One kind of optimism, or supposed optimism, argues that if we think hard enough, are rational enough, we can solve all our problems. The eighteenth century, the Age of Reason, was supposed to be imbued with this kind of optimism. Whether it actually was or not I will leave to historians; certainly the hopes we hold out for reason in our world today are much more modest.¹

The link between ideas and action is rarely direct. There is almost always an intermediary step in which the idea is overcome. De Tocqueville points out that it is at times when passions start to govern human affairs that ideas are most obviously translated into political action. The translation of ideas into action is usually in the hands of people least likely to follow rational motives. Hence it is that action is often the nemesis of ideas, and sometimes of the men who formulated them.²

We must distinguish between a good decision and a good outcome.³

A paradox must be confronted: Good decision practices cannot ensure good outcomes. Outcomes are ruled, to one degree or another, by chance.⁴
I. INTRODUCTION

The overall theme of this series of U.S. Army War College conferences is "the theory and practice of Strategy." We are assembled this year to reflect on the "economic [and] . . . nonrational dimensions of strategic planning." Last year we looked at the "classical theories, and national styles or ethnocentrism manifested in Strategy." These papers—if the goals of Dr. Michael Handel and the War College are met—will add to a growing body of knowledge which, in turn, will lead to a better understanding of the proper rôle of Strategy in the formulation and execution of National Policy.\(^5\)

Many earlier works have studied the War in Vietnam (better described as the Second Indochina War), with particular emphasis on the Communists’ 1968 Winter-Spring Offensive (the Tết Offensive).\(^6\) In this paper the North Vietnamese strategic and operational planning for that offensive are the historical vehicle to study the rationality \textit{vel non} of the actual strategic policy formation and operational planning effort.\(^7\)

The Tết Offensive was part of the implementation of an offensive military operations plan that followed a decision made by the political leadership in Hanoi to undertake a new strategic policy.

\textit{In early 1967 … the 13th Plenum of the North Vietnamese Central Committee … called for a "spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time." [No] more protracted war, but an all-out drive for victory at one stroke. This was the new strategy—the first step on the way to [what the U.S. called] the [1968] Tết offensive.}\(^8\)

This political decision represented a major change in North Vietnam's strategic policy.

By early 1967, the North Vietnamese (Hanoi’s) military effort within the Republic of South Vietnam was in serious trouble.\(^9\) Following the entry of American ground forces into the war in South Vietnam, annual Communist 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 Communists were making no headway
in their war efforts. Instead, the enormous firepower and mobility of the American forces effectively checked the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units. The Communists 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 (U.S.) and Government of Vietnam (GVN) 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. That new course of action was manifested in the 1968 Winter-Spring Offensive.

II. FRAMES OF REFERENCE FOR ANALYSIS:

The principal question explored in this Paper is: Were the strategic policy and operational plan that led to the Têt Offensive rational? To answer that question we also must answer this further question: How do we define and judge rationality in a strategic policy formation and operational planning context?

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF RATIONALITY:

As a prelude to further discussion, some effort must be made to define what is meant, or what can be meant, by the term "rationality" as it is applied to strategic policy and operational plan decisionmaking. "Rationality" is not a genuine term of scientific psychology or decision analysis. Instead, it is a concept of philosophy and economics. However, even within those disciplines the definition of rationality is continually debated. Fortunately, there is general agreement that the concept of rationality (or rational thought) should satisfy some basic requirements of consistency and coherence. Stated otherwise, "rational decisions" cannot be arbitrary or capricious.

The most common, and in this context the most relevant, definition holds that decisionmaking action is rational if it is in line with—or more precisely, if it is "logical" or "consistent" with—the values and beliefs of the individual decisionmaker concerned. This definition specifies rational decisionmaking in a normative sense.
THE USE OF REASON:

What difference does the rationality vel non of a decision make? Reason, taken by itself, is instrumental. Reason cannot be used to select a decisionmaker’s options in terms of final goals. Reason cannot mediate for the strategic policymaker or operational planner in pure conflicts over which alternative final goals to pursue. Decisionmakers have to settle these issues in other ways. All reason can do is help the decisionmaker reach agreed-on goals more efficiently.14

