

Review Article

James J. Wirtz. *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (Cornell Studies in Security Affairs), 1991.

Two hours after the people of South Vietnam began to revel in the delights of Tet (a major religious holiday in Vietnam), gunfire was exchanged in Nha Trang. A key aspect of Hanoi's 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising—the so-called Tet Offensive—had begun. As the night wore on, half a dozen of the cities in the northern and central parts of South Vietnam came under heavy enemy artillery fire; ground assaults followed. One day later, just after midnight on the morning of Wednesday, 31 January, the Battle of Tet began in Saigon, the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam. It is the latter date that marks the official start of one of the most interesting battles—actually a phase in a campaign that lasted over a year—in the second half of the 20th Century.

Call it what you will—Tet 1968, the Battle of Tet, the Tet Offensive, Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68, or even the 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising—Hanoi's surprise military action in South Vietnam in early 1968 marked a turning point in modern American military history and ushered in an era of confused thinking about the use of American military force that lasted into the early 1990's. All the events of that time—both military and political—merit much more detailed study.

Much of the secret intelligence that was available to the Americans in the days before Tet is available to historians today.¹ Military and political people that were involved in the war on the other side of the conflict are beginning to talk about the pre-Tet period. Today scholars can make better judgments about Hanoi's intentions and plans. We also are able to better understand what prompted Hanoi to act as it did in 1968. In addition, we can make better assessments of what decisionmaking use was made of intelligence by senior American military and political leaders in the pre-Tet period. In

The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War, James J. Wirtz, Ph.D., sets for himself the task of speaking to these important issues.

Wirtz teaches in the Department of National Security at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. This book is part of Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, edited by Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis. *The Tet Offensive* had its origins in Wirtz's doctoral dissertation which was supervised by Jervis. Thus, it is not surprising that this book deals with the problems of human misperception in regard to decision-making in the times of uncertainty that existed in the then Republic of Vietnam in 1967–78. Today no one will argue that there are not limitations to the human cognitive system. Instead, everyone who studies cognition assumes that there is a boundary to rationality in situations of cognitive overload due to the capacity and processing limits of the mental system. The real issue has become how people form judgments and make decisions, and particularly whether they operate “rationally” or make judgments within recognized constraints—or do both.

Wirtz wastes no time in setting forth the major premises of the book, *viz.*: *first*, that the so-called Tet Offensive of 1968 came cloaked in a mist of deception—its timing, purpose, and intensity surprised the Americans and, *second*, that the surprise was the result of a major American “failure of intelligence.” Going further, the front leaf describes this work as a “pathbreaking account of one of the worst intelligence failures in American history.” James Wirtz tells us that “This book is intended not only to contribute to the history of the Vietnam War but to follow in a tradition of inquiry that has long fascinated political scientists, the study of intelligence failure.”

The organization of the book is straightforward. There is a short sixteen-page introduction. The body of the book is divided into two parts. Part I, in two chapters, examines the pre-Tet period situation from Hanoi's viewpoint. Chapter 1 described the strategic debate that preoccupied the communist leadership following U.S. intervention in the ground war in South Vietnam. Chapter 2 examines the plans, preparations, and objectives of the Tet Offensive. Part II then explores the on-coming offensive from Saigon's viewpoint—with a focus on MACV's thinking. Here Wirtz details what he sees as the origins of surprise. Chapter 4 deals with the sources of biases that Wirtz believes shaped American decisionmaking. Chapters 5 and 6 details the signals of attack that were misread or misappreciated by the senior U.S. commanders. Chapter 7 tells of the U.S. reaction to the offensive. In a twenty-four page conclusion, Wirtz gives his explanation of how the “failure of intelligence” came to pass. Here Wirtz evaluates what he sees as

Hanoi's deception strategy and discusses the difficulty of the problem he believes that U.S. Intelligence had to overcome to avoid surprise.

