Giap's Dream, Westmoreland's Nightmare

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Dienbienphu, madame . . . Dienbienphu . . . history doesn't always repeat itself. But this time it will. We won a military victory over the French, and we'll win it over the Americans, too. Yes, madame, their Dienbienphu is still to come. And it will come. The Americans will lose the war on the day when their military might is at its maximum . . . we'll beat them at the moment when they have the most men, the most arms, and the greatest hope of winning.

— General Vo Nguyen Giap[1]

The eventual goal throughout was Saigon, but from the first the primary emphasis of the North Vietnamese focused on the Central Highlands and the central coastal provinces . . . . [Also, the] most logical course for the enemy, it seemed to me, was to make another and stronger effort to overrun the two northern provinces, . . . the most vulnerable part of the country.

—General Wm. C. Westmoreland[2]

Lewis Carroll had his character Alice awaken from her bizarre and somewhat frightening Wonderland with the reassuring exclamation, "Things are not as they seem in dreams." So too, it appears, with the Vietnam War: things were not as they seemed. This article probes the ironic twists of fate dealt to Giap's dream of another triumphant Dienbienphu against the Americans, and Westmoreland's nightmare of ignominious defeat before two simultaneous conventional thrusts by the North Vietnamese across the Demilitarized Zone in the north and through the Central Highlands.[3] In the world of events, Giap's dream of a Dienbienphu against the Americans, even in the triumph of his forces in 1975, was dashed, but Westmoreland's nightmare, after the departure of the last American GIs from Vietnam in 1973, was fully visited on the hapless remaining South Vietnamese defenders two years later.

Put simply, then, as a demonstration of a successful people's war strategy (of which a Dienbienphu was to be the culmination), the triumphant Ho Chi Minh Campaign of the North Vietnamese in 1975 was a fraud, whereas, ironically enough, the fears of the American command of a South Vietnam succumbing to a conventional invasion proved, prophetically, to be well-founded.

To make such claims obviously risks confusing the already difficult task of drawing lessons from Vietnam because such claims run counter to received truth. The first of these "truths" is that the North Vietnamese victory was a virtuoso exhibition of people's war. The lesson is that such a strategy can serve as a model for profitable emulation by beleaguered insurgents in El Salvador, the Philippines, Peru, and elsewhere. The second "truth" is that the United States was so blinded to the guerrilla nature and underlying political issues of the conflict that it erringly chose to focus on the conventional threat of the North Vietnamese army. The lesson emerging therefrom is that the United States cannot be counted on ever to develop a foreign policy capable of dealing with insurgencies and the grievances that undergird them. Whether these emergent lessons prove right or wrong, the point of this article is that in order to establish themselves, they will have to look elsewhere for their foundational truths. There is no simple Munich in the Vietnam War.

Few wars can compare with Vietnam as an example of a Clausewitzian fog that has become even soupier after the war's conclusion than when it was actually being fought. The North Vietnamese claim they won by a strategy they actually abandoned after the 1968 Tet Offensive. Most Americans have come to believe they lost a guerrilla war though they in fact crushed it. Ironically, the winning strategy was an American one used by the North Vietnamese in the name of Marxist people's war. It is not a story from which lessons readily emerge.

Tet 1968: The End of a Dream and the Beginning of a Nightmare

We have passed the 20th anniversary of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Few students of the Vietnam War quarrel with the notion that the offensive was a major—if not the central—turning point of the war, but many still debate its significance, the intentions behind it, and its outcome. Militarily, it was a series of coordinated shock assaults on a national scale.[4] Starting with their preliminary siege of Khe Sanh Combat Base (near the DMZ) on 21 January, the communists launched their country-wide attacks on the nights of 30 and 31 January, which, in the first week, enveloped 34 province capitals, all seven autonomous cities, and 64 district towns. For this first wave the communists had amassed a force of some 84,000 men.[5] Though by 31 March the offensive had been beaten back, the defenses of many of these towns and cities had been breached. Parts of Saigon were held by Viet Cong