Thus, rationality is not a vague ideal. Because reason is an instrumental concept it cannot tell a decisionmaker were to go; at best it can tell the policymaker and planner how to get there with greater efficiency. It is a decisionmaking tool that can be employed in the service of whatever goals—good or bad—the decisionmaker seeks to achieve. According to Herbert A. Simon, "it makes a great deal of difference in our view of the human condition whether we attribute our difficulties to evil, or to ignorance, to the baseness of goals, or our not knowing how to reach them."15

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM OF DECISION ANALYSIS:

There are two determinants of every decision: first, the decisionmaker's motive or goal, and, second, his understanding of the actual decision problem. Neither of these two determinants can be observed in the relation to a description of the decision problem and the actual decision or the consequences of the decision. As we now attempt to understand and explain the strategic policy decision made by the individuals constituting the 13th Plenum, and the operational plans for the Têt offensive made by General Giap at the Ministry of Defense, it seems we are faced with an insolvable problem: the important determinants of the decisionmaking processes cannot be observed. Thus, every post-decision analyst truly faces this seemingly impossible problem: there are two unknowns, but only one equation. Nevertheless, such a problem can be solved if one of the unknowns is eliminated. The classical way of doing so is by making an assumption either about the decisionmaker's goal or about the understanding of the decision problem.16
THE RATIONAL ACTOR PARADIGM:

The customary assumption, made by students of decisionmaking, is that of normative rationality. That is, the analyst assumes that the decisionmaker has a perfect understanding of the decision problem. Consequently, the decisionmaker is able to select that course of action which best leads to the goal. With this assumption, the decisionmaker's actions by definition always must mirror his motives perfectly, and the actual consequences of the decisions are seen as the logical consequences the decisionmaker intended. This solves the decisionmaking analyst's problem of explanation, because he is now able to ignore one of the unknowns in the equation, and he can concentrate on the other, i.e., the decisionmaker's motives. Explanation of rationality thus becomes a matter of inferring these motives. Once the motives have been inferred, the decisionmaker's behavior is fully explained. Conversely, by accepting the decisionmaker's motives as a given, the level of his understanding of the decision problem can be explored.\(^{17}\)

The "assumption of rationality" paradigm noted above is the general paradigm of lay psychology, as well as the paradigm of most behavioral sciences. In political science, for example, the paradigm is simply called the "rational actor paradigm." This paradigm serves as the general guide for most research concerning the conduct of international and national politics.\(^{18}\)

Obviously, and unfortunately, the basic premise of the rational actor paradigm—that the decisionmaker has perfect understanding of the decision problem—cannot be upheld for any but the simplest and most insignificant of decision problems. Even though the rational actor paradigm is in common use, it cannot account for any but the simplest decisions.\(^{19}\)

First, it is generally recognized that the people involved in strategic planning and operational decisionmaking will not have a perfect understanding of what will lead to what—an axiom fundamental in the decision problem assumed in the rational actor paradigm. For example, decisions are often based on projections of what the future may hold; many unforeseen things can intervene between the decision and what may come to be in that future time state. This necessarily introduces an element of unresolvable uncertainty in the actual relation between the decision and the consequences. Therefore, neither the decisionmaker's motives nor the
thought process can be inferred from the consequences of the decisions with any degree of certainty.\textsuperscript{20}

Second, strategic and operational decisions frequently require the military decisionmaker to rely on new, often unique configurations of information. Consequently, the decisionmaker cannot rely with certainty on any particular past experience. If he calls for more and better intelligence to assist him, he often will find that the collection means (human or technical)—even if they are timely—are not powerful enough to deal with the complexity of the decision problem.\textsuperscript{21}

Third, decision problems often require the military decisionmaker to integrate a considerable amount of information, much of which may be ambiguous at best and inconsistent at worst. Given that the decisionmaker has but a limited capacity for processing information, he may not always be able to find the decision that would lead to exactly those consequences which he sought to achieve. Consequently, his military decisions may not reflect his motives with any great fidelity.\textsuperscript{22}

There are good and powerful reasons for doubting that a decisionmaker's motives can be inferred from his decisions. Therefore the usefulness of the rational actor paradigm for explaining the behavior of military strategists and operational planners with real decision problems also is in doubt. The decision analyst would do well to look for an alternative if it is necessary to analyze the motives that underlie action.\textsuperscript{23}

