12 The myths of the Tet Offensive

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At the beginning of 1968, both Communist and anti-Communist forces in Vietnam announced plans for a brief cease-fire, to allow celebration of the Vietnamese new year holiday, Tet. But on January 30 and 31, instead of a cease-fire, there was a wave of attacks by Communist forces, which came to be called the "Tet Offensive." The months that followed saw the most intense and bloody combat of the Vietnam War.

Most authors now agree that the Tet Offensive was militarily a defeat for the Communist forces, but politically a victory for them, because it undermined support for the war in the United States. So stated, the conventional wisdom is well-founded. But as soon as one goes beyond that very brief summary, one finds that the issues are hotly debated, and that much of what has been written is astonishingly inaccurate.

Most authors who discuss the Tet Offensive make some or all of the following points:

- The offensive the Communists launched at the end of January 1968 was a well-coordinated wave of simultaneous attacks, throughout South Vietnam.
- It was a relatively brief episode. The Communist forces were able to raise the intensity of combat to extraordinary levels, but not to sustain such intense combat for long.
- The Tet Offensive was not just a defeat for the Communist forces, but a huge disaster, leaving them militarily crippled.
- In particular, the Viet Cong—the South Vietnamese Communist forces—were essentially destroyed in the offensive. From this point onward, northerners—troops of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), often referred to by Americans as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)—were the only serious military force on the Communist side in the war.
- The Communist political and administrative organizations in South Vietnam that the Americans often called the "Infrastructure" were essentially destroyed in the Tet Offensive.
- The number of Americans who died, in the process of inflicting this huge defeat on the Communists, was 2,000 or less.

- The American media not only failed to notice a huge American military victory achieved at little cost in American casualties, but portrayed it as the opposite—an American military defeat.

Every one of these points is a myth. The Communist attacks were not simultaneous or well coordinated. The defeat the Communists suffered, while serious, was not as devastating as is often claimed. The cost in American casualties was considerably higher than is claimed, and it stayed high for a very long time; the period of unusually intense combat that began in late January 1968 lasted not for a few weeks, but for many months. And the American media, even faced with a reality much more distressing than the cheap and overwhelming American victory portrayed in the myths, did not overreact and conclude that the United States had been militarily defeated.

Even more extreme falsehoods circulate on the internet, and are widely believed.

Strength estimates and casualty levels: the Tet Offensive in context

What was happening in Vietnam was, to a large extent, a war of attrition. The United States was hoping to win the war by inflicting on the Communist forces a level of casualties that they would be unable to endure. Estimates of enemy strength were crucial to any evaluation of American success or failure.

Intelligence officers in Vietnam compiled, and regularly updated, an "Order of Battle" of the enemy's forces, an estimate of what forces the Communists had in and near South Vietnam. On August 15, 1967, Brigadier General Phillip Davidson, the chief of intelligence (J-2) for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), issued a directive that in the Order of Battle estimates, "The figure of combat strength and particularly of guerrillas must take a steady and significant downward trend as I am convinced this reflects true enemy status."[1]

In November 1967, the US military released to the press, with considerable publicity, Order of Battle estimates showing that the Communist force in South Vietnam was shrinking. The number of troops in the Communists' regular combat units was said to have peaked in September 1966, at about 127,000, and declined since then to about 118,000. Communist military forces more broadly defined, including not only the regular combat units but also guerrillas and what the Americans called "administrative services" (military staff, medical corps, supply and transportation units, etc.) were currently estimated at a total of 223,000 to 248,000 according to the briefing. This was said to represent a decline from a level of about 285,000 in the period July–September 1966. The numbers in the briefing were reasonably close to those in the classified intelligence estimate, more detailed and precise, of which the briefing should have been a summary. The classified estimate showed regular combat forces declining from a peak of 127,200 in September 1966, down to 116,552 in October 1967; guerrillas declining much more dramatically from a peak of 126,200 in December 1966, down to 81,300;

and Communist military forces overall, as defined above, declining from a peak of 286,700 in October 1966, down to 235,852.[2]

[*Please note: in the paragraph above, and throughout this paper, Communist military forces are defined by the relatively narrow criteria used by U.S. military intelligence in Vietnam from late 1967 onward. The Viet Cong Infrastructure, and the Viet Cong village militia, are not included in the Communist military forces. Estimates for earlier periods are retrospective: they are statements issued by U.S. military intelligence after the narrowing of the criteria, of what the size of Communist military forces, as defined under the new narrow criteria, was believed to have been at various dates in the past*.]

The Order of Battle Summary was updated on the last day of every month. The update issued 31 January, 1968, represented the final word in pre-Tet estimates. It showed regular combat forces 115,016 (down 1.3% from the previous October); administrative service 37,725 (down 0.7%); and guerrillas 72,605 (down 10.7 %), for an overall total of 225,346 (down 4.5% from October 1967, and 21% from the October 1966 peak). Of these men, 55,744 were serving in PAVN units, 10,000 to 12,000 were North Vietnamese serving in Viet Cong units, and the remainder—about 159,000—were actual southerners serving in Viet Cong units. About 48,000 of the men in the regular combat units were southerners.[3]

American officers told the press and public that the Communist forces were not just losing manpower but losing their strategic position, losing the ability to operate in large areas of South Vietnam. General William Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), gave a major speech at the National Press Club in Washington on November 21, 1967:

> It is significant that the enemy has not won a major battle in more than a year. In general, he can fight his large forces only at the edges of his sanctuaries, as we have seen recently at Con Thien and along the DMZ, at Dak To opposite the Laotian border, at Song Be and Loc Ninh near the Cambodian border. His Vietcong military units can no longer fill their ranks from the South, but must depend increasingly on replacements from North Vietnam. His guerrilla force is declining at a steady rate. Morale problems are developing within his ranks . . . the enemy's hopes are bankrupt.[4]

General Bruce Palmer, deputy commander of U.S. Army, Vietnam, told a reporter, "The Viet Cong has been defeated from Da Nang all the way down in the populated areas. He can't get food and he can't recruit. He has been forced to change his strategy from trying to control the people on the coast to trying to survive in the mountains."[5] The MACV Office of Information distributed to the press a summary of the year 1967, titled *1967 Wrap-Up: A Year of Progress*. The first paragraph stated that during that year,

> Enemy military personnel left their units and joined the government's cause in greater numbers than ever before. More enemy were killed than ever before. By year's end, enemy military strength was at the lowest level since

late 1965 or early 1966. And about 30 percent of his maneuver battalions were considered not combat effective.[6]

The notion that Communist strength had peaked in 1966, and had been declining since then, did not fit very well with changes in the intensity of combat, as measured in American casualties (Fig. 12.1).

On average, 417 Americans per month had been killed by hostile action in 1966. There had been random fluctuations from month to month, but not much of an upward or downward trend during that year. Early in 1967, there was a dramatic jump in casualties, but casualties then stabilized, at a rate not quite twice the average for 1966. The average number of Americans killed by hostile action during 1967 was 781.5 per month. There were random fluctuations, but no conspicuous overall trend after the big rise at the beginning of the year. The numbers for the last four months of the year—775, 733, 881, and 774—were all reasonably close to the average for the year. There had been only one month, May 1967, when the number of Americans killed by hostile action had been more than 1,000 (see Figure 12.1).

The officers who made the big public relations drive of late 1967, claiming that the enemy had been significantly weakened, did not explain why the rate at which the enemy was killing American troops in combat was substantially higher than it had been in 1966, when enemy strength had supposedly been at its maximum. And the level of combat was about to increase much more.