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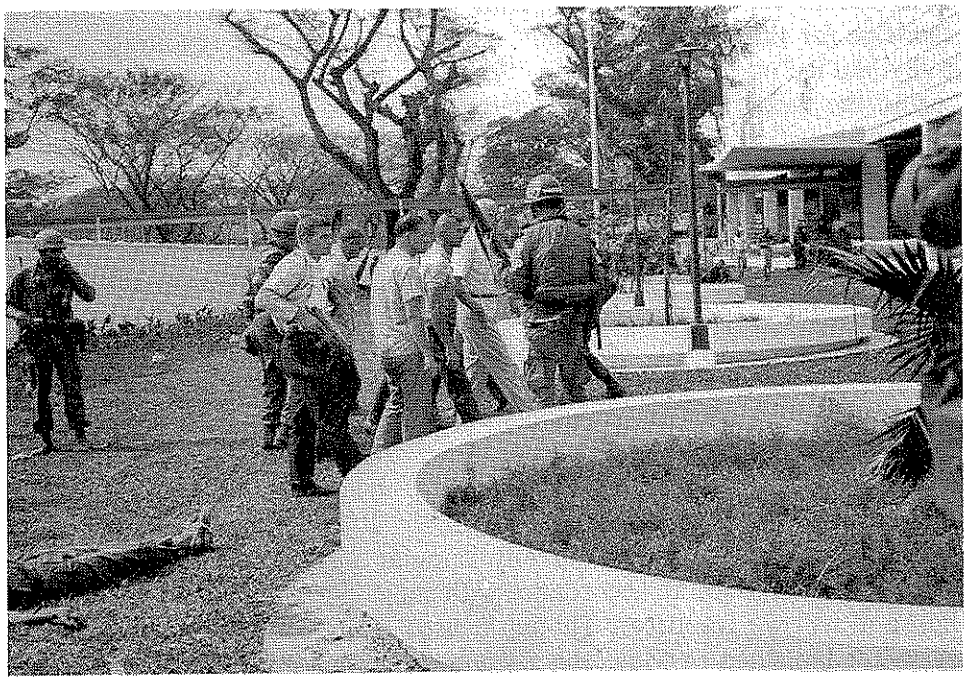
shock units for two weeks, and the entire city of Hue was occupied for three weeks. Even the grounds of the US Embassy in Saigon had been briefly penetrated. The physical destruction was enormous; the fighting was fierce; and the casualties were heavy. The communists lost nearly 60,000 in killed and wounded, the Americans and South Vietnamese about 10,000.[6] Fifteen Americans won the Medal of Honor.[7] A second wave called "Mini-Tet" was launched in May, but despite another break into Saigon it quickly fizzled. A final wave in August hardly attracted attention, and the communists themselves have readily acknowledged that this last round was a failure. When it was all over, official American figures showed that the communists had suffered 92,000 deaths.[8]

Despite these heavy communist losses, the most obvious effect of the Tet Offensive was that it marked the end of the escalation ladder for the Americans. In brief, a war effort designed to induce Hanoi to come to the conference table and desist from further attempts at forcible takeover of the south was instead blown apart by these shocking attacks ordered by Hanoi. The Pentagon, to say nothing of the American public, was obviously shaken by the offensive. An after-action assessment by General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concluded that "it was a very near thing."[9]

In the same report, Wheeler endorsed what he said was an add-on request by the US military command in Saigon (MACV) for 206,756 men to turn the war around and exploit the military advantages the defeat of the offensive afforded.[10] Such a request clearly amounted to a proposal for a significant change in strategy as well. An analysis of this request in the *Pentagon Papers* reveals a full understanding of the strategic Rubicon that would be crossed in responding to it favorably:

> The alternatives stood out in stark reality. To accept General Wheeler's request for troops would mean a total US military commitment to SVN [South Vietnam]—an Americanization of the war, a callup of reserve forces, vastly increased expenditures. To deny the request for troops, or to attempt to again cut it to a size which could be sustained by the thinly stretched active forces, would just as surely signify that an upper limit to the US military commitment in SVN had been reached.[11]

To help him think through his response, President Lyndon Johnson called together a group of his most trusted advisers, inside and outside of the government—dubbed the Wise Men—who agonized over the request in February and March. In the meantime, the domestic American reaction to the offensive was not promising for any contemplated expansion of the war. On 12 March Senator Eugene McCarthy, one of the most vocal critics of the war, garnered 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire presidential primary. Just four days later, a dithering Senator Robert



DOD Photo Archives

US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker (center, partly obscured by rifle) views the results of the Viet Cong attack on the US Embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive.

Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency on an antiwar platform, giving the antiwar movement a luster it had previously lacked. The polls also began to show signs of a demonstrable shift away from support for the war. While 40 percent of the respondents of a 1967 Harris poll had supported Johnson's conduct of the war, that support had plummeted to 26 percent in March 1968.[12] Surveying the military options and the domestic political carnage, the Wise Men advised Johnson to deescalate and seek a negotiated settlement. Reluctantly concurring, Johnson, in a televised address on 31 March, explained to the American public his decisions to freeze the war by keeping the American troop commitment at existing levels and to order a partial bombing halt of North Vietnam as a step toward negotiation. Further, he dramatically announced that he was dropping out of the presidential campaign. Militarily, America had won the battle of Tet, but politically it was a defeat for Lyndon Johnson.