If the equation is turned around and the motives are taken to be the "known" part of the equation, the rational actor paradigm can be used with better certainty to explore the quality of the decisionmaker's understand of the decision problem. As the factual context of the decision problem is developed in this Paper it will become clear that the motives of Hanoi's decisionmakers are known with reasonable certainty. Therefore, with the motives taken as a given, greater emphasis in terms of rationality \textit{vel non} will be given to the leadership in Hanoi understanding of the decision problem facing them in 1967.\textsuperscript{24}
BEYOND THE RATIONAL ACTOR PARADIGM:

Despite the fact that the rational actor paradigm may have a limited value for the purpose of studying the question of a decisionmaker’s understanding of the decision problem, the basic theory of rational decisionmaking simply is not tenable; thus, it is not suitable for decision analysis where the actor's motives are unknown. The rational actor paradigm presupposes that the process of arriving at a policy decision is essentially rational. Thus, decisionmakers are defined as rational actors who generally deal with policy problems by trying to find the best alternative—the one that emerges, after a thorough information search and careful deliberation, as the most likely to succeed in attaining the goals or values to be maximized. This is the descriptive theory of the paradigm. However, as noted above, the rational actor paradigm does not stand up very well as a descriptive theory. What then is the historian working as a decision analyst to do in the face of this problem with the model for decision-making analysis? Obviously, the traditional model must be replaced with "a variety of models and approaches"; new approaches which will make the historian aware of the multiplicity of personal, social, and political; factors that shape the process of decisionmaking. Its is probably fair to assume that no single alternative perspective will provide the satisfactory explanation of decisionmaking. The best that can reasonably be hoped for is that each alternative theoretical approach will offer "its own particular insights and [be] . . . more or less useful depending on the analytical concerns of the investigator and nature of the decision involved."25

OPTION 1: THE HUMAN JUDGMENT PARADIGM:

Real life necessarily forces the decisionmaker to rely on something other than perfect facts and a full understanding of the decision problem. One method of developing an alternative is to take as the point of departure the consequences of the purely epistemological problems of the rational actor paradigm. Instead we can assume that the decisionmaker will rely on what has been called "the cognitive process of last resort," i.e., human judgment.26

This alternative paradigm is called "the judgment paradigm" to underline its most important feature: it assumes that the decisions are based on the decisionmaker’s judgments rather than on the facts before him. This alternative paradigm considers the analysis of the actor’s judgments to be the key to understanding his
decisions. Analysis of decisions using the judgment paradigm requires that the decisionmaker's motives are presumed to be known. Such an assumption is no more problematic than the basic assumption in the rational actor paradigm. Necessarily, it is only by the fruitfulness vel non of the insights that flow from it that the value of this operative assumption can be assessed.\textsuperscript{27}

Since the motives of the decisionmakers in Hanoi are known with reasonable certainty, this alternative paradigm can be used to analyze the rationality vel non of the judgments made by the members of the 13th Plenum and by General Giap.

**OPTION 2: THE HIGH-LOW QUALITY ASSESSMENT PARADIGM:**

There is another reason for not using the rational actor paradigm. The concept of rationality involves an unavoidable degree of uncertainty. Irving L. Janis points out that the "term `non-rational' is especially misleading because it connotes `irrational,' `wildly unrealistic,' `crazy,' and other extreme epithets, which are not appropriate to conceptualizing seat-of-the-pants approaches" to decisionmaking. Because of this high degree of ambiguity in the term "rationality," philosopher of science Max Black proposes replacing what he sees as ill-defined terms by less ambiguous ones such as "reasonable" and "sensible," versus "hasty" and "short-sighted." For the same reason Janis suggests using terms like "high-quality" versus "low-quality" or "effective" versus "defective" when evaluating the procedures used by decisionmakers to arrive at their choices.\textsuperscript{28}

What criteria can be used to determine whether the process of effective versus defective policymaking is of "high" or "low" quality? The following seven procedural criteria have been suggested by Janis:

To the best of his ability, the decisionmaker [involved in "high-quality" analyses of a decision problem]:

1. Surveys a wide range of objectives to be fulfilled, taking account of the multiplicity of values that are at stake;

2. Canvasses a wide variety of alternative courses of action;

3. Intensively searches for new information relevant to evaluating the alternatives;
4. Correctly assimilates and takes account of new information or expert judgments to which he or she is exposed, even when that information or judgment does not support the course of action initially preferred;

5. Reconsiders the positive and negative consequences of alternatives originally relegated as unacceptable, making the final choice;

6. Carefully examines the cost and risk and negative consequences, as well as positive consequences, that could flow from the alternative that is preferred;

7. Makes detailed provisions for implementing and monitoring the chosen course of action, with special attention to contingency plans that might be required if various risks were known to materialize.\(^{29}\)

From this it necessarily follows that "any gross failure to meet one of the criteria can be regarded as a *symptom of defective policy making*.\(^{30}\)

In regard to the decisions reached by the 13th Plenum and by General Giap, there is a fair body of information about how the strategic policy and operational decisions were made. Therefore, this alternative paradigm can be used to study the quality of the decision-making process.

**OPTION 3: THE DEBACLE THEORY PARADIGM:**

Like most events viewed from the vantage point of hindsight, bad military outcomes known to be based on bad decisions, often appear in overly sharp relief. For those standing away from the event and the decisions of the day it is difficult to understand how the clues and harbingers of failure, which seem so clear after the fact, were originally overlooked by the decisionmakers. In the event, however, the strategic policymakers and operational planners do not have the luxury of waiting to see how their strategy and plans will play out before they make decisions. With this thought in mind, calling a strategic policy or an operational plan bad runs a high risk of being unnecessarily critical, perhaps even unjust to the actors. For this reason, according to Paul C. Nutt, cases that go beyond what appears to be mere "bad" policy and planning decisions to what appropriately can be termed "debacles" need to be studied. Obviously, the word
debacle is an highly emotive term. When it is used here the intent is to convey the notion of a decision that has gone very wrong.³¹

To label a very bad decision a debacle, says Nutt, at least one of two types of decision outcome must have occurred: either the decision must have been abandoned, or the decision criticized as being mistaken before the outcome was known. "Abandoned military decisions" are marked by operational plans that were substantially modified, reversed, or in the end are withdrawn after considerable operational effort has been expended or serious casualties are suffered, or both. "Mistaken decisions" are illustrated by plans made in the face of substantial criticism by informed people which provoked, and continue to provoke, considerable controversy. On the basis of these definitions, a "decision debacle" results when the strategic policy or operational planning choices, which are widely regarded as unwise, are overturned, or are never in fact implemented, after a considerable expenditure of resources.³²

The Têt Offensive cannot be categorized as a military plan that ran on rails from start to finish. In fact, the concept of operations was derailed in the opening days of Phase II of the Communists' operational plan. For this reason the strategic policy and operational plan also should be studied in terms of the Debacle Theory Paradigm.

PUTTING THE DECISION PROBLEM IN CONTEXT:

The purpose of this Paper is to explore in depth Hanoi's strategic policy and operational plan decisionmaking in the year that preceded the Têt Offensive. Some cursory pre-Têt history is necessary to set the stage for this discussion. Because the decision problems that faced the leadership in Hanoi must be put into context, some familiarity with the Communist strategy and the history of the war in the 1954-1966 period also is required. Once the decision problem is put in the broader context, the Paper focuses on what happened during the last year before Têt. The perceived need for a new strategic policy is explored. In addition, the explicit operational planning assumptions of North Vietnamese military planners, particularly those held by General Vo Nguyen Giap, and the key political leaders are examined. Then, the outline of the overall offensive plan is revealed. Finally his Paper discusses is how the strategic plans can be
characterized in terms of rationality, or in terms of an alternative decision analysis paradigm.