Wirtz has done his homework with regard to the materials that are available with regard to the intelligence production in the pre-Tet era. His detailing of the collection and dissemination of this material is thorough and it makes a good read. He is correct in his explanation that the “failure of intelligence” was not caused by an shortcomings in the collection of information about Hanoi’s capabilities or intentions. Nor was the “failure” one of dissemination. Indeed, Wirtz notes that Joseph Hovey, an analyst with the Central Intelligence Agency, developed an accurate prediction of the Tet Offensive months before the attacks on the cities began.

Despite some broad, categorical, and contradicting statements, Wirtz concedes in the concluding chapter of the book that “in the strictest sense, the allies did not suffer a complete failure of intelligence analysis before Tet.” He acknowledges that the senior military officers had accepted estimates that identified the general parameters of the Tet attacks before the materialized, but notes that the proper understanding of what was about to happen came too late to reduce the military and psychological impact of the attacks. This reviewer remembers that the senior American officials in Vietnam and their South Vietnamese counterparts were expecting the VC/NVA forces to mount a major offensive throughout the country right around Tet—if not before then surely after. However, they were not expecting the country-wide attacks on the cities, or attacks on the scale they were mounted.²

As a parenthetical aside this reviewer suggests that had Generals Westmoreland and Davidson had *perfect knowledge* well prior to the attacks they might have chosen to let the attacks proceed. Remember how the Americans were hunting the VC/NVA main force units, mostly in vain. How tempting it would have been to let the enemy come on in where they could be killed (as they were in the event). And while it is true, as Wirtz points out, that the acceptance of the estimates by the Americans right before the attacks began at Tet did little to improve the ability of the defenders to meet the assaults, it is equally true that the late acceptance did little to hinder effectively meeting and breaking up the Tet assaults. In a strict military sense the first two weeks of the Tet Offensive were for the Allied Forces the greatest killing period of the war. In that short span the allied forces broke the back of Hanoi’s Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68.

As noted above, this book is about the human factors of intelligence analysis and operational decisionmaking. In the introduction James Wirtz notes that “situational and bureaucratic explanations for failures of intelligence are treated as second-order, not primary, explanations for the surprise suffered during Tet,” and that his analysis focuses on the theory of unmotivated biases which is a cognitive explanation of decisionmaking that posits that individuals do not follow a rational process in making decisions. Wirtz goes on to say that —

the theory of unmotivated bias suggest that a belief system acts to insulate the decision maker from information that contradicts the system. When used in the context of the theory of unmotivated biases, the term “belief system” denotes the ideas held by individuals concerning the nature of the world and the motives of other actors. Individuals usually form these beliefs by drawing on either stereotyped interpretations of dramatic historical events, especially wars and revolutions, or powerful personal experiences. When individuals make a decision, they attempt to place ongoing events in the context of preexisting beliefs, beliefs that often take the form of historical analogies. This phenomenon tends to shape decision making in three important respects. First, the belief systems filter the individual's receptivity to information. Decision makers pay attention to information that confirms their beliefs and dismiss information that disconfirms them. If a particular belief system is used to interpret a given situation, it continues to filter new information in a manner that confirms the applicability of the belief system to developing events. Second, decision makers choose before sufficient information has been collected or evaluated. As a result of this premature cognitive closure, according to Richard Ned Lebow, “policy makers will proceed a long way down a blind alley before realizing that something is wrong.” [Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 105] In other words, individuals tend to make a decision when they possess information that confirms their preexisting beliefs, even though this information may fail to describe adequately the present situation. Finally, belief systems can desensitize individuals to the need to make value trade-off's. Because of a lack of sensitivity to information that calls into question their preexisting beliefs, decision makers are likely to assert that a preferred option will simultaneously support all their goals.

This is his primary thesis. While Wirtz makes much of this human factors thesis in the introduction, his evidence to support the impact of the theory in the event is slim and his

argument is strained. In short, Wirtz fails to make a convincing case for his hypothesis out of the events that surround the battle at Tet.