Had Johnson and his Wise Men's survey encompassed the perspective of the communists, their assessments might not have been so gloomy. Whatever the intentions of the communist leaders (which will be discussed shortly), the Tet Offensive certainly did not go according to the

plans they had given to their cadres and military commanders. Directives went out to all commands to instill in their troops a sense of ultimate sacrifice for this "decisive hour." All the long years of revolutionary activity had led up to this moment: "We only need to make a swift assault to secure the target and gain total victory."[13] Victory was to be achieved in three stages: first, a shock assault would be carried into the cities by largely local (i.e. southern) forces; second, a tide of both popular uprisings by the people and massive defections by ARVN units triggered by those assaults would bring about the collapse of the South Vietnamese government;[14] and finally, regular units of the North Vietnamese army would enter the cities as a triumphant mopping-up force, obliging the outflanked and thoroughly disoriented Americans to negotiate their own withdrawal.[15]

In the event, of course, the offensive never got beyond stage one. The responsibility for this stage, one recalls, fell heavily on locally recruited southerners. Pentagon sources estimated that in the first wave of Tet (January to March) only 20 to 25 percent of the North Vietnamese forces in the south were committed, whereas virtually all Viet Cong combatants were engaged.[16] With the failure of any popular uprisings and mass ARVN defections to develop in accordance with stage two plans, Hanoi decided to husband its own resources. Though it used many of its own troops in the Mini-Tet launched in May, this second wave was much smaller than the first. The third wave in August reverted back to entire reliance on local forces. As a standard of comparison, there were 29 battalion-sized attacks in the first wave, six in the second, and only two in the third.[17] This is not to say that northerners went completely unscathed—they bore the brunt of the fighting at Khe Sanh and in Hue, for example—but it was the southern insurgent ranks that were decimated. The ultimate military result of Tet, therefore, was that if the war was to continue, the responsibility for its prosecution shifted to the northerners. Before the offensive, 55 percent of the main force communist ranks were filled by northern regulars, but in April 1968 over 70 percent of these positions had to be provided by northerners.[18] Even such a fervent believer in the revolutionary unity of the communist side as Frances FitzGerald admitted that after Tet the "southern movement was driven to become almost totally dependent on the North."[19]

If southern communists might be forgiven for wondering aloud about the asymmetry of regional sacrifice during Tet, northerners felt they had reason to fear for the fatherland itself and were therefore justified in conserving their troops for this challenge.[20] Indeed, after the siege of Khe Sanh was lifted by American troops in Operation Pegasus in April, two North Vietnamese divisions withdrew from the south altogether.[21] What they feared was a repeat of the Inchon landings.[22] Despite aspersions from southerners about the northern preoccupation with safeguarding "the great socialist rear," Hanoi's fears were not unfounded. American military planning (and desires) for cross-border operations into Laos and Cambodia

to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and even to disrupt the north by amphibious landings that would slice across North Vietnam's slender southern panhandle was of long standing. In his memoir Westmoreland relates that he first proposed such cross-border operations in 1964. His staffers continued to draw up contingency plans for these operations in 1966 and 1967. Throughout his account he expresses frustration over his failure to get clearance for these attacks, which he saw as a natural extension of his strategy.[23] It is clear from the *Pentagon Papers* (as well as from the memoirs both of Westmoreland and of Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp) that a petition for moves into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam was imbedded in the 206,000-troop request.[24]

That an expanded war strategy was behind the troop request was no mystery to Vietnamese communists. Indeed a lead article in the 10 March 1968 issue of *The New York Times* outlined the essential features of the debate over the request. Though the tenor of the article was that the request was unrealistic, the article admitted that if it were granted Vietnam could "no longer be called 'a limited war.' "[25] The communists, in fact, had been worried about such an expansion for at least as long as Westmoreland had been planning it. The key December 1963 resolution of the Lao Dong party to intervene directly in the war in the south contained the warning: "At the same time, we should be prepared to cope with the eventuality of the expansion of the war into North Viet Nam."[26] An intriguing 1984 interview conducted by William Turley with the deputy editor of the North Vietnamese journal *People's Army* corroborates this preoccupation. The editor said that the siege of Khe Sanh was actually intended as a probe to see if the Americans would send troops north in response to attacks across the DMZ. When no such attacks came, Hanoi went ahead with Tet.[27] It can also be inferred that with the huge losses, the failure to incite any response from the South Vietnamese populace, and the rumblings of a 206,000-troop request (even when it was turned down), Hanoi got nervous and decided not to send "good money after bad"—even if it meant splitting the revolution and abandoning a strategy.