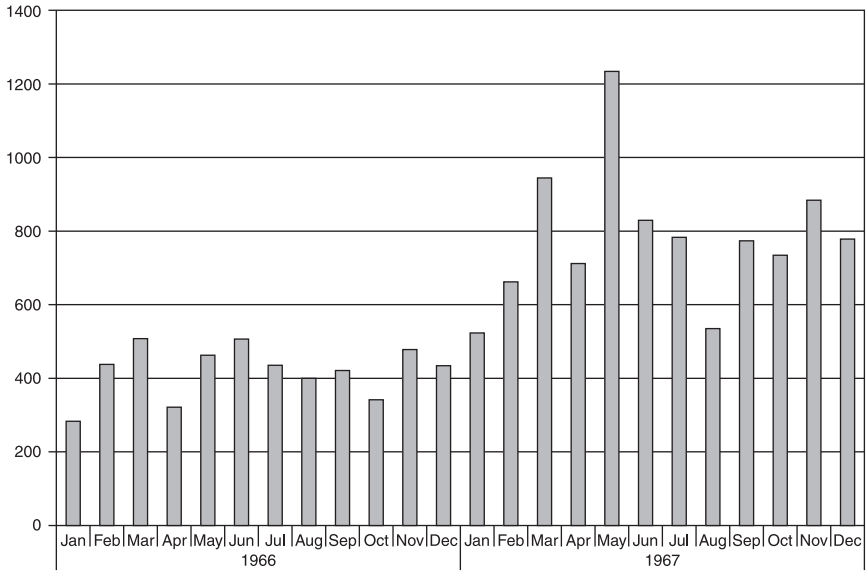

Figure 12.1 Americans killed by hostile action, by month, 1966–1967.[7]

Tet and its aftermath

PAVN forces began serious shelling of Khe Sanh, near the northwest corner of South Vietnam, on the night of January 20–21, 1968. This was intended to draw the attention of the Americans out to this remote area, and thus open the way for the Tet Offensive to hit towns and cities in more populated areas of South Vietnam. Those attacks were supposed to hit simultaneously, by surprise, in the early hours (before dawn) of January 31. They have often been described as having been well coordinated. Historian Gerald DeGroot's recent account is typical of many: "84,000 soldiers attacked at midnight on January 31, hitting thirty-six provincial capitals, sixty-four district capitals, and a number of military bases." Douglas Pike was so impressed as to write that only General Vo Nguyen Giap, "one of the best tactical commanders of the 20th century . . . meticulous in his planning . . . could have supervised the elaborate synchronization" of the Tet offensive.[8]

In reality, gross failures of synchronization caused the Tet Offensive to begin gradually, over a space of several days. Danang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, and some other locations were hit one day ahead of schedule, on January 30. This seriously compromised the ability of units that attacked Saigon and many other towns and cities on schedule, on January 31, to achieve surprise. There was still less surprise in places where the attacks were not launched until February 1. In II Corps, these included Dalat; in III Corps they included Phu Cuong, Ba Ria (capitals of Binh Duong and Phuoc Tuy provinces, respectively), Cu Chi, and Xuan Loc. In IV Corps, Go Cong, capital of Go Cong province, was mortared on January 31, but not hit by ground attack until February 5.[9] And even some places that were hit on schedule were not hit by all the scheduled forces. One reason so few Americans were killed in the famous January 31 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was that, of the two units that were supposed to make the attack, only the smaller one ever actually arrived at the Embassy.[10]

The impact of the Tet Offensive in the last days of January lifted the American death toll for that month to 1,202. This was only the second time during the war that more than 1,000 Americans had been killed in action in a single month. In February, with the offensive in full swing, the total was a shocking 2,124.

Most authors treat the Tet Offensive as having ended no later than the end of February, and give the impression that this meant the level of combat had subsided. Senator John McCain, in a recent book, gave a fairly common view: "The battle for Saigon ended in a few days in a devastating defeat for the enemy, as did most of the fighting in the Tet Offensive. Only at Hue, the old imperial capital and the only city captured in the offensive, and at Khe Sanh did major operations continue longer than a week." General William Westmoreland has claimed that "almost everywhere except on the outskirts of Saigon and in Hué the fighting was over in two or three days."[11] Brigadier General Winant Sidle, head of MACV's Office of Information, was a key figure in pushing MACV's claims about enemy weakness. Long afterward, he wrote that "the offensive was over by February 5 as far as the country-wide effort was concerned . . . But the media reports gave the impression that the offensive was still going strong long after February 4. It was as if reporters

either just didn't want to let go of the story or simply could not believe in the quick military defeat of the offensive."[12] But the figures for American casualties show something quite different: 21 weeks (January 28 to June 22) of *continuously* heavy combat (Fig. 12.2). In every one of those 21 weeks, the number of Americans killed in battle was well above the pre-Tet average. In two-thirds of those weeks, the number was higher than it had ever been in *any* week before the Tet Offensive.

Perhaps even more interesting is the pattern of variation within that period of heavy combat. The worst eight weeks, in which the numbers of Americans killed in combat were the largest, fell neatly into two groups: the four weeks from February 11 to March 9, and the four weeks from May 5 to June 1. The week during which the Tet Offensive began, and the week after that, should, according to the common image of the offensive, have been the two bloodiest weeks for American forces. The official figures show them as the ninth and tenth bloodiest weeks, though it should be noted that peculiarities in the way the U.S. government handled the dates made the official figure for the first week unrealistically low.[13]

There are two probable explanations why American casualties were not higher in the opening days of the Tet Offensive. One was that the Communist forces simply may not have been fighting very well. Many units had not been given time to plan their attacks properly, and the offensive took many of them into areas with which they were not very familiar. Under those circumstances, they would have been more likely to suffer casualties than to inflict them.

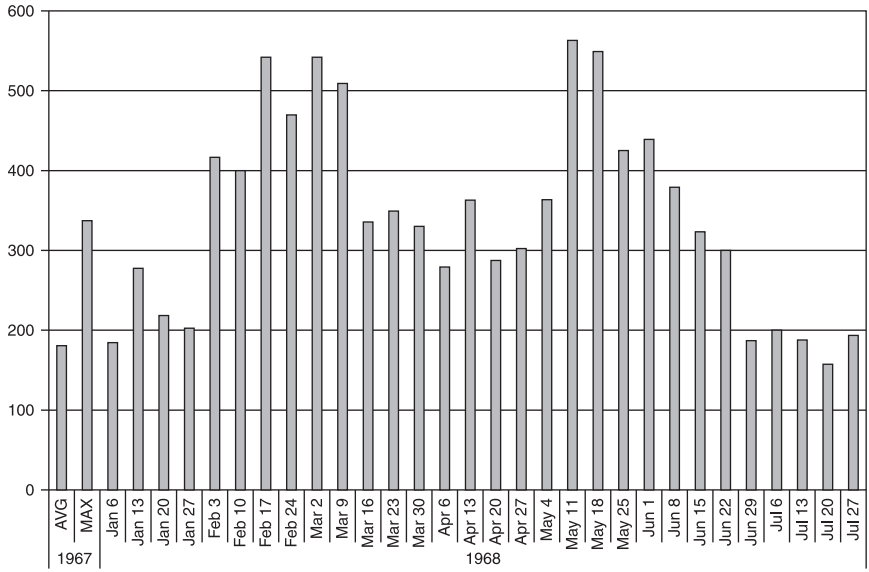

Figure 12.2 Americans killed by hostile action, weeks ending on specified dates.[14]

Map 10 Tet Offensive.

The other was that the Communist plan for many areas (Khe Sanh being the biggest exception) had been to send units dodging past major American forces, to make surprise attacks against towns, cities, and facilities in areas guarded mainly by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Not all units were in positions from which it was practical to carry out such a maneuver, and the ones that did carry it out were fighting more against the ARVN than against the Americans during the days that immediately followed. (This is why ARVN casualties peaked more dramatically in January and February than U.S. casualties did—see below.) In later weeks, the Communists were able to get units into the fight that had not been in a position to join in the surprise attacks scheduled for January 31, and the Americans were able to get units into the fight that had been bypassed on January 31, so the numbers of American and Communist troops in direct combat with one another were larger.