This analysis is done in what the behavioral scientists call the "literary" style. This cognitive action analysis style is believed to be an appropriate technique for studies concerned with individuals, and particularly with groups of persons or with sets of events. The literary style is often called the case study method. As a part of this style, a general plot outline of the decisionmaker's actions is unfolded; by doing so, a behavior or action sequence is explored as having a certain significance. The decisionmaking events are then interpreted—largely in terms of the specific purposes and perspectives of the decisionmakers rather than in terms of an abstract hypothesis that suggests a model of "perfect" decisionmaking.33

In terms of historiography it is axiomatic that there is no such thing as "historical" explanation, only the explanation of a historical event.34 The mere listing of past events—a simple chronicle—gives little meaningful substance to history. Thus the historian is required to transform what was done (the acts) into an explanation of why it was done (the actions). To do this, the succession of actions seen by the historian must be laid out as more than a bare sequence of events. The historian must unfold a scenario that has meaning by purposive or causal connection of diverse acts. The process of putting raw data into such succession of acts configurations has been called "colligation," i.e, "explaining an event by tracing its intrinsic relations to other events and locating it in its historical context"—which is said to yield a "significance narrative."35 Abraham Kaplan suggests that this "colligation" is an interpretation of events rather than their "explanation." This does not deny that it is explanatory; rather it emphasizes that it is the "act meanings" rather than the "actions meanings" which have been provided. A significance narrative explains what was done (the act) but not why it was done (the action). In this Paper, where the motives of the decisionmakers are known with reasonable certainty, it is possible to go beyond mere significance narration while putting the decision problem into context.36
III. THE PRELUDE - 1954 TO 1967

The Têt Offensive was part of a radical new strategy. To understand it, one must examine the strategic plan that preceded it. In addition, one must understand why the old strategy was not working.

HANOI'S ORIGINAL STRATEGIC PLAN:

Hanoi's initial long-range strategy for military operations in South Vietnam anticipated that its military and political struggle would occur in three phases. In the first or *opening phase*, a political organization and a guerrilla capability would be created in the South. Small-scale guerrilla warfare would commence; such efforts would grow in number and intensity over time. In the second or *movement phase*, larger base areas would be established. From these areas attacks by mobile forces would be launched. In the third or *concluding phase*, the final large-scale attacks would be launched to annihilate the opposing Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces. The three-phase strategy reflected Mao's People's War of National Liberation rubric. The participation of North Vietnam was to be concealed throughout the entire struggle period so that Hanoi could plausibly deny any direct involvement in the "peoples' revolution." Despite the cloak over Hanoi's involvement, the strategic objective of the struggle was to gain for Hanoi control of South Vietnam, as a prelude to annexing it into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN).37

THE FIRST PHASE OF HANOI'S STRATEGY:

Hanoi began the first phase of the struggle in 1954 after the Geneva Peace Accords were signed. During the first phase *Lao Dong* Party officials from the North created and organized the National Liberation Front (NLF) in the South. The NLF was the communist-dominated front organization used by Hanoi for political action in South Vietnam. Concurrently, the Communist cadre forces in the South commenced low-level guerrilla operations. They also established secure bases for larger operations, and began to force the Republic of Vietnam Armed Force (RVNAF) units into a defensive posture. In addition, land and sea infiltration routes from North Vietnam were established, and a vast system of logistic support for the numerous base areas was created.38
HANOI’S CHANGE OF STRATEGY IN LATE 1963:

In November 1963, after the coup that overthrew South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, there was political turmoil in South Vietnam. In December the Lao Dong Central Committee convened its 9th Plenum to reappraise its strategy regarding action in South Vietnam. The final resolution of the Plenum ordered the initiation of a major effort to build up revolutionary military forces in the South—forces needed in the near term to tip decisively the balance of military force in favor of the Communists. While Hanoi recognized the worth of seizing opportunities to win victories in a relatively short time, the Communist party organization in the South also was ordered to be prepared as well for a protracted People’s War struggle, with the three transitional phases. The 9th Plenum reaffirmed the Party’s basic policy that the war was to be confined within South Vietnam. Hanoi thus continued in its resolve not to participate overtly in the fighting.39

AMERICA GOES TO WAR; HANOI’S REACTION:

United States action in August 1964 following the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin" incidents represented a crucial military and psychological turning point in the course of the Vietnam War. What followed—the fleeting engagements at sea, and the larger retaliatory strikes against targets along the North Vietnamese coast—marked the first overt direct confrontations between North Vietnamese and American military forces.40

Late in the summer of 1964 Hanoi also escalated the war. A regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiment was sent into South Vietnam.41 No effort was made to disguise it as a Viet Cong unit. By February 1965, the total number of NVA units infiltrated into the Central Highlands of South Vietnam had increased to four regiments—all part of the 325th NVA Division. Hanoi had decided to make the Central Highlands the operational area and primary target of the NVA units. Hanoi’s objective was to split South Vietnam in two along the Pleiku to Qui Nhon axis. Believing that the end of the war was imminent, Hanoi decided that overt NVA intervention was worth the risks.42