The meaning of Tet 1968 turns, then, essentially on the intentions of the communists. If their intentions were not to win on the battlefield but rather to launch a dramatic and devastating assault (sacrificing, incidentally, a fair proportion of their southern comrades) that would rekindle the antiwar movement to the point where the American will could no longer be mobilized for a response—and thereby inducing American policymakers to deescalate the war—then the communists clearly could have called Tet a victory, and even hailed it as another Dienbienphu. Indeed, it is in precisely these terms that an official account of the war portrays the offensive as a victory: Tet "bankrupted the aggressive will of the US imperialists, and forced them to deescalate the war and negotiate with us at the Paris Conference."[28]

Though such intentions square well with subsequent events, it can be readily inferred from other communist writings and statements that, with such enormous sacrifices, they intended to achieve much more than a gradual American deescalation. If Tet was considered to have been such a victory, it is strange that as early as 1969 and 1970 there were thinly disguised public recriminations over the offensive at even the politburo level among such venerables as Truong Chinh, Le Duan, and Vo Nguyen Giap. In the middle of a eulogy on Karl Marx, for example, Truong Chinh pointedly reminded his colleagues that "our strategy is to protract the war; therefore, in tactics we should avoid unfavorable fights to the death."[29]

Since the war, some leading communist figures have become even more candid about Tet. That the war could have been won by pulling on the fickle heartstrings of American domestic moral sentiment and opinion is not something too many communists are eager to claim. Such a claim would almost vitiate all the sacrifices made on the battlefield, where, according to the strategy of people's war, the final test must come. Despite his praise for the US antiwar movement, General Giap emphasized to Stanley Karnow "that the 'decisive' arena was Vietnam itself, where communist success hinged on 'changing the balance of power in our favor.' " Indeed, communist General Tran Do told Karnow, "In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the south . . . . As for making an impact in the US, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result."[30] Truong Nhu Tang, a southerner who was a founding member of the National Liberation Front and the Justice Minister of the NLF's Provisional Revolutionary Government, doesn't even concede the "fortunate result." What Tet succeeded in doing, he points out, was to bring Richard Nixon, a far more formidable adversary than Lyndon Johnson, into the White House.[31]

For purposes of settling the question of intentions, the postmortem of Tet by Tran Van Tra, the leading southern general among the communist forces, is poignantly revealing:

> However, during Tet of 1968 we did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy . . . . In other words, we did not base ourselves on scientific calculation or a careful weighing of all factors, but in part on an illusion based on our subjective desires. For that reason, although that decision was wise, ingenious, and timely . . . , we suffered large sacrifices and losses . . . which clearly weakened us. Afterwards, we were not only unable to retain the gains we had made, but had to overcome a myriad of difficulties in 1969 and 1970 so that the resolution could stand firm in the storm . . . . If we had weighed and considered things meticulously, taken into consideration the balance of forces of the two sides . . . less blood would have been spilled . . . and the future development of the revolution would certainly have been far different.[32]

More than a battlefield loss, then, the Tet Offensive was a failure of strategy and politics as well. Even the official account of the war drops its overweening tone of euphoria in its narration of Tet and does not resume its pro forma optimism until the Easter invasion of 1972.[33] Truong Nhu Tang, more forthrightly, describes the period from the Tet Offensive to the Laotian cross-border operation of 1971 as one of hardship and of serious tensions between southern and northern communists. These tensions, he insists, could have been profitably exploited by Henry Kissinger had he the political perspicacity to see them.[34]

Thus, there was no Dienbienphu in the Tet Offensive. Even such an admirer of the communist cause as Gabriel Kolko concedes, "Never again was the Tet 1968 strategy repeated."[35] People's war, as a banner that had led the party through a generation of trials, was finished. Without it, the communists thrashed about in their jungles for two years without a strategy to guide them. Then hope trickled back as the glimmerings of another strategy began to emerge, an American one.