Rational policy for the Communists would have been to pull back when the offensive did not cause a collapse of the ARVN. But instead, when the Communist leaders at the headquarters the Americans called the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) met on February 21, they exaggerated the weakness and vulnerability of the ARVN, and decided to keep up the pressure to cause its collapse.

> The puppet army has continued to deteriorate spiritually and physically. The puppet government has continued toward collapse. These [victories] have disrupted the U.S.-conspiracy of stabilizing the puppet army and puppet government. There is also a discernable deterioration of troop morale and combat effectiveness among the U.S. forces . . . .
>
> Nevertheless, we continued to display many shortcomings, which we must make maximum efforts to correct . . . .
>
> This is see-saw fighting, and we must at this time continue to carry out our sieges and offensive against cities and towns and simultaneously liberate the rural area completely. If we fail to carry out continuous attacks the enemy will be able to expand his offensive over the rural areas. Again, if we fail to liberate the rural area we will not be able to besiege and press the enemy in the cities and towns . . . .
>
> The primary requirement at the present time is the destruction of enemy manpower and war facilities. Our attacks should serve the primary objective, which is to destroy and disintegrate the entire puppet army and government. Consequently, proper objectives for each attack must be selected so as to destroy the self-defense corps, civil guard and puppet police units . . . preparations should be made to repulse enemy counter attacks in the implementation of sieges or attacks by fire. Such circumstances should be considered as favorable conditions to annihilate enemy troops when they are not protected by fortifications. We should also attack the mobile elements of the puppet regular forces so as to destroy puppet divisions and regiments.
>
> In regard to towns and cities, it is advisable not to conduct large-scale attacks in the immediate future because the enemy defense therein has been strengthened recently. But we must set up positions to besiege cities and

> towns. We should also use special action teams, sapper/guerrilla units, and artillery shellings to harass the enemy every night so as to keep him under constant stress. It would be absolutely to our disadvantage to cease the fire-fight completely in cities and towns . . . In respect to district seats and province capitals, eighty per cent of them should be destroyed by concentrated attacks whenever and wherever conditions permit. If such favorable conditions are not available, besiege them with small-scale attacks, using similar tactics for major cities.[15]

Up to this time, the Tet Offensive had been a military defeat for the Communists. The sort of unfounded optimism reflected in the February 21 COSVN directive kept the Communist forces pushing for an unattainable victory for months afterward, and turned military defeat into military disaster.[16] But keeping the pressure on did keep U.S. casualty levels high. During the two weeks from February 25 to March 9, as Communist forces pushed the battle in line with the February 21 directive, U.S. government figures showed 1,051 Americans killed in action—more than in any previous two-week period of the war, including even the earlier weeks of the Tet Offensive.

It is bizarre then to see some authors write as if the combat subsided at this point. Two of the most important books on the Tet Offensive interpret COSVN's February 21 decision as an abandonment of large-scale combat. "The Standing Committee of COSVN and the Military Affairs Committee of the People's Liberation Armed Forces met again on February 21. The decision was to disengage from advanced and risky positions near the cities and reduce the level of attacks to small unit encounters or harassment by fire . . . The decision recognized the realities and amounted to a lowering of the sights." "On February 21, COSVN ordered a pullback of the battered battalions still fighting close to the cities, and a switch to war on the cheap—harassing mortar and rocket fire and sapper raids. (Ironically, these last orders were issued just as MACV officers gave their most pessimistic briefings, and the spirits of newsmen in Saigon, still-embattled Hue, and encircled Khe Sanh were at their lowest ebb)."[17]

Placing the Tet Offensive in a broader context is easier if we look at American casualties by month rather than by week (Fig. 12.3). The number of Americans killed in action in February, 2,124, was far larger than in any previous month of the war. The number was lower in March than in February, but still higher than it had ever been in any month before the Tet Offensive. The same was true for April. The death toll for May was 2,169—the highest for any month of the war, higher even than that for February. The name "Mini-Tet" often used for the May fighting is in surreal contrast to its bloody reality.

Not until July did the American monthly death toll sink below 1,000. Not until October did it sink below the average level of the year 1967. In the last months of 1968 it stayed a bit below the average level for 1967, but then it rebounded. Four months in 1969 saw monthly death tolls above 1,000.

January 1968 was the beginning of a period of heavy combat that lasted not for a few weeks but for eighteen months. The number of Americans killed in action

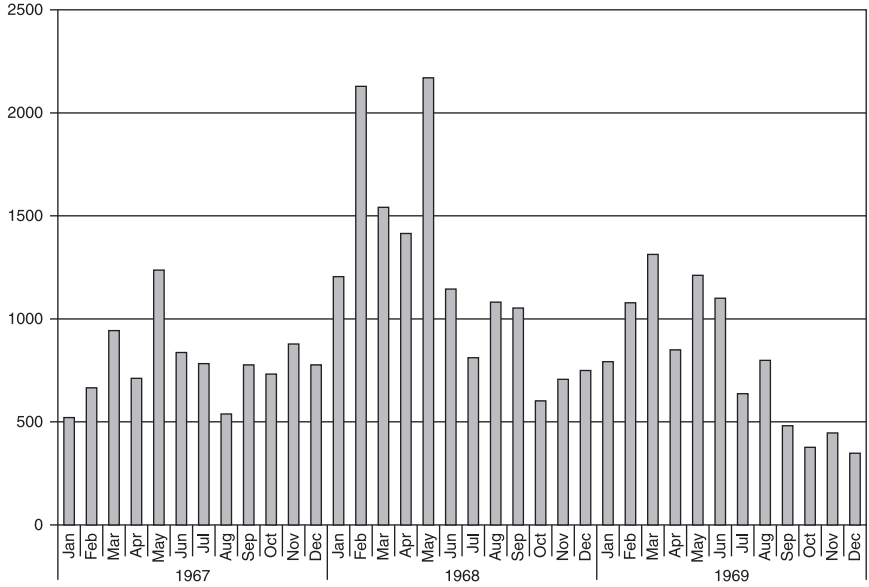

Figure 12.3 Americans killed by hostile action, by month, 1967–1969.[18]

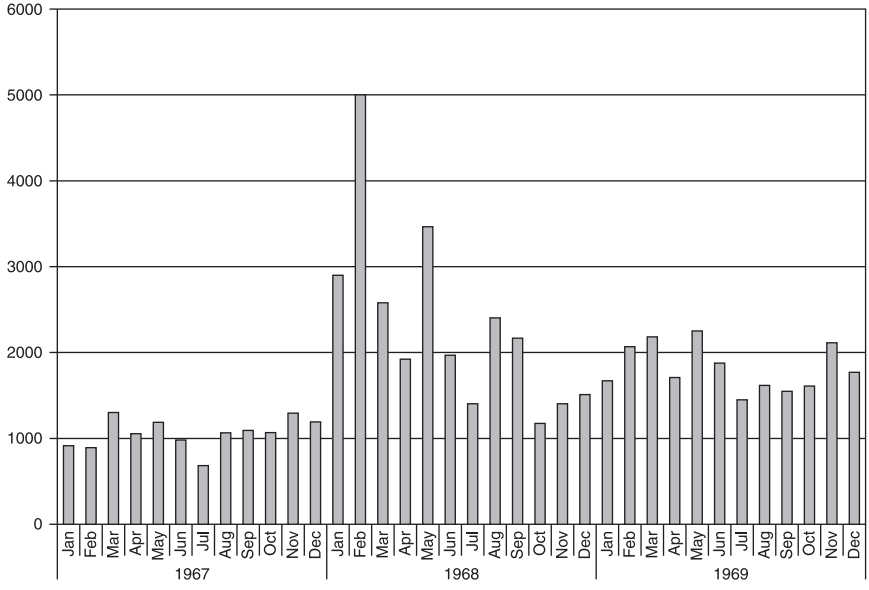

Figure 12.4 RVN personnel killed by hostile action, by month, 1967–1969.[19]

was above 1,000 in twelve of those eighteen months; it had been above 1,000 in only a single month before January 1968 (Fig. 12.3). Only in *September 1969* did the number of Americans killed in action finally sink to a level—477—that would have been conspicuously low by pre-Tet standards, suggesting that the Communist forces might finally have run out of steam. And even that is questionable.