Sending NVA regiments south signaled a crucial turning point in the Second Indochina War. Previously Hanoi fostered the fiction that the military activity in the
South was an internal war of revolution. Once its forces were committed to battle, the fiction that was part of the earlier strategy could not be maintained. Thus, Hanoi "dramatically altered the entire thrust and scope of the conflict."43 This change clearly was one of the key command decisions of the war strategists and operational planners in Hanoi.44

HANOI ATTACKS THE AMERICANS:

At the start of 1965 Hanoi implemented another key command decision—orders were given to launch major actions directed against U.S. personnel in South Vietnam. Reacting to these direct challenges, the U.S. President, Lyndon B. Johnson, first ordered the evacuation of American military dependents from South Vietnam. The President eventually decided to send U.S. combat troops—as opposed to advisors—into South Vietnam.45

The leadership in Hanoi appreciated that its offensive actions might provoke Johnson. On 5 March 1965, the Lao Dong Party warned its members that the situation in the South might go through "complex changes" in 1965. Party members were told that the struggle in the South probably would be a long and drawn out affair. However, in its analysis of the situation, the Party minimized the possibilities either of the United States sending troops to the South on a massive scale, or launching ground attacks against the North.46 In this assessment Hanoi partially misjudged Washington's reaction. The Americans did come, and in very large numbers, albeit not for the purpose of invading North Vietnam.

HANOI'S NEED FOR A NEW STRATEGY IN MID-1965:

Thus it was that, in July 1965, the Communists were faced with the urgent need to formulate a new strategy or develop a tactical innovation to respond to the massive intervention of the U.S. combat troops in the ground war.47 This task proved to be far from easy. In the first place, the Communist military leaders knew very little about the composition and capabilities of the American forces. Second, they knew little about the way the U.S. intended to conduct ground operations in South Vietnam.48

In an article written in 1967 under the pen name of Troung Son, one of the highest-ranking Communist military leaders in South Vietnam admitted that during
the summer of 1966—one year after the U.S. began its force buildup—COSVN and its key military commands still were probing to resolve many puzzling questions about the U.S. strategy and the American rules of engagement. They also were concerned about the total strength of the Americans, and even about the specific capabilities of each major U.S. unit.49 *Often, knowing precisely what you don't know is as important as knowing what you do know.*50

By late 1965 General Vo Nguyen Giap, whose political star earlier had waned, was once again in Ho Chi Minh's good graces. Giap and General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the commander of Communist forces in the South, began a public and rhetorical battle over the Communist strategy for waging the war in South Vietnam.51

In essence, Giap favored a strategy emphasizing guerrilla warfare and "protracted war" so as to erode American willpower over the long haul. Thanh wanted a "big unit," conventional war which would destroy large American units and installations. The debate raged through 1966 and ended in … 1967.52

In the end this debate was overcome by events—events controlled by General William Westmoreland commanding the U.S. forces.

THE NORTHERN PROVINCES OPTION:

In February 1966, Hanoi further escalated the level of its direct involvement in the South. Two more NVA infantry divisions—the 324B and the 341st—were sent south. They crossed the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into Quang Tri, the northernmost province of South Vietnam. At the same time, Hanoi moved several regimental-sized NVA units from their Laotian bases into Thua Thien, the province immediately south of Quang Tri.53 This strategic deployment was a dangerous variation to what previously had been Hanoi’s "border war strategy."54

The geography of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces (which Hanoi called the Tri-Thien Front) favored the NVA forces. In *Vietnam at War*, General Phillip Davidson explains the threat posed by the movement of NVA forces into that area:
The two northern provinces of South Vietnam are isolated from the rest of the country by a steep ridge which runs [east] from the Laotian border to the sea, striking the ocean just north of Da Nang. A single road traverses this ridge, through the infamous Hai Van Pass, narrow, winding, easily cut, and vulnerable to ambushes. This problem of poor [land] communications was aggravated by the lack of all-weather ports north of the pass. [Thus] … logistic support of any sizable U.S./GVN countering force in the two northern provinces would be difficult.\footnote{55}