Success in Failure: Hanoi's American Strategy

Though it may have been *terra incognita* to the American public in the post-World War II years, Vietnam was no stranger to contingency planners in the Pentagon. As early as 1952 the Joint Chiefs of Staff mulled over the possibility of sending eight American combat divisions to Indochina's Red River delta to free French forces for offensive actions against the Viet Minh. With the withdrawal of the French and the partitioning of Viet Nam at the 17th parallel as a result of the Geneva Accords of 1954, a Korean War mindset settled in on the military planners of the 1950s. Assuming the North Vietnamese were bent on reunifying the country, they identified three invasion routes which could link up for a culminating assault on the capital city of Saigon: the first, and most direct, was a drive across the DMZ and down Highway One along the coast; the second passed through the Laotian panhandle and cut across the Central Highlands; and the third was a grand flanking movement originating in the northern Laotian mountains that would sweep down to the Mekong River and follow it to Saigon. To counter such a presumed strategy, American planners envisioned a three-staged operation of their own. The first involved securing coastal and inland bases to establish an infrastructure of logistical support. The second called for US forces to push inland and set up blocking positions astride these three invasion routes: the DMZ, the Central Highlands, and an arc around Saigon's northern and western approaches. The final stage was a counteroffensive of combined airborne, amphibious, and ground attacks into North Vietnam.[36]

With the coming of the Kennedy Administration in 1961, a concern for counterinsurgency began to play a role in military planning. Indeed, the

JCS had recognized the need to incorporate counterinsurgency capabilities into the South Vietnamese armed forces as early as March 1960.[37] The Kennedy era, however, ushered in a crew of enthusiasts for counterinsurgency strategy. Men like General Maxwell Taylor, Walt Rostow, and Roger Hilsman guaranteed that there would indeed be a debate with the more conventional planning of the military establishment. Michael Brown categorizes the debate as being between two schools who viewed the nature of the war according to diametrically opposite concepts: the war school and the insurgency school.[38]

It was this tug-of-war that caused such initial indecision in 1965 over how to deploy forces in the impending troop buildup. Nominally, the debate was between advocates of a cautious pacification/enclave strategy and those of a big-unit/aggressive strategy.[39] In fact, however, the military debate was overlaid by a welter of political concerns that were argued out in this period.[40] What emerged by July 1965 was a compromise strategy, here described by Westmoreland in his memoir:

> *Phase One*: Commit those American and Allied forces necessary "to halt the losing trend" by the end of 1965.
>
> *Phase Two*: "During the first half of 1966," take the offensive with American and Allied forces in "high priority areas" to destroy enemy forces and reinstitute pacification programs.
>
> *Phase Three*: If the enemy persisted, he might be defeated and his forces and base areas destroyed during a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase II.[41]

This seemingly innocuous strategy contained important ramifications. In the strategy of attrition, provision was made for the incorporation of "pacification programs." Indeed the PROVN study of the Army Staff, completed in March 1966, insisted that pacification be given top priority in the war. Although there was a variety of programs and missions undertaken under the rubric of pacification, when all was said and done Westmoreland's strategy reflected the conventional-war emphasis that Andrew Krepinevich convincingly argues is at the core of the US Army's ethos.[42] His strategy, furthermore, was little more than a reiteration of the first two stages of the three-staged operation envisioned by JCS planners in the 1950s to throw back a North Vietnamese invasion. It is obvious, at least from a military point of view, that the success of Westmoreland's strategy ultimately depended on the implementation of an unstated fourth phase, the third stage of the JCS contingency plan calling for airborne, amphibious, and ground attacks into North Vietnam.

Putting the story of the two strategies together (Washington's and Hanoi's), the Tet Offensive meant two things. For the communists it was the

end of people's war and, essentially, of any strategy built on guerrilla warfare. For the American command, with the refusal of the 206,000-troop request, it was the end of any possibility of a conventional military victory. Both sides, then, saw their strategies turn to ashes. For the Americans there was little else to do but to deescalate the war, turn it over to the Vietnamese, and find some palliative way to negotiate themselves home. For the communists, however, there remained, lying around still unused as a strategy, an acting out of the very conventional invasion that had animated the fears of the JCS planners of the 1950s.

Interestingly, Truong Nhu Tang cites the "incursion" into Cambodia by American forces in 1970 as the turning point of the war, rather than Tet. Although he concedes that the operation nearly succeeded in capturing COSVN headquarters intact and seriously disrupted operations in the south, it was "an enduring gift" because it decisively separated the American leadership from its domestic support.[43] The political uproar over Cambodia also ensured that there would be no unstated phase four to worry about from MACV. With a conventional victory for the Americans impossible, ARVN's debacle in its cross-border operation into Laos in February 1971 (Lam Son 719) proved to the communists that a conventional-war strategy was possible. Two of ARVN's best divisions, the 1st

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Dead Viet Cong, killed toward the end of "Mini-Tet" in June 1968, lie in a street in Cholon.

Division and the Airborne Division, were routed in their assault across the Ho Chi Minh Trail on Tchepone, Laos. Though there were no American ground troops involved, there was generous American air support for the ARVN forces, but the communists were successful despite it.