Figure 12.4 shows U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) figures for Republic of Vietnam (RVN) combat deaths by month. These are not as reliable as the figures for U.S. deaths, but they probably are reasonably accurate. Comparison of these figures with those of Thomas C. Thayer, who did an important analysis, while working for the Department of Defense during the war, of the errors in U.S. figures for RVN casualties,[20] suggests:

(1) The DoD figures used in Figure 12.4 were not compiled until after the U.S. government had corrected the serious misunderstandings that previously had led it to underestimate RVN casualties.
(2) The DoD figures are quite comprehensive, including combat deaths not just for the RVN's regular armed forces, but also for other organizations: definitely the Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF), probably the Revolutionary Development (later called Rural Development) cadres, and perhaps the National Police.

What the DoD figures for RVN casualties show is that February 1968 was the worst month for RVN deaths, by a significant margin. In this regard these figures are a bit closer than the figures for American deaths to fitting the stereotype of the Tet Offensive as a relatively brief period of intense fighting that the Communists could not sustain. But in other ways these figures contradict the stereotype even more sharply. They show casualty levels remaining well above pre-Tet levels much longer after Tet for RVN forces than they did for U.S. forces.

The largest number of RVN personnel killed in action in any month of 1966 or 1967, according to the DoD figures, had been 1,359 in February 1966. The number was larger than this in every month but one of 1968; in every month without exception of both 1969 and 1970; and in most months of 1971.[21] It would seem that even the drop in U.S. deaths late in 1969 may not really have meant that the Communist forces were running out of steam, only that Vietnamization was throwing the burden of combat onto the RVN.

Interpreting the Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive posed a problem for the people who had been arguing that the Communist forces in South Vietnam had been declining in strength during 1967, and losing the war. But they were able to find an interpretation of the offensive that was consistent with this picture of enemy weakness. The model they used was the Battle of the Bulge in 1944.

By December 1944, Germany was unmistakably losing World War II. But German forces were able to concentrate a substantial force, and make a major counter-attack. With the advantage of surprise, they were able to cut deep into American lines, and inflict heavy casualties on the Americans. December 1944 was the bloodiest month of World War II for the American forces in Europe. But the German drive was quickly brought to a halt, well short of its objectives. The Germans simply did not have the forces or the supplies to keep their offensive going, and the losses they suffered in it left them even more vulnerable than they already had been to Allied offensives. Five months after the Battle of the Bulge began, there was no war in Europe because the German army no longer existed.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Earle Wheeler may have been the first to compare Tet to the Battle of the Bulge, speaking hypothetically in December 1967 about an enemy offensive that still lay in the future. He wanted to warn the public that there might be heavy fighting to come, without undermining his argument that the enemy was weakening and the war being won. He said that the Communist forces should be given "credit for waging a very skillful delaying action" but that they had "not scored a significant military success for at least eighteen months," and they were paying a high cost for what they were doing. But he warned that the North Vietnamese were "not yet at the end of their military rope" and that "it is entirely possible that there may be a communist thrust similar to the desperate effort of the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II." General Westmoreland told the Associated Press on February 25, 1968, "I liken the recent Tet truce offensive by the leadership in Hanoi to the Battle of the Bulge in World War II." On February 28, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow sent President Johnson a memo, written by Henry Owen, head of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, in which Owen wrote that the television coverage of the Tet Offensive reminded him of how in three past American wars, "the losing side threw everything it had into one last all-out offensive." The Battle of the Bulge was one of his cases. He concluded, "there may be a law of human nature that comes into play toward the end of wars, and which . . . prompts the losing side to take large risks and losses in a last offensive (or, more usually, a wave of successive offensives) just before its collapse." Retired General Bruce Clarke, after a brief tour of South Vietnam, wrote, "I like to think that a lot of his [General Vo Nguyen Giap's] thinking was like Hitler in the Battle of the Bulge. This was a final desperate effort. People say I am too optimistic. I don't think so."[22]

Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote in his memoirs, "From a purely military point of view, it reminded me of Germany's Battle of the Bulge in World War II—a last-ditch offensive. North Vietnamese strategists committed all their available manpower, apparently hoping that their offensive would spark a general uprising among the South Vietnamese people, but this did not occur . . ."[23] General Davidson, who had been MACV's chief of intelligence, wrote: "We knew that in 1967 the Communists were losing the war in both South and North Vietnam. But it is only from reports that have recently become available that historians realize the disastrous extent of those losses. Like Hitler at the Battle of the Bulge . . .

desperation forced the North Vietnamese to take an action of major risk." Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor even exaggerated the losses the German suffered in the Battle of the Bulge, when comparing the Tet offensive to it: "Just as Hitler had lost the last of his combat-worthy divisions in the Ardennes, Ho Chi Minh lost the flower of his forces in the Tet offensive and the subsequent operations of 1968."[24]

Journalists and academics have made similar statements. William S. White published a column in the *Washington Post* titled "Red Gains in Viet Cities Like Last Nazi Spasm at The Bulge." More recently, Professor Peter C. Rollins wrote, "Johnson, Rostow, the Joint Chiefs, Westmoreland all saw Tet—correctly—as a Battle of the Bulge effort, a sign of desperation rather than strength."[25]

Many others have presented a similar idea without specifically mentioning the Battle of the Bulge. Thus Senator John Tower, a prominent member of the Armed Services Committee, decided immediately after the Tet Offensive began that it was the "death rattle" of the Viet Cong.[26]

The problem with this comparison is that the Communists did not collapse after the failure of the Tet Offensive. One has only to look at the actual combat performance of the Communist forces after Tet, as measured by U.S. casualty levels, to recognize the notion that Tet had been the Communists' "last" or "final" effort as preposterous nonsense. The supporters of the model have been surprisingly successful in obscuring this reality. They have created an alternate history in which the Viet Cong, the main Communist force in the Tet Offensive, did essentially collapse by the end of that offensive. They have taken an important truth—the Viet Cong really were very seriously weakened by 1969, leaving the war to be fought mainly by North Vietnamese—and altered it in two major ways. First, exaggerate the outcome by changing very seriously weakened to essentially destroyed. Second, compress the time frame to have this outcome achieved in 1968, and in most versions, very early in 1968.

Communist losses

What did US intelligence estimates indicate about Communist force strength after Tet? The October 1968 update of the Order of Battle Summary showed total Communist military personnel strength at 251,455. Of these, 86,584 men were in PAVN units, 13,000 to 16,000 were North Vietnamese serving in Viet Cong units, and the remainder—about 150,000—were actual southerners serving in Viet Cong units. Out of this total, the regular combat units had a strength of 138,359, of whom about 39,000 were actual southerners according to the estimate.[27] This was substantially more total personnel than had appeared in the Order of Battle Summary issued January 31, just as the Tet offensive was beginning, and almost as many southerners (see above).

Something is obviously wrong somewhere. For the Communist forces to have been substantially larger in October 1968 than in January is hard to reconcile with the level of casualties they had been suffering during the interim. But it does not seem likely that U.S. intelligence was seriously overestimating Communist

strength in October. For one thing, this would not have been consistent with the pattern of political pressures within U.S. intelligence. For another, the October estimates seem consistent with the actual combat strength of the Communist forces, as measured by U.S. and RVN casualty levels, from that point through the middle of 1969. It is the lower estimates in the January Order of Battle Summary that are open to serious doubt. By October, indeed, the office responsible for the Order of Battle estimates was admitting that its January estimate had undercounted Communist military personnel by about 24,000.[28] The true degree of the undercounting may have been much greater than was admitted.