Despite all the theories that can be hatched to explain why Generals Westmoreland, Davidson, and others, would not, or could not, believe that a series of coordinated attacks on the cities was a serious part of Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68, the truth of the matter is that no one really believed that the planners in Hanoi were that stupid. To be a good intelligence analyst, and a good user of intelligence, one must share the fantasy of the opposition.

Wirtz errs by trying to make more out of the simple explanation—“Giap ain't that stupid”—than the facts deserve. This is a situation where the use of Occam's famous razor is the key to a true understanding of what went “wrong” at Tet. When faced with an apparently difficult situation William of Occam (d. 1349) counseled a the pragmatic approach to problem solving. Occam believed in shaving away all extraneous details. And, further, he postulated, where there are several apparent solutions to a problem, the correct one probably is the most obvious one. “Thou must keep it simple Simon,” Occam probably told his students at Oxford. Remembering that KISS (Keep It Simple Soldier) is a universal tenant of military planning makes Occam's approach best when picking apart an opponent's plans.

This reviewer believes that James Wirtz's analysis of the Tet Offensive is severely flawed. These flaws go to the very core of his argument; because the premises are false the conclusions that follow also are false. Wirtz certainly did a good job of collecting the available intelligence materials and detailing the battle of Tet, but when he put it all together he left out essential materials about Hanoi's battle plans and the motives behind them, he relied on numerous assumptions (mostly wrong and based originally on hasty journalistic reporting), and in the end he drew entirely wrong conclusions.

It is my belief that there are four major errors in Wirtz's analysis. First, he deals with the Tet Offensive as a discreet event; his failure to see it as part of the unfolding of the Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68 confuses his analysis. Second, he does not understand the role of the attacks of Khe Sanh in Hanoi's wider battle plan—*its was for real and was not a diversion*. Third, he posits that the overall seasonal offensive plan was cloaked in a master deception plan; at best the normal VC/NVA security plans were in effect. Finally, he draws the false conclusion that what went wrong—and something did

go wrong in so far as the American's were concerned—was an “intelligence” failure; instead there was a “decisionmaking” failure. All the intelligence was there, and all of it was briefed and discussed, but it was the senior decisionmaking officers—the users of the intelligence—who did not act in a right way based on what they knew but would not believe.

How can this reviewer be so critical of Wirtz's effort? The answer is simple: I studied the same events, but reached different conclusions.³ It is my belief that my analysis is better because I started from a different perspective—I didn't have a thesis that I had to support. All intelligence analysts, whether they be in the government or the military, always should remember the simple warning that Marshal Joseph Stalin gave to his intelligence chiefs during the Second World War: “An intelligence hypothesis may become your hobby-horse on which you will ride into a self-made trap.” Uncle Joe's plain-talking advice is equally good advice for those conducting intelligence post-mortems.

In 1969, while a student at the Defense Intelligence College, I also wrote a thesis which studied the efforts of the Germans to discern the secrets of the expected Allied invasion of northwest Europe—Operation OVERLORD. At the time I thought that there were many things about the German intelligence appreciation's that appeared odd. In 1986, when I obtained a copy of the Hesketh Report (a detailed Most Secret report of Allied deception operations), much of what appeared to be error on the part of the Germans could be seen in a new light—error to be sure, but it was error induced by Allied deception efforts. I learned a simple lesson: before one can properly criticize another's intelligence analysis and operational reaction to it, the critic must know what was happening on the other side of the hill—first one must know what was knowable. That rule is the keystone to effective hindsight analysis. In this reviewer's mind, Wirtz did not have a correct understanding of the details of Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68, and the misunderstanding undermined his analysis.