In the Easter invasion launched on 30 March 1972, the communists tried out their new strategy. They dubbed it the Nguyen Hue campaign, not even bothering to call it a popular uprising. This time the North Vietnamese unleashed practically everything they had: 14 divisions and 26 independent regiments (only a training division in Hanoi and two in Laos were held back). They also concentrated their forces for four major attacks: one across the DMZ, one on Hue, another across the Central Highlands, and a final one on Saigon. An attempt to bring the invasion to the Mekong Delta ended in failure.[44] After seizing all of Quang Tri Province just south of the DMZ and overrunning Loc Ninh north of Saigon, the invasion stalled. The communists' bid for Hue was turned back. ARVN successfully defended the Central Highland towns of Kontum and Pleiku. And the drive on Saigon was stopped at An Loc. Though US ground troops played little role in the Easter invasion, American air support was massive—and often decisive. On 15 September, South Vietnamese marines recaptured Quang Tri. With this the invasion was over, at a reported loss of 100,000 North Vietnamese killed.[45]

Plainly, the communists had not got their new strategy down right. General Giap and his staff made two strategic mistakes that were magnified by the tactical errors of their field commanders. Although this time Giap did nothing like Tet and scatter his forces to the four winds, he nevertheless failed to concentrate them into a single blow. Instead, he attacked on four fronts at staggered time intervals. Further, after overrunning Quang Tri he ordered a three-week pause. The effect of both these mistakes was to allow ARVN to regroup and consolidate its positions. Tactically, the North Vietnamese committed a variety of conventional blunders showing an inability to conduct combined-arms warfare, that is, they were unable to get armored, artillery, and infantry units to work together. On the ground, particularly in the Central Highlands, they often threw away an initial superiority by mounting desperate human-wave assaults that left their ranks depleted and forced them to retire from the field.[46]

In 1975, in their lightning 55-day Ho Chi Minh campaign, they got their strategy right. Though the communists were aided by disastrous mistakes of both strategy and tactics by the South Vietnamese and by the complete lack of US air support that had always provided hefty margins for error in the past for both Americans and South Vietnamese, it was an epic military campaign culminating in the triumphant seizure of Saigon on 30 April 1975.[47] This time the communists concentrated their forces for one overwhelming thrust across the Central Highlands, choosing, shrewdly, to

aim at the lightly defended provincial capital Ban Me Thuot. The town fell on 11 March, the day after it was attacked. On 13 March, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu convened a fateful meeting in which he contradictorily ordered the simultaneous withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum and the recapture of Ban Me Thuot. Ban Me Thuot was not recaptured and the withdrawal turned into a rout. Determined not to give ARVN forces any chances to recover and regroup, North Vietnamese forces now struck across the DMZ to link up with their comrades cutting across the Central Highlands. In a panic, Thieu ordered the Airborne Division south to Saigon just as the I Corps Commander was setting it up to anchor his defense of Hue. Shorn of this division and with the commander further confused by Thieu on whether to try to hold Hue and Danang, the north collapsed in chaos and panic. Hue fell on 28 March and Danang two days later. The link-up was now complete and the North Vietnamese steamroller inexorably advanced on Saigon, its tanks smashing through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon on 30 April.[48]

Thus, in losing a people's war, the communists went on to win the war itself. But in adopting a conventional war strategy, they won by a means that should have brought defeat. The United States, on the other hand, won a war it thought it lost, and lost by default what it could have prevented.

Conclusion: The Stolen Strategy

The Vietnam War has been over now for 13 years. But whatever else Americans have done with Vietnam, they have certainly not put it behind them. Everywhere in the Third World where the remotest prospect for American intervention in some local squabble looms, the ghost of Vietnam casts its shadow. "Lessons" of Vietnam are invoked to justify virtually any policy. With respect to the question in the Middle East over whether to permit the continued presence of US Marines in Lebanon, for example, Senator Charles Percy and Joseph Biden cited the "lessons" of Vietnam to justify opposite votes. People draw lessons from their memories, from a set of images that, in time, become highly selective. Some, with Ronald Reagan, remember Vietnam as a "noble crusade," while others in the antiwar community relive with Daniel Ellsberg his nightmare of the war as a heinous "crime."

The historian Ernest May, however, offers the reminder that historical lessons are properly drawn only from comparing one component of an event to a similar component in another event, not from applications of an entire event wholesale.[49] Even in victory there are things done wrong and stupidly, and in defeat there are yet deeds of intelligence and glowing success. Hence, the lessons from any conflict do not derive from the general outcome of success or failure, but from the constituent components of the

victory or defeat. The German blitzkrieg was not the origin of the German defeat in World War II, nor was people's war the strategy by which the Vietnamese communists came to power in 1975. These facts may make no difference to the Vietnamese and Germans of today, but they do to the Salvadoran guerrilla *commandante*, for example, who may think that history is on his side because he is following a people's war strategy which had "soundly defeated" the Americans in Vietnam a decade earlier.