It seems reasonable, then, to accept the October estimates as a roughly valid reflection of actual Communist force strengths at that time. By these estimates, Viet Cong personnel—actual southerners, not including the thousands of North Vietnamese who by this time were serving as "fillers" in Viet Cong units—still made up somewhat more than a quarter of the personnel in the regular combat units, and more than half of the Communist military forces more broadly defined. They also presumably would have made up an overwhelming majority of the Infrastructure. In the very important area southwest of Saigon, the Viet Cong were still doing almost all the fighting against the U.S. Army's 9th Division in late 1968, because no substantial North Vietnamese forces had yet arrived in that area.[29] By the beginning of 1973, U.S. estimates showed the Viet Cong had been further reduced, to about one-sixth of the Communists" combat troops in South Vietnam. This still was not a negligible fraction.[30]

To claim that the Viet Cong were essentially destroyed by late 1968 would be, then, a serious exaggeration. To claim that they were essentially destroyed *in the Tet Offensive* is much more misleading, since most authors treat the Tet Offensive as having ended quite early in 1968. But such statements are extremely common, especially from senior military men. U.S. Army Chief of Staff Frederick C. Weyand put into two different Army publications a statement that "the real losers of Tet-68 were the South Vietnamese Communists (the Viet Cong or PRG) who surfaced, led the attacks, and were destroyed in the process . . . the North Vietnamese eliminated their southern competitors with Tet-68." General H. Norman Schwarzkopf: "The Vietcong was virtually wiped out during the Tet Offensive of 1968." Senator (and former Navy Captain) John McCain: "Tet had been a calamitous failure for the enemy. The Viet Cong were never again a serious factor in the war. There were too few left alive to present much of a threat to anyone. Henceforth, the NVA alone would continue the struggle." General David T. Zabecki: "Militarily, the Tet Offensive was a tactical disaster for the Communists . . . The biggest loser in the Tet Offensive was the Viet Cong . . . The guerrilla infrastructure developed over so many years was wiped out. After Tet 1968 the war was run entirely by the North. The VC were never again a significant force on the battlefield."[31] The claim that the Infrastructure was wiped out in the Tet Offensive is in striking contrast to actual U.S. military intelligence estimates on the subject, which indicate the Infrastructure hardly shrank at all. It had a personnel strength of 84,700 in January 1968 on the eve of Tet, 83,000 in March, and 81,700 in September.[32]

Among the statements that most clearly imply a very early date for the destruction of the Viet Cong, we might note:

> . . . there was combat but within a couple of days all except Hue, the Cholon area of Saigon and a few other isolated spots were all quiet again. The VC had been set back. From the VC viewpoint a lot of their cadre which had been in the front were eliminated. The North Vietnamese, which were in the support position, largely survived. Tet destroyed the core of the VC, the southerners, a lot of whom had gone north at the time of the 54 partition and then come back south as VC and were the insurgents.[33]
>
> By the end of February, General Westmoreland claimed that his forces had killed 45,000 of the enemy. The Vietcong, who had spearheaded the attack, were destroyed as a fighting force and were never again a major military factor in the war.[34]
>
> By the end of February, the battles of *Tet* were over . . . .
>
> The picture in the enemy camp at the beginning of March, one month after the *Tet* offensive began, was indeed bleak. At no single point was the Viet Cong flag flying . . . Moreover, the cost had been appalling. Up to 45,000 Viet Cong soldiers had died in the attacks, other thousands had been captured, one could only guess at how many tens of thousands had been disabled. Worse, even, than those stark, raw statistics was the fact that the fallen included the bulk of the irreplaceable infrastructure of the insurgency, the Viet Cong political leadership. The revolution, which had been nourished so painstakingly since 1956, had been nipped off right at the ground. If it were not in fact destroyed outright the insurgency had absorbed such a telling blow that it could not be a major consideration for years to come—if ever.[35]
>
> Only in Saigon and the imperial capital of Hue did the actual fighting last more than a week . . . While the actual casualty figures may be debatable, most authorities agree that the Viet Cong suffered greatly during the Tet fighting and ceased to be a significant military threat for the remainder of the war.[36]

The very influential Colonel Harry Summers combined the claim that the Viet Cong were essentially destroyed with some other significant errors: "In the first half of 1968 the Communists had lost an estimated 120,000 men, over half of their total strength when the Tet Offensive began. At the height of the battle, in January and February, 45,000 were killed and 5,800 captured in their fighting elements alone. The Viet Cong was practically annihilated, and the war was henceforth almost entirely an NVA affair. . . . Allied losses included 1,001 Americans and 2,082 South Vietnamese and allied troops."[37] Colonel Summers' statistics are wrong in two ways. First, the 45,000 enemy who supposedly had been killed by the end of February were by no means all members of the fighting elements. Only 19,000 of them were members of regular combat units; 12,000 were guerrillas; the remaining 14,000 were not combat personnel at all (see below). Second, the number of Americans killed in action in this period was not 1,001; it was well

over 2,000. What Colonel Summers has done was to take the 45,000 enemy personnel the United States claimed had been killed by 29 February, and juxtapose this figure with the 1,001 American and 2,098 South Vietnamese and allied troops who had been killed by 11 February. This error has recently been extended further in a book by the director of the Department of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, who misread Summers and treated the figure of 1,001 as the number of Americans who were killed from the beginning of the Tet Offensive all the way to the end of March (by which time the actual number was well over 3,600).[38]

A slightly less extreme version, stating that the United States suffered 1,100 combat deaths while 45,000 of the enemy died, appeared in a widely used historical encyclopedia in 1996, and spread to other works from there.[39]

The next Communist offensive, in May 1968, was very bloody. The two worst weeks of the May offensive each had more Americans killed in action than any week of the original Tet Offensive. The Viet Cong played a very large role in this fighting. The people who claim that the Viet Cong had essentially been destroyed earlier in the year downplay the May offensive. They call it "Mini-Tet" and pretend it was relatively small in scale. "Starting about 5 May and lasting into June, communists conducted another country-wide series of attacks, mostly by fire, giving the general appearance of a sustained offensive, but with a level of intensity not even closely approximating that achieved during Tet. Their aim was to avoid direct confrontation with military units." "This series of attacks, known around MACV headquarters as 'mini-Tet,' was a pallid copy of the original Tet offensive."[40]

American spokesmen were issuing regular claims for the number of casualties being inflicted on the Communist forces. Early on February 4, for example, it was announced that 14,997 enemy personnel had been killed so far. Such claims were greeted with a well-justified skepticism.[41] It was obvious that nobody could really know how many enemy personnel had been killed at this point. Retrospective estimates could perhaps be taken more seriously. The American command eventually settled on 45,000 as its estimate of enemy dead for the period January 31 to February 29. Lt. Gen. Phillip Davidson, who had been MACV's chief of intelligence at the time, later explained the composition of this figure; he said the 45,000 enemy dead included 19,000 members of regular combat units, 12,000 guerrillas, 4,000 administrative (this adds up to 35,000 members of Communist military forces broadly defined), 5,000 members of the Infrastructure, and 5,000 civilians.[42] There is no way to evaluate the accuracy of these numbers; they are not likely to be underestimates. But certainly the Communist losses were very heavy. They were committing far more of their men to active combat than they ever had before, and many of these men were operating away from the areas with which they were familiar, making them unusually vulnerable to American firepower. In addition to the 45,000 dead, 5,800 Communist personnel had been captured; no information is available on how many of the prisoners fell within which categories. The Americans did not try to estimate the number of enemy wounded.

If we compare these estimates of enemy deaths with the estimate of enemy strength in South Vietnam that General Davidson's officers had issued just as the Tet Offensive was beginning, they indicate that about 16 percent of the Communist military forces had been killed by the end of February. But US intelligence later acknowledged that it had been underestimating enemy strength in January (see above). The 35,000 members of the Communist military forces that the Americans claimed had been killed by February 29 would have been about 14 percent of the retroactively corrected figure for pre-Tet Communist military strength.