When I was the Middle-East current intelligence analyst with the Army's ISD at the Pentagon from 1969–71, my colleagues hung a sign over my desk. It read: “He was on the alert constantly for every signal, shrewdly sensitive to relationships and situations that did not exist. — Anon.” I believe that it served as a proper caution for my analysis. There is a great line with the same thought in Len Deighton, *Spy Line*: “Failure in the art of intelligence comes to those who cannot distinguish between what they know to be facts and what they wish were true.” (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989) As I noted

above, Wirtz had an objective when he wrote the dissertation that ultimately became this book. He set out to prove something. This reviewer believes that Wirtz let the hypothesis drive his search for relevant facts, and he let the premise drive his analysis. He rode the hobby-horse of self-deception. The result is a book that misses the mark in regard to the history of the War in Vietnam and the “intelligence failure” as Wirtz calls it.

What did Wirtz miss along the way? He missed the fact that the so-called “Tet Offensive” was not *the plan*; rather it was part of a year long Winter-Spring Campaign. He missed the fact that the border battles were not deception operations. They were designed to fight American forces on terrain favorable to the VC/NVA and close to Hanoi’s supply bases and sanctuary areas. The fact that these battles were fought near the border was not so much a plan as the acceptance of reality. The VC/NVA main force units had been driven out of the other areas by U.S. operations—they had no other place to fight. He missed the fact that the attacks made at Tet by the Communist were not an “all-out” effort in the sense that not all of the VC/NVA forces were committed to the battle. Instead, the Winter-Spring Offensive—of which the attacks at Tet were a part—was a compromise in Hanoi’s strategic thinking. The year-long effort—nipped in the bud at Tet to be sure—was neither a reversion to guerrilla warfare or a commitment to large unit maneuver battle. Hanoi’s use of its total available forces was measured according to the stage of the overall plan that was being executed. Units needed, and held in readiness, for follow-up action after Tet were not committed during the Tet-period attacks. For that reason less than the total available VC/NVA force was committed to the initial assault phase in the Tet period.

Was Hanoi’s intent concerning Khe Sanh real or a ruse? Wirtz builds his analysis of the “intelligence failure” at Tet on the proposition that the attack on Khe Sanh was a ruse. He is wrong—it was the real thing. The attack had the purpose of capturing Khe Sanh as a necessary interim phase of an ever broadening battle plan. Wirtz gives the Hanoi credit for being clever in the wrong way. They were not clever because they had a good deception plan—they were clever because they had a new and imaginative strategic plan which they thought had practical tactical objectives. The overall offensive failed because the keystone to success—the capture of Khe Sanh—was not accomplished. Now, who in Hanoi rationally would have predicted that three battle-hardened NVA regular divisions could not have taken Khe Sanh (they had no evidentiary basis on which to anticipate the awesome firepower that Westmoreland would marshaled against them in defense of the firebase). The old Dien Bien Phu model for analysis was simply out of

date—an analogy overcome by the new technologies of war.

The capture of Khe Sanh was a key element in Hanoi's larger plan and the assault on the base was to be separated by a ten day period from the attacks on the cities (which is what we commonly call the Tet Offensive). The NVA effort at Khe Sanh was part of a one-two punch—designed to clear the way for NVA forces to move from the border area toward the coastal plain. Success at Khe Sanh would have sealed the fate of Hue and put Da Nang in gravest danger. Because the assault on Khe Sanh was to be a key main attack Hanoi did not jeopardize the effort by dealing with it as a ruse. Hanoi did not leak information about it to attract attention— Westmoreland knew about it because he had good intelligence.

What Wirtz missed is the important point that Westmoreland, by concentrating on a key element of the Winter-Spring Offensive—the attack on Khe Sanh—and defeating it, weakened the rest of Hanoi's plan and it failed. Had the situation played out otherwise and Khe Sanh had fallen (which surely would have thrown the American officials in Saigon and Washington into confusion and disarray), then the Vietnamese population of the South— sensing a change in the winds of fortune—might have joined a call for a coalition government in the wake of what may have been a more successful series of attacks at Tet. Let me make that point quite plain: this reviewer believes that had Khe Sanh fallen, Hanoi's offensive goal might have been achieved. But, in the event, as the poem goes, “for the want of a nail”