For the sake of lessons, two points from this tale of two strategies emerge. First, it was not at the hands of a guerrilla strategy or people's war by which the United States and South Vietnam were beaten. This is not to say the Americans are to be commended, therefore, for being intelligent and wise. Despite their abandonment of people's war in the Tet Offensive, the communists did enjoy for the duration of the war one of the key benefits of this strategy, an intelligence superiority in the field. Truong Nhu Tang insisted in an interview with Al Santoli that communist units always had advance warning of major allied operations.[50] Consequently, US forces in the field were unable, most of the time, to fulfill the basic mission of the infantry, "to close with and destroy the enemy." Also, even had the United States intervened successfully in 1975, there is no assurance Hanoi would not have kept trying. Indeed, Hanoi's ability to fight the Cambodians in 1977 and 1978, take on the Chinese in sharp border battles in 1979, and continue to occupy Cambodia in the 1980s should refute any latent hopes that Hanoi would have fallen immediately to a "phase four" attack. What this does say, however, is that by switching to a conventional war strategy, the internal political issues that fueled the defeated people's war were left unresolved by both sides, not just by the Americans and South Vietnamese.

Second, the Vietnam War was a frustrating contradiction in that it was simultaneously a conventional war and a guerrilla insurgency. Compared to other insurgencies of the postwar era, then, it is more unique than it is general in its applications.[51] As such, it was not wrong for American military planners or for General Westmoreland to concentrate on the conventional challenge first. Larry Cable has pointed out that in Korea the United States faced both a conventional war and a guerrilla war but concentrated on the conventional war; the guerrilla war evaporated with the expulsion of the conventional North Korean army.[52] In Vietnam, the guerrillas largely disappeared after they rose to mount a conventional attack, and the war then had to be won by the communists in conventional, almost American, terms.

In concluding this discussion of strategy in Vietnam, we can agree with the venerable Chinese strategist Sun Tzu's dictum that "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."[53] To this eternal verity General Giap can legitimately add the postscript that it is doubly clever to steal it.

NOTES

1. Interview of North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. Cited in Russell Stetler, ed., *The Military Art of People's War: Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 331.

2. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 194, 213.

3. Though Giap's dream of a Dienbienphu is clear enough, Westmoreland never fleshed out what I have chosen to call his nightmare. Nevertheless, his preoccupation with a threat to Saigon emanating from a conventional overrunning of the north of South Vietnam is rife throughout his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*. His worries about the Central Highlands come out on pp. 144, 150, 156-58, 171, 178-79, 238-39, and 406. On p. 163 he forthrightly acknowledges his fear of the country being cut in two, and on p. 406 he notes that Giap in his writings had viewed the Central Highlands as the key to solving "the problem of South Vietnam." His concerns for the DMZ emerge on pp. 150, 164, 168, 196-201, and 350-51. His fears of a link-up are most clearly expressed when he talks of the coastal cities of Hue, Danang, and Qui Nhon, as on p. 167.

4. By far the most comprehensive and balanced account of the Tet Offensive is in Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

5. Neil Sheehan, et al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 617. See also Oberdorfer, p. 262; and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954-1975* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), p. 106.

6. Oberdorfer, dedication page; see also Turley, p. 108.

7. Oberdorfer, p. 332.

8. Robert S. Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam 1965-1971*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 219.

9. Sheehan, et al., p. 616.

10. Ibid., p. 620. Westmoreland writes that this request was not his idea, but Wheeler's. See Westmoreland, pp. 352-58.

11. *The Pentagon Papers*, the Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon, 1975), IV, 549.

12. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 201-02.

13. " 'The Decisive Hour': Two Directives for Tet," Joint United States Public Affairs Office, (hereinafter JUSPAO), *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes* (hereinafter VNDRN) Nos. 28-29 (April 1968), p. 4.

14. Turley, p. 99. Turley reports that the Lao Dong party had been led to believe that it had a popular support base of four million people in the south that would respond to its calls if only the communist troops could get around American forces.

15. Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 308.

16. *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, IV, 539.

17. Kolko, p. 328; and Hoang Ngoc Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69* (Washington: USACMH, 1981), pp. 103-04, 110.

18. "North Vietnam's Role in the South," JUSPAO, *VNDRN Nos. 36-37* (June 1968), pp. 1, 13. As the war progressed to its conclusion, these proportions became even more weighted with northerners.

19. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 527.