The suggestion that the Viet Cong were largely destroyed in the space of a month or two, at a modest cost in American casualties, gives a seriously misleading picture of the situation not just after Tet but also before Tet. It implies that the Viet Cong had been so weak at the beginning of 1968 that it would have been possible for them to be essentially destroyed in a relatively brief episode of combat, at little cost in American casualties. This was very far from being the case.

Exaggerating the changes in U.S. strategy

If the Communist forces had already been weakened enough to be becoming desperate before Tet, and then were much more drastically weakened by their losses in the Tet Offensive, why were they not finished off in the following months? Those who attempt an answer to this question usually say that the United States, demoralized by a mistaken impression that Tet had been a disaster, did not make a vigorous effort to finish off the weakened enemy. Instead, President Johnson decided to try to negotiate a settlement of the war. Henry Kissinger, after the usual exaggeration of the extent to which the Viet Cong were destroyed in the Tet offensive, wrote: "One can reflect with some melancholy on the course of events had, in its aftermath, American leaders stepped up pressure on the North Vietnamese regular combat units, which were now deprived of their guerrilla shield." General Westmoreland wrote that "President Johnson and his civilian advisers . . . ignored the maxim that when the enemy is hurting, you don't diminish the pressure, you increase it." Historian Victor Davis Hanson has taken this argument to a greater extreme: "the Americans failed to capitalize on the communist disarray but instead halted the bombing and began a radical retrenchment. The great buildup of 1965–67, soon to peak at 543,000 troops on April 4, 1968, would abruptly decline . . ."[43]

This is a serious misreading of the record. President Johnson reacted to Tet by moving toward peace talks *and* stepping up military pressure against the Communist forces in South Vietnam. He did not grant the famous request for 206,000 additional troops, but he did send significant reinforcements to Vietnam, about 40,000 men. The number of American military personnel in Vietnam did not peak in April 1968. It rose gradually until April 1969, more than a year after the Tet Offensive, and even then it did not decline abruptly. It took until October 1969 just to get back down to where it had been at the time the Tet Offensive began.[44]

Johnson did not halt the bombing after the Tet offensive, he increased it significantly. His announcement of March 31, 1968, is often remembered as a bombing

halt, but what it actually did was simply to refocus the American air effort—an *expanding* air effort—to fall more on the Communist forces in South Vietnam, and on their supply lines in southern Laos and the southern panhandle of North Vietnam, instead of on the northern part of North Vietnam. In the twelve months after January 31,1968, the total United States bomb tonnage in Indochina was *47% larger* than in the twelve months up to January 31, 1968. The tonnage dropped on North Vietnam was 15 percent lower (down from 249,765 tons to 212,423 tons), but the tonnage on South Vietnam was 64 percent larger (up from 487,793 tons to 798,807 tons), and the tonnage on southern Laos was 94 percent larger (up from 126,055 tons to 244,949 tons).[45]

In the year following Tet, then, U.S. forces were putting more combat pressure on the Communists in South Vietnam than they had during the year before Tet, going after them with somewhat more ground troops and much more air power. The Communists, even after the losses they had suffered at Tet, had enough strength left to meet this increased pressure without cracking. A year and more after Tet, they were still very much in the fight, killing significantly more Americans per month in the first half of 1969 than they had in 1967.

A Communist military victory?

A widespread belief about the Tet Offensive is that the American media declared it a Communist military victory. CJCS Wheeler: "Those newspapers . . . said it was the worst calamity since Bull Run." President Richard Nixon: "the almost universal theme of media coverage was that we had suffered a disastrous defeat." Professor Anthony James Joes: "On the whole, the media, especially television, presented the Tet Offensive as an unprecedented catastrophe for U.S. forces, a totally unexpected, nearly complete and probably irredeemable breakdown of security all over South Viet Nam." Lt. Col. James Carafano and General Walter Kerwin: "The American media generally portrayed Tet as a horrendous military setback." Colonel Harry Summers: "Initial media reports stated that U.S. and South Vietnamese Army forces had been surprised and defeated." A recent volume of the U.S. Army's official history of the war stated: "The more than 600 reporters in South Vietnam, and their editors in the United States and around the world, generally portrayed the offensive as a disastrous allied defeat. Their stories emphasized the death, destruction, horror, and confusion of the post-Tet fighting; their commentaries presented the setback as probably irreversible and the war as unwinnable by the United States."[46] But those making such statements seldom back them up with actual quotes from the media. If they cite a source, it usually is Peter Braestrup's massive study, *Big Story*.

Braestrup's concluding chapter indeed contained some spectacular generalizations about the media's reaction to the Tet Offensive. He wrote that during the offensive a mind-set quickly developed that "Tet was a disaster . . . for the allied armies."[47]

> By March 1, it would have been possible to observe and report that: (1) enemy military pressure had slackened, except at Khe Sanh; (2) the fighting was

> shifting back to the countryside; . . . it was a mixed picture, but clearly neither a military nor a psychological "disaster."[48]
>
> At Tet, the press shouted that the patient was dying, then weeks later began to whisper that he somehow seemed to be recovering—whispers apparently not heard amid the clamorous domestic reaction to the initial shouts.[49]

These generalizations were not supported by Braestrup's actual research, as presented in previous chapters. Most crucial was Chapter 4, "Military Victory or Defeat for Hanoi?" This chapter was filled with extended quotes from the various media. It is unmistakable, both from the shortage of quotes stating that Tet had been a Communist military victory and from those specifically stating that it had not, that there had been nothing remotely resembling a media consensus depicting the offensive as a Communist military victory.

The quotes that are clearest about military victory and defeat are: Walter Cronkite, anchor of the CBS News, broadcast on February 14, "first, and simplest, the Vietcong suffered a military defeat." Frank McGee of NBC News, in an hour-long special program broadcast March 10, said that in the battle of Saigon, "militarily the allies won." William Rademaekers, *Time* magazine's Saigon bureau chief, wrote on February 8: "If the events of the last week could be measured on a military ruler, there is little doubt that the allies would be considered the victors." Even Joseph Kraft, a columnist in the *Washington Post* who considered the Vietnam War unwinnable and wanted the U.S. government to open negotiations to end it, wrote a week into the Tet Offensive that the pattern of events "does not prove that the United States has suffered a military defeat."[50]

Braestrup seemed hard put to find a single quote from any American journalist clearly stating that Tet had been a *military* victory for the Communists, to balance out the multiple quotes stating that it had been a military defeat for them. There were some quotes stating that Tet had been a Communist victory of some sort. Frank McGee, after saying that the allies had won the battle of Saigon militarily, added that the Communists had won it psychologically.[51] C.L. Sulzberger, of the *New York Times*, wrote of the allies suffering "serious prestige defeats."[52] Braestrup quotes the February 9 issue of *Time* magazine, which said the scale and coordination of the assaults had taken the US and ARVN by surprise. "In that sense, and because they continued after five days of fighting to hang on to some of their targets, the communists undeniably won a victory of sorts. . . . In the end, however, the communist victory may be classed as Pyrrhic." Even if enemy losses were only half what the US command claimed, "it would still represent a huge bloodletting of the enemy's forces in South Vietnam." Braestrup chose not to quote the next sentence, which stated that even the lower estimates of enemy casualties "leave no doubt about who won the actual battles."[53] He quoted the Washington *Daily News* asking on January 31: "Is this the sort of defeat we should be suffering . . .?" but not specifying whether a military or psychological defeat was meant. He quoted Rademaeker writing on February 15 that the Communists had gained "a substantial victory," but again without making it clear what sort of victory was meant. He quoted the March 11 issue of *Newsweek*, which looked at

such things as the impact of Tet on American public opinion and concluded that "despite the fact that the communists did not achieve most of their [military] objectives, their offensive was far from a failure."[54]

It would be hard to argue that any statement about a Communist victory should be taken as referring to a military victory, and Braestrup did not ague that. He discussed at length the concern of the media about a political or psychological victory for the Communists. And in hindsight this concern appears to have been, at least in part, very well founded. The impact of Tet on American public opinion did represent a political victory for the Communists, and a hugely important one.