One thing is abundantly clear: the senior U.S. political and military decisionmaking leaders in Vietnam, and in Washington, deserved a good scold for failing to read the clear signals that foretold the unfolding of the Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68. But a proper understanding of why they failed is not to be gleaned from this book. Wirtz makes much of what he sees (wrongly, I believe) as an elaborate deception plan and gives it as the reason why the Americans were misled. I believe that the lesson to be drawn from the battles at Tet is not that the Americans were misled by an elaborate enemy deception plan but by their failure to recognize that Hanoi was being forced to come up with a new scheme in order to stay in the war. The military commanders and political leaders in Saigon and Washington failed to understand what their successful military actions would force the enemy to do. Westmoreland said that the U.S. was winning the war—and it was from Hanoi's perspective—but neither Westmoreland nor the other senior official really believed it, or understood how Hanoi would react to that

reality. That failure—one of decisionmaking and command, and not of intelligence—is a more ominous danger for the future. Self-deception is a greater danger than real deception.

Having said all this, what were the factors that shaped Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68, and what are the key elements of the overall plan. Because I have said that Wirtz got it all wrong I owe it to him and to the reader to lay out the situation as I see it. Let me proceed to that task.

By early 1967, the North Vietnamese (Hanoi's) military effort within the Republic of South Vietnam was in serious trouble. Following the entry of American ground forces into the war in South Vietnam, Hanoi's annual dry season offensive campaigns ended in failure. Despite large-scale offensive operations—intended to destroy South Vietnamese and American military units, and to establish full control over the southern population—the VC/NVA were making no headway in their war efforts. Instead, the enormous firepower and mobility of the American forces effectively checked the VC/NVA units. Hanoi were paying dearly in terms of men and material with nothing substantial to show in return. The situation in the South was worse than stalemated. Actually the United States and Government of Vietnam forces were winning—winning slowly to be sure, but steadily. In March 1967 Ho Chi Minh convened the 13th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee. Ho gave to the Plenum this charge: study carefully the current military and political situation, then recommend a *new* course of action.

It was clear to the Plenum members that General Westmoreland's concept of operations in 1966 and early 1967 made the most of the strategic debate in Hanoi irrelevant. The American forays into the VC/NVA base areas, and the hard-hitting mobile operations along the frontiers of South Vietnam had effectively undermined the foundations on which both General Vo Nguyen Giap and Nguyen Chi Thanh had built their competing strategies. The American offensives in the interior base areas (e.g., the CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY operations) nullified Giap's strategy of protected guerrilla war. The Americans had driven the VC/NVA units away from the guerrillas and deprived the latter of vital combat unit support. Thanh's concept also suffered severely. The VC/NVA units were no match for the Americans. They lost every battle. Hanoi had lost the ability to move large units freely which was essential to Thanh's strategy. The Plenum members concluded that a new course of action was called for. The core message of the Plenum's recommendation was simple: do not be distracted from the end game by the fact that there are Americans on the battlefield. Instead, look to the fact that the

conditions for a final victory appear to be at hand. To Giap and Thanh the Plenum said this: forget the interminable war of guerrilla tactics; forget the glory of the clash of arms between VC/NVA and American forces; rather, remember the goal of the war, and seize the day and victory.

The recommendation of the 13th Plenum was considered, and in turn, was approved by the North Vietnamese Politburo. The concept of operations contained in the Plenum report then was handed to the various military and political staffs. In time the details of the implementation of the Plenum's concept would be worked out and the final operational plan issued. The overall strategy for what the Communists would call Tong Cong Kick, Tong Khoi Nghia (General Offensive-General Uprising), or TCK-TKN, was set. Once the political aspect—the strategic decision-making aspect—of the Plenum's and Politburo's business was concluded, it was General Giap's responsibility to devise a plan of action to implement the recommended new strategy.⁴

