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## The Tet Offensive in Historical Perspective

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The Tet Offensive of 1968 was an extraordinary event. I can think of only one parallel case from any other war, and that case is not a close parallel.

The notion of a very large-scale surprise attack by a force that was substantially weaker than the armies it was attacking—heavily outnumbered and even more heavily outgunned overall, even if not in the particular locations where it was concentrating troops for a surprise attack—was extraordinary but not quite unprecedented. The German attack in the Battle of the Bulge, at the end of 1944, also fit that description. But there were significant differences.

The Germans could reasonably hope to achieve complete surprise. Their need to avoid use of radio, in order to preserve secrecy, was not a severe constraint because they could transmit information by written messages, face-to-face meetings, and landline telephone. There was a clear line separating the two sides in Europe, and so few people normally crossed it that something could be fairly widely known on one side but not known at all on the other. Northern Europe in December had very short days and very long nights, so the need to move troops at night, to avoid aerial observation, was less constraining than it normally would have been.

The Vietnamese Communist forces assigned to carry out the Tet Offensive were widely scattered. There was no good way other than radio to get orders and plans to all of them. In northern III Corps, radio was used, and the loss of surprise was disastrous for the Communist

forces. The Americans were listening, and paid attention to what they heard. This was part of the reason they were pretty well prepared for the offensive. In some areas west and southwest of Saigon, radio silence was kept, so there was no loss of surprise, but there were disastrous failures of coordination, because there was no adequate substitute for radio. Important people were unable to perform their assignments because they did not get word of their assignments until too late.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

In Vietnam there was no neat line separating Communist and anti-Communist forces. The forces of the two sides were interspersed, and considerable numbers of people regularly moved back and forth across the often vague line separating Communist from anti-Communist control. There were far more opportunities for information about what was being prepared in Communist zones to leak to the other side.

Finally, of course, Vietnam did not at any season have the very short days and long nights of northern Europe in December.

For all of these reasons, those planning the Tet Offensive could not rationally have had even a hope of attaining the degree of surprise that the Germans achieved in the Battle of the Bulge. They were very lucky to have gotten even the partial surprise they did get.

The Germans were pushed into the Battle of the Bulge by desperation. They were losing World War II, and losing it badly. In the absence of some dramatic change to the situation, they faced utter destruction within a matter of months. It therefore made a certain amount of sense to take a gamble, even one with poor odds of success, that might interrupt their downward trajectory if it somehow did succeed. They tried it, and failed, and less than five months later

there was no war in Europe because the German Army had ceased to exist. If instead of launching this supreme effort they had husbanded their resources and stayed on the defensive, this might have enabled them to last a month or so longer, but not more than that.

The situation of the Vietnamese Communists was not good in the period leading up to Tet, but it was not nearly so desperate as some American authors have claimed, not nearly so desperate as that of the Germans in 1944. The Germans had nothing to lose. The Vietnamese Communists could afford to lose. They took the gamble of the Tet Offensive, they suffered terrible casualties when it failed, and they had enough strength left, even after those casualties, to fight on to victory.

It was that persistence of very heavy combat for a long period after Tet that marked the biggest difference between Tet and the Battle of the Bulge. Many authors have failed to appreciate the determination of both sides. They often write as if the Communists, crippled by their losses, were forced to let the level of combat subside quickly after the initial burst of violence in January and February of 1968. General William Westmoreland wrote that “almost everywhere except on the outskirts of Saigon and in Hué the fighting was over in two or three days.”<sup>1</sup> George Herring’s hugely influential history of the war stated that “In Saigon, U.S. and ARVN forces held off the initial attacks and within several days cleared the city, inflicting huge casualties, taking large numbers of prisoners, and forcing the remnants to melt into the countryside. Elsewhere the result was much the same.... The NLF launched a second round of

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<sup>1</sup> General William Westmoreland, “A Military War of Attrition,” in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977), 68.

attacks on February 18, but these were confined largely to rocket and mortar barrages against U.S. and South Vietnamese military installations and steadily diminished in intensity.”<sup>2</sup>

Many authors also write as if the Americans, politically crippled either by the shock of the actual offensive or by exaggerated accounts in the American media, chose to dial down their own effort instead of launching a vigorous counter-offensive, to take advantage of enemy weakness. Of all the myths about the Tet Offensive, this is the one that has been repeated most often in very recent works. Mark Bowden’s best-selling book on the Battle of Hue, published last years, stated, "The Battle of Hue would be the bloodiest of the Vietnam War, and a turning point not just in that conflict, but in American history. When it was over, debate concerning the war in the United States was never again about winning, only about how to leave."<sup>3</sup> Tuong Vu and Pierre Asselin have made similar statements in books also published within the past two years.<sup>4</sup>

Both halves of this are false. The Communists’ losses in February 1968 were heavy, but they had, as I said before, strength to spare. What they still had left, at the end of February, was substantially greater than what MACV had credited them with in January on the eve of the offensive. And they continued to use that strength very aggressively, not withdrawing into their sanctuaries to regroup. They sustained abnormally heavy combat, killing abnormally large

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<sup>2</sup> George Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 237-239.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), unnumbered page just before p. 1. The same statement appeared again, in almost the same words, on p. 519.

<sup>4</sup> Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 294. Pierre Asselin quoted this passage, and endorsed it, in his book *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 164.

numbers of American troops each week, absolutely without interruption for twenty-one weeks, from late January to late June.