Let us return to Walter Cronkite, probably the most influential single journalist in the United States in 1968. On February 14, when Cronkite branded the Tet Offensive a Communist military defeat, it was still possible to believe that the heavy fighting was going to be relatively brief. Later that month, as the intensity of the combat showed no sign of subsiding, Cronkite pulled back a bit from that position, but he did not pull back very far. In his very famous special report on the Tet offensive broadcast February 27, he was very negative about many aspects of the situation. He was horrified by the damage that had been inflicted on many towns and cities, by the number of refugees that had been generated, by the setback that had been inflicted on pacification, by the weakness of the government's response. In chapter 4 of his book, Braestrup wrote that "Only the darkest clouds hung over his show that night."[55] But this was a serious exaggeration. Braestrup quoted Cronkite's pessimistic prognosis for the war as a whole (although Cronkite was not so pessimistic as to suggest even a possibility that the war might end the way we now know it did end, with a clear Communist victory), but one has to go to the full text of Cronkite's broadcast, which Braestrup gave as an appendix in Volume 2 of his study, to find Cronkite's actual evaluation of the Tet Offensive. Cronkite said that the Communists appeared to have a three-phase plan.

> Part one was the fall campaign against the allied positions astride the Vietcong supply routes through the Central Highlands. The attacks on Dak To and Loc Ninh were part of that campaign, and they failed. If they had succeeded, the Vietcong would have opened up a supply route to bring in even more troops for the attack against the cities along the coast.
>
> Those attacks, against 35 cities from Quang Tri in the far north to the Delta in the far south, were phase two, which, at least in their initial military phase, also have failed—failed, that is, to seize the cities, although they have brought them to near paralysis. Now it's believed the enemy is ready to move to phase three of the winter-spring offensive with the hope that he can recoup there what he lost in the first two phases.[56]

Cronkite's overall summary of the Tet Offensive at the end of his program was:

> Who won and who lost in the great Tet offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Vietcong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we. The referees of history may make it a draw.[57]

Cronkite's broadcast was regarded at the time, and is remembered today, as having been shockingly negative. But if the general mindset of the media had been to treat Tet as a defeat for the American forces, Cronkite's judgment that it had been a draw, not a victory or defeat for either side, would have seemed refreshingly positive. If even a strong minority within the media had been treating the offensive as a military disaster for the United States, Cronkite's show would have seemed unexceptional. The reason it seemed shockingly negative, in the context of the time, is that the notion that Tet had been a serious military defeat for American forces was *almost entirely absent* from the media coverage in this period. It was not the consensus; it was not the viewpoint even of any important minority within the American media.

It is interesting to compare what appeared in the media in February 1968 with what was being said, very privately, by some senior officers at MACV. General Walter Kerwin, chief of staff at MACV, assembled a small planning team to consider the possible use of nuclear weapons, if the enemy should launch another offensive. General Kerwin later described this as contingency planning "in case we had a catastrophe." General Westmoreland cabled the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on February 12: "On the assumption that it is our national policy to prohibit the enemy from seizing and permanently occupying the two northern provinces, I intend to hold them at all cost. However, to do so I must reinforce from other areas and accept a major risk, unless I can get reinforcements, which I desperately need . . . . "[58] (Suggestions that Westmoreland did not actually feel a strong need for reinforcements, but was only telling General Wheeler what he thought Wheeler wanted to hear, seem implausible to this author.) If the reporters thought that the United States was in danger of a catastrophe so great as to call for the use of nuclear weapons, or thought that the U.S. forces needed reinforcements "desperately," they were not putting these beliefs into their stories.

Mythology goes to extremes: the Giap memoir

The most extreme of the myths about the Tet Offensive circulate mostly on the internet; they seldom appear in print publications. There have been rumors for more than a decade that PAVN General Vo Nguyen Giap, in a memoir, has written that the Tet Offensive had been such a disaster for the Communists that they decided to abandon the war. (Many versions say Giap wrote that the Communists decided on a "negotiated surrender.") But then statements by Americans that the Tet Offensive had been a Communist victory persuaded them to fight on.

This story first came to the author's attention though private e-mail in mid-1997. Giap supposedly had been ready to abandon the war, but decided to fight on after hearing Walter Cronkite's broadcast, in which Cronkite called the offensive a horrible defeat for the United States. The source was said to be *How We Won the War*, an American reprint of a short account, by Giap and another general, of the last stage of the Vietnam War.[59] Giap had not in fact written anything even vaguely resembling this in *How We Won the War*, or elsewhere, and for that matter Cronkite had not called the Tet Offensive a defeat for the United States.

The story was put in a more extreme form and given wider distribution in January 1998, when a man named Larry Tweedie released over the internet an open letter to Chip Cronkite, the son of Walter Cronkite. This letter stated that the Tet Offensive of 1968 had been a "stunning" defeat for the Communist forces in Vietnam, so much so "that Ho Chi Minh was ready to completely throw in the towel and surrender." Cronkite, however, slanted his reporting on the Tet Offensive against the U.S. military. "When the North Vietnamese . . . heard Walter Cronkite tell America and the world the LIE that Tet was a major defeat to the allied war effort, the North Vietnamese then decided that they would not surrender. . . . According to NVA General Giap, these distorted reports were inspirational to the NVA. They changed their plans from a negotiated surrender and decided, instead, that they only needed to persevere . . ."[60]

At some point probably in the autumn of 1998, a brief comment by a Vietnam veteran named Gene Kuentzler appeared on an internet forum. It stated that after the Tet Offensive Giap and the PAVN "were on their knees and prepared to negotiate a surrender." But hearing Cronkite's broadcast persuaded them to fight on. This was attributed to an unnamed book by Giap.[61]. Kuentzler's comment was widely copied on Usenet. By 2002, there was a version circulating in which a passage citing *How We Won the War* had been spliced onto the end of Kuentzler's comment.[62] But there is no clear evidence that Kuentzler himself identified this as the book he had in mind.

The story broke into the print media, in modified form, in 2004. Arnaud de Borchgrave, in the *Washington Times*, April 16, 2004, started with an unusually extreme version of the myths about the Tet Offensive, in which the Viet Cong "did not reach a single one of their objectives—except when they arrived by taxi at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon . . ." "With the Viet Cong wiped out in the Tet Offensive, North Vietnamese regulars moved south down the Ho Chi Minh trails through Laos and Cambodia to continue the war. Even Giap admitted in his memoirs that news media reporting of the war and the antiwar demonstrations that ensued in America surprised him. Instead of negotiating what he called a conditional surrender, Giap said they would now go the limit because America's resolve was weakening and the possibility of complete victory was within Hanoi's grasp."[63]

The version of the story given the most circulation that year, however, was a variant that omitted the Tet Offensive. It said that Giap, in an imaginary 1985 memoir (Giap had not in fact published any 1985 memoir), had credited Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, and Kerry's organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War, for persuading him not to give up on the war. Since Kerry had not become an antiwar spokesman until 1970, the Tet Offensive of 1968 had to be edited out of the explanation of what had had Giap on the edge of surrender. This story was publicized in a number of articles in the online magazine Newsmax.com, beginning on February 10,[64] and from there spread to Usenet.

After the 2004 election was over, the rumor reverted to its previous focus on the Tet Offensive. In 2007, a new quote, supposedly coming from a memoir by Giap, was invented: "What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi. You had us on the ropes. If you had pressed us a little harder, just for another day or two, we were ready to surrender! It was the same at the

battles of TET. You defeated us! We knew it, and we thought you knew it. But we were elated to notice your media was definitely helping us. They were causing more disruption in America than we could in the battlefields. We were ready to surrender. You had won!" This spread from NewsMax.com to Rush Limbaugh and the *Washington Times*.[65] It was even more obviously spurious than the previous versions of the rumor. When General Giap writes memoirs, he addresses them to a Vietnamese audience. He does not refer to Americans as "you."

