt, "Strategies at War: Pacification and Attrition in Vietnam," in *Lessons from an Unconventional War*, ed. Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Schultz, Jr. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), p. 42.
20. Tra, p. 260.
21. Ibid., p. 63.
22. Ibid.
23. Tra noted that a famous tactic by the 3rd Brigade of the US 9th Division, known to the local VC as "hop and probe," was to use small units on low-flying helicopters, suddenly swooping down on the suspected VC infrastructure or guerrilla activities and raining fire on them, then taking off quickly to escape. Tra sent his main force regiment to Long An to protect the VC infrastructure against such pacification campaigns. General Ewell (commander of the US forces in Long An and other provinces in the III Corps area) was skeptical of pacification operations because they yielded lower body counts than search and destroy sweeps. (Quoted in Hunt, p. 42.) Had he known that Tra was under direct order from Hanoi to try to protect the Long An VC infrastructure, he might have thought otherwise.
24. On this point, Tra stated that good generalship consisted of "deploying available forces in a cohesive strategic disposition . . . to allow them to exploit the opportunity to divide and disperse the enemy forces so that when strong they become weak and when many they become few." See Tra, pp. 169-70.
25. Quoted in Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1982), p. 12.
26. Comment by General Krulak, Commander of Marine Forces in the Pacific, cited in Shulimson.
27. Truong, p. 21.
28. Tra, pp. 90, 136.
29. Ibid., p. 91.

30. Ibid., p. 90.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 92.
33. Ibid., p. 95.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., pp. 134-35.
36. Ibid.; also see the chapter on Westmoreland in Robert Pisor, *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982). The month before Tet, 50 percent of US combat troops were drawn to the I Corps area because Westmoreland was concerned about the threat there posed by NVA divisions, particularly in Khe Sanh.
37. Ibid., p. 111.
38. Truong, p. 82.
39. Tra, p. 218.
40. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and with an introduction by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 91-92.
41. Ibid., p. 91.
42. Vien, pp. 138-40. Similarly, the 22nd Division in Binh Dinh was unable to redeploy to stem the communist offensive in the Central Highlands.
43. Pisor.
44. Although Tra admitted that the VC suffered heavy losses during Tet, he still considered it "a strategic turning point," at which "American limited war strategy was defeated," forcing the US to deescalate. Tra, p. 47.
45. Lung, p. 145.
46. Tra, p. 147, also p. 206.
47. Ibid., p. 206; see also pp. 57-58 and p. 101 for comments on Tet.
48. Ibid., p. 147.
49. Ibid., pp. 228, 258. In their rush to move down the Central Highlands and along the coast toward Saigon, the NVA divisions experienced a tremendous logistical headache. Units would arrive without their ammunition; tanks ran out of fuel; and artillery units were short of shells! Hardly the picture of a blitzkrieg army in the usual sense.
50. Tra was unhappy with this order by Le Duan and Giap. He thought that the muddy terrain there and the strongly fortified outposts on Route 4 put his light infantry divisions in the Mekong at a disadvantage. In fact, the communists were pushed back from Route 4, suffering heavy casualties. Tra, p. 230.
51. By then the battle was almost decided. Tra had his artillery units with their deadly 130mm guns within range of Saigon and the airport, which were surrounded except from the south and southeast.
52. Ibid., pp. 182-83. Originally, the General Staff's plan in Hanoi was to concentrate the NVA offensive on the Central Highlands but did not envision an attack on Ban Me Thuot. Tra was dismayed when he found out during a discussion on the forthcoming plan in Hanoi that the offensive was centered on Kontum and Pleiku, the defensive strongholds of the ARVN in the Central Highlands. These defense positions were stationed extremely close to the NVA infiltration routes from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The intention of the General Staff in Hanoi was to engage these defense forces in an attrition battle, since the NVA had numerical superiority and the advantage of an interior line of communication, whereas reinforcements for ARVN units could be blocked off on Route 19 (see Map 3). Doing so, Tra argued, would play right into the hands of Saigon because the ARVN positions were strongly defended and well stocked. Moreover, the plan reflected a "conventional war" mentality, whereas the communist forces should have exploited the ability to infiltrate into the rear by bypassing Kontum and Pleiku to strike at Ban Me Thuot, and thus indirectly collapse the front. According to Tra, he interceded with Pham Hung, the southern party secretary, to dissuade the Politburo from approving this plan. At the last moment, when the final Central Military-Party Committee meeting was taking place to hammer out the offensive plan, Politburo member Le Duc Tho entered with an explicit order to focus the attack on Ban Me Thuot.
53. During the 1975 offensive, these tank units could achieve a speed of advance of up to 50 to 60 kilometers a day and thus disrupted the efforts by South Vietnamese forces to reorganize and consolidate their defense. See Colonel Le X. Kien, "The Potential for Rapid Attack by Tank Forces in Modern Offensive Operations," *TCQDND* (August 1982).
54. Tra, p. 112.
55. Ibid., pp. 110-12.
56. General Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington: Indochina Monographs, US Army Center of Military History), p. 11.
57. General Cao Van Vien, the South Vietnamese chief of the Joint Staff, stated that South Vietnam "would have been much better off with a reduced but not infested territory . . . two clean-cut zones instead of the purulent spots of the 'leopard skin.' " See Vien, p. 81.
58. Tra, p. 105.
59. These attacks occurred mainly in October 1967, a few months after the end of Junction City. They included an ambush against a battalion of the Big Red One, an attack on Phuoc Long, and a division-sized attack on Loc Ninh, a district capital north of An Loc. The last attack was later considered a trial run for Tet to test combat tactics against towns and cities.
60. General Bernard W. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City: A Turning Point* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1974), p. 155.
61. Ibid., pp. 157-58.
62. General Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington: Indochina Monographs, US Army Center of Military History, 1978), p. 175.
63. According to General Murray, the US logistic chief in Vietnam in 1974, at the height of the US involvement in Vietnam there were 433 allied combat battalions fighting 60 enemy combat regiments (somewhat larger than an allied battalion). In 1974, ARVN had 189 battalions against 110 enemy regiments, see *Some Lessons and Non Lessons*, p. 38.
64. Tra, p. 188.
65. Vien, p. 7.
66. Ibid.
67. Tra, pp. 97, 111.
68. Ibid., pp. 105, 110.
69. Vien, p. 43.
70. Truong, p. 45.
71. Jean Ferrandi, *Les Officiers Francais Face au Vietminh, 1945-1954* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), p. 152.
72. General James M. Gavin, "A Communication on Vietnam," *Harper's*, 232 (February 1966), 17.
73. Ibid.
74. Bradley Biggs, *Gavin: A Biography of General James M. Gavin* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1980), pp. 148-49.
75. Tra, p. 145.
76. Ibid.
77. Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 104, 109, and 156.
78. Tra, pp. 128, 160.
79. Ibid., p. 146.
80. Ferrandi, p. 167.
81. Ibid., p. 182.
82. Tra, p. 161.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., p. 188.
85. Ibid., p. 170.