The cumulative casualties the Communists suffered in those twenty-one weeks were horrendous, and by late June they badly needed a respite, but they still had not been reduced to as low a level of strength as what MACV had said they had on the eve of Tet, in January, and they were able to resume heavy combat, for considerable periods, intermittently over the following year. In the whole of the Vietnam War, there were thirteen months in which more than a thousand Americans were killed by hostile action. Six of those thirteen months fell between July 1968 and June 1969.

The belief that President Johnson reacted to the Tet Offensive by abandoning the pursuit of victory in Vietnam, and de-escalating the American war effort, is also false, but for this error there is some excuse: Johnson deliberately tried to give an impression that was what he was doing, trying to make his policies look acceptable to the large number of American voters who were distressed by the war.

In his famous speech of March 31, 1968, in which he announced that he was not running for re-election, Johnson said he was going to try to achieve a negotiated settlement of the war. What he did not say was that the only settlement he would be willing to accept would be one in which the Communists conceded defeat, and abandoned their struggle for control of South Vietnam.

In that speech he also said that in an effort to improve the environment for negotiations, he was “taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict.” He said he was “reducing—substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities.” “Tonight I have ordered

our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy build-up directly threatens Allied forward positions and where the movement of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat.”

His reference to “the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy build-up directly threatens Allied forward positions” would have been reasonable if the area he was continuing to bomb had stretched ten, or twenty, or perhaps even fifty miles north of the Allies’ forward positions along the Demilitarized Zone. It was very misleading as a description of a policy under which bombing would be permitted up to a line more than two hundred miles from the northernmost Allied positions, a line much closer to Hanoi than to the Demilitarized Zone. When this deception was unmasked, Johnson was forced to shift the line southward to a point about halfway between Hanoi and the Demilitarized Zone, but even this left the area subject to bombing considerably broader than Johnson had implied it would be, in his speech.

Johnson’s statement about reducing the level of hostilities was flatly false. In his efforts to bludgeon the Communists into a peace settlement that would be acceptable to the United States, Johnson was increasing, not reducing, the level of violence. More troops on the ground, more planes, more tons of bombs per month.

In regard to troops: There had been 498,000 US military personnel in Vietnam at the time the Tet Offensive hit, at the end of January. There were 515,000 by the time Johnson gave his speech, two months later. There would be 538,000 four months after his speech.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds., *The Air War in Indochina*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 269.

They were fighting hard, and Johnson was urging them on. Even in the autumn, after General Creighton Abrams had replaced Westmoreland as US commander in Vietnam, Johnson's orders to Abrams were "follow the enemy in relentless pursuit. Don't give them a minute's rest. Keep pouring it on. Let the enemy feel the weight of everything you've got."<sup>6</sup>

In regard to the air war: Johnson had limited American bombing of North Vietnam to its southern region, often called the "panhandle," but this had already been the main focus of Operation Rolling Thunder. And after his speech he poured more tons of bombs per month into that area than had previously fallen on the whole of North Vietnam. He also escalated his bombing of South Vietnam, and of Laos. For Indochina as a whole, the heaviest bomb tonnage the United States had ever dropped in a single month before the Tet Offensive had been 83,000 tons. For March 1968, the month leading up to Johnson's speech, the figure was 97,000 tons. It was over 110,000 tons in each of the next five months, from April through August.<sup>7</sup>

Each side was pushing very hard, believing that the other side would be unable to endure the pressure. Each side had reasonable grounds for hope. Most countries would have buckled under considerably less pressure than what the Americans were placing on the Vietnamese Communists.

In 1946, as it became apparently that Ho Chi Minh's efforts to negotiate a compromise with France were failing, Ho had commented to a French official that in the war that was starting, the French would kill ten Vietnamese for every one Frenchman the Vietnamese

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<sup>6</sup> President Johnson to General Abrams, October 29, 1968, quoted in Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics furnished by the Department of Defense to the House Committee on Armed Services, December 11, 1973, published in *Statement of Information, Book XI, Bombing of Cambodia* (House Judiciary Committee, 1974), 93-94, 101.

manage to kill, and that the French would get tired of it first.<sup>8</sup> A similar logic applied to the Vietnamese Communists' struggle with the United States in the 1960s. Not many countries have a leader strong enough and determined enough to keep his forces committed to a war under such unfavorable odds, and nobody at the upper levels of the US government knew enough about Le Duan to be in a position to say that he was that determined, and had that much power.

It is hard to tell whether Le Duan was actually as optimistic as he claimed to be, on the eve of the Tet Offensive, about his ability to break the will either of the Republic of Vietnam or of the United States. But at the end of a year and a half of heavy combat, from the beginning of 1968 through mid-1969, he finally did break the will of the United States. The first significant reductions in the number of American military personnel in Vietnam, and in the total monthly bomb tonnage, were in August 1969.

Le Duan could reasonably have expected to find the American breaking point faster than that. Americans often write as if the limited war the United States fought in Vietnam was some sort of anomaly, but no other country in history has fought half as hard, in a war so far from home and in which there was so little to gain from a victory, as the United States did in Vietnam. Compare the Vietnam War with the Soviet war in Afghanistan a few years later. Afghanistan directly bordered on the Soviet Union. It was much more important to Soviet security than Vietnam ever was to American security. But the Soviet Union was not willing to send even half as many troops to Afghanistan as the United States did to Vietnam, and it did not show even a tenth the Americans' willingness to risk international repercussions by

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Sainteny, *Face à Ho Chi Minh* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p. 108.

attacking the sanctuaries in neighboring countries used by its enemies. We should ask not why the Americans did not fight longer and harder than they did in Vietnam, but why they fought as long and as hard as they did.