Conclusion

The Communist forces in South Vietnam had considerably more actual strength at the end of February 1968, even after the bloodletting they had suffered in the previous weeks, than the U.S. military had been saying they had in January, before the Tet Offensive. It was this reality, not some lurid exaggeration perpetrated by the media, that undermined support for the war in the United States.

Many Americans have long been inclined to ignore the "agency" of the Vietnamese on both sides in the Vietnam War, to assume that what really mattered were American policies and American decisions. Many of the myths about the Tet Offensive, which suggest that the Tet Offensive came as a shock to the United States only because there were Americans who misunderstood or misrepresented the situation in Vietnam, not because the Communists had managed to do anything that would have been shocking if accurately described, are examples of this tendency. The myths deny the agency of the Vietnamese Communists in the political victory they won in 1968.

The Tet Offensive was a crucial turning point in the Vietnam War. People's beliefs about the offensive influence their views on the overall pattern of the war, and the lessons they draw from it. This is especially true of lessons in regard to the role of the media. It is disturbing, then, to realize to what extent crucial aspects of it have been misunderstood. An accurate view of the Tet Offensive will not necessarily lead to correct lessons applicable to future wars, but it may at least save us from some false lessons.

Notes

1 Brigadier General Phillip B. Davidson, Jr., Assistant Chief of Staff, J2, "New Procedures for OB,"August 15, 1967. In the Virtual Vietnam Archive of the Vietnam Project, at Texas Tech University (hereafter TTU), this is item # 0240715002.

2 "MACV Briefing on Enemy Order of Battle, November 24, 1967" (TTU # 0240817003). Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, "Monthly Order of Battle Summary, 1 October thru 31 October 1967" (TTU # 0240801005), section I, pp. 1, 21–25. See also Tom Buckley, "U.S. Cuts Estimate of Foe's Strength," *New York Times*, November 25, 1967, p. 3.

3 Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, "Order of Battle Summary, 1 January thru 31 January 1968" (TTU # 0240907005), section I, p. 1.

4 General William C. Westmoreland at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., November 21, 1967, text in Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*, (BO, Colorado: Westview, 1977, vol. 2, pp. 4–5, 10.

5 Don Oberdorfer, *Tet*, New York: Avon, 1972, pp. 119–20, citing an article by Orr Kelly, Washington *Evening Star*, November 7, 1967, p. 1.
6 MACV Office of Information, "1967 Wrap-Up: A Year of Progress" (TTU # 168300010742), p. 1.
7 Figures released by the Comptroller, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1971, in Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff (eds.) *The Air War in Indochina*, rev. ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, pp. 267–8.
8 Gerald J. DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 283. Douglas Pike, "The Tet Offensive: A Setback for Giap, But Just How Big?," *Army*, 1968, 18.4 (April), p. 57.
9 Pham Van Son *et al.*, *The Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, Saigon: Printing and Publications Center (A.G./Joint General Staff) RVNAF, 1969, reprinted Christiansburg, Virginia: Dalley Book Service, p. 420. LTG Frederick C. Weyand, CG II Field Force Vietnam, "Combat Operations After Action Report" (TTU # 168300010351), pp. 16–17. Captain L.E. Lyons, "Historical Summary of VC Tet Offensive IV CTZ," April 8, 1968 (TTU #2121101020), p. 2.
10 Merle Pribbenow, "The Vietcong and PAVN Historical Perspective on the Battle for Tan Son Nhut." Paper presented at Texas Tech University's Sixth Triennial Vietnam Symposium, March 13, 2008.
11 John McCain, with Mark Salter, *Hard Call: Great Decisions and the Extraordinary People who Made Them*, New York: Twelve, 2007, p. 278. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell (eds.) *The Lessons of Vietnam*, New York: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977, p. 68.
12 Major General Winant Sidle, "The Tet Offensive: Another Press Controversy: I," in Harrison E. Salisbury (ed.) *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984, pp. 164–6. As a brigadier general, Sidle had commanded MACV's Office of Information in 1968.
13 The numbers released by the U.S. government were based on the date a man's death was officially recorded in an office in the United States, rather than the date he died in Vietnam. There was often a lag of about two days between death and the recording of the death. Many of the men who died on February 2 and 3, perhaps most, were counted in the figure for deaths in the week of February 4 to 10. If we had a figure actually including all the deaths that occurred from January 28 to February 3, this surely would have been among the worst eight weeks.
14 Office of Information, MACV, "1968 Summary" (TTU 168300010753), pp. 271–2.
15 Translated text in "COSVN Report Outlines Viet Cong 'Second Offensive' Tactics" (United States Mission Press Center, Press Release # 120-68, June 26, 1968, TTU # 2131210108), pp. 3–4. Words in brackets were inserted by the translator.
16 See David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, vol. 2, esp. p. 1140.
17 Oberdorfer, *Tet*, p. 274. Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, p. 140. Both Oberdorfer is and Braestrup's statements supposedly derive from the translation of the COSVN decision that was quoted above.
18 Littauer and Uphoff (eds.) *The Air War in Indochina*, pp. 268–70.
19 *Ibid*.
20 Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, Boulder and London: Westview, 1985, pp. 105–7.
21 Littauer and Uphoff (eds.) *The Air War in Indochina*, pp. 267–72.
22 General Earle G. Wheeler, "Address before the Economic Club of Detroit", December 18, 1967, in *Selected Statements on Vietnam by DoD and Other Administration Officials, July 1–December 31, 1967* (TTU #1070118001), p. 291a. Braestrup, vol. 2, p. 166. Henry Owen, "How Wars End – With a Bang, Not a Whimper" (TTU #0241017019), pp. 1, 4. Gen. Bruce C. Clarke (ret.), "Special Report from Vietnam", *Army*, 1968 (May), p. 20.

23 Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, New York: Norton, 1990, p. 476.
24 Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, Novato, CA: Presidio, 1990, p. 110. General Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, New York: Norton, 1972, p. 383. See also General Frederick C. Weyand, "Troops to Equal Any," *Vietnam* Magazine, 1998 (August), p. 39.
25 *Washington Post*, February 12, 1968, A 15. Peter C. Rollins, "Behind the Westmoreland Trial of 1984: What Was So Wrong with the CBS Program, The Uncounted Enemy (1982)" (TTU #3280124004), p. 18.
26 Tom Wicker, "Vietcong's Attacks Shock Washington", *New York Times*, February 2, 1968, p. 13.
27 Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, "Order of Battle Summary, 1 thru 31 October 1968" (TTU # 2500111006), p. I-1.
28 Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, "Order of Battle Summary, 1 August thru 31 October 1968" (TTU # 2500111007), p. I-34.
29 Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, "Order of Battle Summary, 1 thru 31 October 1968" (TTU # 2500111006), p. I-1. See also Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, p. 1323.
30 Col. William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981, p. 28.
31 General Fred C. Weyand and Lt. Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Vietnam Myths and American Realities," *Cdrs Call*, 1976 (July–August), p. 5, reprinted as "Vietnam Myths and Military Realities," *Armor*, 1976 (September–October), p. 34. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, "Foreword" to Brig. Gen. John C. Bahnsen, Jr., *American Warrior*, New York: Citadel, 2007, p. xv. McCain, *Hard Call*, p. 278. David T. Zabecki, "Tet Offensive: Overall Strategy," in Spencer C. Tucker (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, Santa Barbara: ABC–Clio, 1998, p. 680.
32 Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, "Order of Battle Summary, 1 August thru 31 October 1968" (TTU # 2500111007), p. IV-2, IV-3.
33 Barry Zorthian, oral history interview conducted by Richard P. Verrone, September 27, 2006, the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, TTU # OH0540, p. 126.
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35 Colonel Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S. – Vietnam in Perspective*, Presidio, 1978, pp. 200, 202. The influence of this book increased after Palmer became a Lieutenant General and Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy.
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