20. This "wondering" is noted by Turley, p. 113. In 1981 Stanley Karnow found persistent bitterness against northerners by southern communists over Tet. In an interview with Karnow in Saigon, one female commando in the offensive denounced it as a "grievous miscalculation" by Hanoi that "wantonly squandered the southern insurgent movement." See Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 545.

21. Obendorfer, p. 304.

22. The Inchon landings would seem to offer a perfect example of Van Tien Dung's "blossoming lotus" tactics of "attacking on the rear to collapse the front," a supposed innovation that the communist general introduced in the 1975 campaign. See Hung P. Nguyen, "Communist Offensive Strategy and the Defense of South Vietnam," *Parameters*, 14 (Winter 1984), 11.

23. Westmoreland, pp. 148, 153.

24. *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, IV, 550-55; and Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 242, 244.

25. The article was reprinted in the *Pentagon Papers*. See *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, IV, 586.

26. "The Viet-Nam Workers' Party's 1963 Decision to Escalate the War in the South," JUSPAO, *VNDRN No. 96* (July 1971), p. 40.

27. Turley, p. 105.

28. *The Anti-U.S. Resistance War for National Salvation 1954-1975: Military Events* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1980 [Joint Publication Research Service Reel No. 80968, 3 June 1982]), pp. 104-05.

29. "Let Us Be Grateful to Karl Marx and Follow the Path Traced by Him," JUSPAO, *VNDRN No. 52* (February 1969), p. 1. For a brief account of these recriminations, see Timothy J. Lomperis, *The War Everyone Lost—And Won: America's Interventions in Vietnam's Twin Struggles* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 152-54.

30. Karnow, pp. 523, 527.

31. Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), pp. 143-44.

32. Tran Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre*, Vol. 5: *Concluding the 30-Years War* (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe Publishing House, 1982 [JPRS Reel No. 82783, 2 February 1983]), pp. 35-36.

33. *Anti-U.S. Resistance War*, pp. 105-38.

34. Truong Nhu Tang, pp. 186-200, 213.

35. Kolko, p. 334.

36. Alexander S. Cochran, Jr., "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam, 1952-1965," *Parameters*, 14 (Summer 1984), 63-65. It is nothing more than this plan that Harry Summers contends would have turned the war around. See Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), esp. pp. 126-32.

37. George M. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 473.

38. Michael L. Brown, "Vietnam: Learning from the Debate," *Military Review*, 67 (February 1987), 49.

39. Cochran raises some legitimate questions as to whether there was such a dichotomous debate. Rather, he argues, the so-called debate over an enclave versus a big-unit war strategy was actually a discussion over refining pre-existing plans (p. 67).

40. On the military side alone, Jeffrey Clarke catalogs a debate among conventional war advocates, enclave defenders, Vietnamization and guerrilla war enthusiasts, and proponents of a beefed-up advisory and training effort. See his "On Strategy and the Vietnam War," *Parameters*, 16 (Winter 1986), 39-46.

41. Westmoreland, p. 142.

42. Krepinevich, pp. 180-82, 232-33.

43. Truong Nhu Tang, pp. 212-13.

44. For an account of the failed offensive in the Mekong delta, see Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington: USACMH, 1980), pp. 137-56.

45. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 198.

46. For a litany of these mistakes, see ibid., p. 199; and Ngo Quang Truong, pp. 158-60.

47. The official communist account of the campaign is by General Van Tien Dung in his *Our Great Spring Victory*, trans. John Spragens, Jr. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977). An American account that closely tracks Dung's narrative, and adds the political and diplomatic maneuvering to the military drama, is Frank Snepp's *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End* (New York: Random House, 1977). William E. Le Gro provides a terse blow-by-blow account of the military action in his *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington: USACMH, 1981).

48. An insightful analysis of communist strategy and tactics in their victorious campaign can be found in Hung P. Nguyen, "Communist Offensive Strategy and the Defense of South Vietnam," *Parameters*, 14 (Winter 1984), 3-19. The present writer, however, remains to be convinced that the communist campaign exemplified Tran Van Tra's "war of syntheses."

49. Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 127-41.

50. Al Santoli, "Why Viet Cong Flee," *Parade*, 11 July 1982, p. 5.

51. This point has been made by Samuel P. Huntington, among others, in Stanley Hoffman, Samuel P. Huntington, Richard N. Neustadt, and Thomas C. Schelling, "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security*, 6 (Summer 1981), 6-7.

52. Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 177-78. The basic point of Cable's book, however—and it is a prescient one—is that the US Army has failed to distinguish between *partisan* guerrillas (which are adjuncts to conventional forces) and *insurgent* guerrillas (which are internally supported forces in their own right). See esp. pp. 5-7.

53. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 77.