Under the planning leadership of Giap, the decision of the 13th Plenum quickly took shape in the form of a bold operational plan for decisive offensive action. The primary objective of the plan for the Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967–68 was to end the American presence in South Vietnam. In theory that was to be accomplished after the formation of a coalition government in Saigon following the fall of the Thieu-Ky government in Saigon and the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). In conjunction with the new government, the National Liberation Front (NLF) would play a major role in arranging for the Americans to leave South Vietnam. The simple—perhaps beguiling—beauty of the plan was that the exit of the Americans would be accomplished with a minimum of actual combat between VC/NVA and American forces. Alternately, the American forces would be ejected after the capture of Khe Sanh, Hue, and Da Nang.

The TCK-TKN plan was designed to accomplish several goals: destroy the RVNAF; instigate a country-wide insurrection; cause the collapse of the Thieu-Ky regime; create a coalition government; destroy all of the American political and military institutions; and then oust the American from Vietnam through follow-up negotiations. The quick unification of Vietnam under the Hanoi regime was the ultimate goal of the strategy on which the Winter-Spring Offensive was based.

Giap's overall concept of the TCK-TKN operation was bold and imaginative: In one operation there was to be the mating of both political struggle (*dau tranh*) and

military struggle leading to the culminating General Offensive-General Uprising. In broad outline, the plan of attack had three independent parts, and the planners dubbed it a three-pronged offensive—one with military, political, and troops proselytizing. The military prong would be the most important—the planners called it the “lever.” Giap's *lever* had three distinct phases to be carried out over a period of several months.

General Giap envisaged that Phase I of the TCK-TKN operations would begin about 1 July 1967. It was to continue until the outbreak of the Tet attacks on 30 January 1968. The VC/NVA would mount large-scale attacks along the borders of Vietnam. Prior to fighting the battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Giap had used a similar tactic to disrupt the campaign plan of French General Henri Navarre. Giap would use the same tactic against General William Westmoreland. Giap aimed to draw United States forces out of the populated areas to the peripheries of the country and lure Westmoreland into launching operations along South Vietnam's borders. This would make it easier for the VC to storm the cities (Hanoi's eventual target), all located in the interior. Once the American units were drawn away from populated areas they would be repeatedly attacked and forced to assume a defensive posture—thereby becoming *fixed* in areas where their presence would not interfere with the decisive Phase II attacks.⁵ Phase I actions also would serve to mask the preparations being made for the assaults against southern cities at the start of Phase II.

In addition in Phase I of the military plan for TCK-TKN an NVA force of three divisions would be moved into position around Khe Sanh, an outpost held by one American Marine regiment. The high point of Phase I was to be the siege and capture of Khe Sanh on the eve of Phase II. The ground attacks at Khe Sanh would begin about ten days prior to Tet 1968, i.e., on 20 January 1968. Thus, in the last few days before the critical Phase II actions, the final assault on Khe Sanh would serve to divert the attention of American officers and officials away from the impending country-wide attacks.

Phase II of the Offensive Campaign was to begin in the early morning of 30 January. It would last through the end of February 1968. Phase II would begin with simultaneous large-scale surprise attacks against government offices, and police and military facilities in every major city, province and district capital, and against any other RVNAF installation and facility of any consequence.

During Phase II the NVA forces in I and II CTZ would engage American forces. However, the VC units, as well as the guerrilla forces, would avoid all contact with the

American ground forces. Instead the VC and guerrillas would attack the South Vietnamese cities, the RVNAF units, the American headquarters, all communications centers, and all airbases in the South. The purpose for attacking headquarters, communication centers, and airports was to disrupt the RVNAF and American command and control capability, and ground the helicopters and other aircraft which had a ground-support capability. The purpose for attacking police and RVNAF units was to destroy them. The purpose for attacking government offices in the cities was to spark the general uprising.

Giap gave the VC the role of attacking the RVNAF and police units in the cities in an effort to convince the South Vietnamese that the attacks were being conducted by the Southern nationalist compatriots of the NLF. Using Southerners in that role also afforded a better opportunity for the VC forces to infiltrate into attack positions prior to the offensive. The NVA forces would have been given away by their accents. Using the VC as the spearpoint of the country-wide assault on urban targets in II and III CTZ also allowed Giap to use NVA forces to attack the Americans, and to form a reserve for use later.

The second prong of the three-pronged offensive—troops proselytizing—was to be intensified in Phase II. That part of Giap's plan called for a massive propaganda campaign, and for subversive operations directed at the RVNAF soldiers by family members and by other pressures, both of which, in conjunction with sharp and devastating military blows, would produce large defections and desertions from the RVNAF's ranks. Giap foresaw whole RVNAF units either melting away, or better yet, turning their weapons against other RVNAF units or the Americans.

During Phase II, according to Giap's plan, the puppet Thieu-Ky government would be overthrown; the RVNAF would be defeated; Saigon, Hue, and most of the major metropolitan areas of the South would come under the control of the coalition government; the American forces would be isolated; and U.S. President Lyndon Johnson would discover that he could no longer count on a puppet government to justify a continued American presence in South Vietnam. Faced with such circumstances, Giap believed, the American would be forced to do one of two things: either to negotiate a withdrawal of American and other allied forces from South Vietnam; or to engage in a major escalation of the war. Giap confidently predicted that because of America's global military force commitments, the Johnson administration would choose withdrawal over escalation.

During Phase III of the offensive plan the VC/NVA units, augmented with defecting RVNAF forces, would maintain a constant military pressure on American units which would be isolated amid a hostile population. In addition, NVA units, held in reserve near Hue, reinforced by the divisions that had captured Khe Sanh, would be used to engage American units operating along the DMZ and the western border of South Vietnam. During Phase III Giap planned to attack and overrun the Marine airbase at Da Nang.

The members of the 13th Plenum and General Giap had a high degree of confidence in both their new strategic policy and in the operational plan. Like eighteenth century rationalists, they were imbued with the optimism that if they thought about their decision problem hard enough they could devise a way to overcome the difficulties they faced. They were wrong in that belief. As the contemporary philosopher Eric Hoffer noted (*Between the Devil and the Dragon*, p. 70.), “action is often the nemesis of ideas, and . . . of the men who formulated them.”

Thomas L. Cabbage II – Attorney-at-Law
The Law Centre at Dorchester House
Bartlesville, Oklahoma, USA

-
- ¹. Ironically, the military historian studying this important period owes much to General William B. Westmoreland’s personal sense of duty, honor and service to country. Because of attacks on him in the television media—demonstrably baseless attacks—he felt compelled to sue the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and others. A rich and voluminous historical record came out of that lawsuit. Much material that long might have remained classified became a part of the public record because of Westmoreland’s defense of his reputation.
 - ². T. L. Cabbage II, letter to father (Saigon: 8 February 1968), pp. 1–2 (“We [in military intelligence] knew Charlie was planning to hit right around Tet.... We were not entirely anticipating the attacks on the cities countrywide on the scale they mounted.”)
 - ³. T. L. Cabbage II, “Strategy and Rationality in the Vietnam War: Hanoi’s Decisionmaking and the Tet Offensive,” a paper presented at the Second International Conference on Strategy, U.S. Army War College, 7–9 February 1991.
 - ⁴. It is by no means clear whether, by this time, Giap had as an alternative, the ability to go back and tell Ho that the Plenum’s overall strategic recommendation might not work. All that is known for sure is that Giap went forward with the development and implementation of an operational plan.

-
5. Giap had several other reasons for initiating the *border battles* as part of Phase I. First, the operations would serve as needed training exercises. The VC/NVA forces needed to conduct a number of urban operations so they could learn from them practical lessons about the problems associated with attacking towns and large installations. Second, the units involved could practice large-scale coordinated operations. Third, attacks on American units would keep the American coffins going home—this in support of the psychological warfare aspect of the plan.