There were few U.S. or RVNAF forces in the Tri-Thien Front area when the NVA units moved into that sector. The Americans quickly countered the NVA deployment by reinforcing the one South Vietnamese (ARVN) division and the single United States Marine Corps battalion that were operating in this area of northern South Vietnam.\footnote{56}

General Westmoreland believed that Hanoi’s primary intent in sending large NVA units into the northern provinces was to force the United States and GVN to divert troops from operations in the more heavily populated areas. Westmoreland also saw behind this enemy move a more ominous plan—one to seize and isolate the northern area and set up a "liberation" government in the area.\footnote{57}

HANOI'S CRISIS OF 1966:

In May 1966 the annual Southwest Monsoon began in the South. It marked the end of the Communists’ 1965-66 Winter-Spring Campaign. By then it was clear that in the face of American operations Hanoi had lost the initiative. General Westmoreland’s several search-and-destroy operations proved to be too formidable for the Viet Cong and the NVA forces that opposed them. The Communist offensives all were broken and the Viet Cong and NVA forces repeatedly suffered heavy casualties.\footnote{58}

The Hanoi leadership also saw the need for a thorough strategic reappraisal of the situation in the South. During the summer of 1966, the leadership in Hanoi disappeared from public view. Insiders knew that a high-level conference was debating the pros and cons of General Thanh’s then-current strategy. Thanh, continuing the debate begun in 1965, was still arguing for large-scale, set-piece battles on an ever-increasing scale.\footnote{59}
By mid-1966 the Communists had a better understanding of the U.S. strategy and how the American forces would be committed to combat. The Americans certainly were a tougher opponent than the French. General Nguyen Chi Thanh had studied the actions of the U.S. forces in South Vietnam. He concluded that the American military effort reflected five main goals:

To disperse Viet Cong and NVA units, thereby forcing the Communists to revert to guerrilla warfare. This clearly was the goal of the large-scale search-and-destroy operations of the U.S. forces.

To spread Viet Cong and NVA forces thin over the entire territory of South Vietnam and destroy them piecemeal with superior firepower. This effectively amounted to forcing the Communists to fight the war on U.S. terms, while making the guerrilla forces more vulnerable.

To expand the Government of Vietnam (GVN) controlled areas through pacification. This allowed for the use of the pacified areas as bases from which to launch further attacks against Communist-controlled areas.

To mop up local guerrilla units, thereby protecting the strategic lines of communication, especially the links between bases. This would ease American troop movements and ensure the effectiveness of any new American offensive operations.

To isolate North Vietnam from the South. This was designed to stop or significantly reduce North Vietnam's military aid to the Communists in the South.\textsuperscript{60}

To his credit it can be said that General Thanh accurately understood the mission of the American forces.

When all the Communist counter-options were considered realistically, Thanh argued, the most effective anti-U.S. strategy was to conduct determined and continuous offensive operations throughout South Vietnam. Any other course of action, Thanh argued, would doom Communist efforts to regain the initiative in the conduct of the war.\textsuperscript{61} Thanh saw that with the Americans on the battlefield in South Vietnam, the days of fighting according to the "old customs," i.e., by
protracted guerrilla warfare, were gone.\textsuperscript{62} Without naming names, Thanh called General Giap "old-fashioned"—Thanh accused Giap of viewing the military situation in a backward-looking way "that is detached from reality." Thus, said Thanh, Giap spends his time "looking for new factors in the formulas that exist in books, and mechanically copying ... past experiences or the experiences of foreign countries ... in accordance with a dogmatic tendency."\textsuperscript{63} Thanh (commanding troops in South Vietnam) believed that Giap (far away in Hanoi) did not have a correct appreciation of the actual combat situation in the South.\textsuperscript{64} In his frustration, Thanh issued the ancient field commander's challenge to Giap: "Come with me into Macedonia," that is, do not dictate policy when you have not seen the true situation.\textsuperscript{65}

Truong Son, another theorist who favored General Thanh's views, noted the need to minimize American air superiority and mass firepower advantages. To do this, Son said, the Viet Cong and NVA units must launch close-range attacks on the American headquarters, airfields, and bases—and such attacks should be both frequent and on a massive scale. Truong Son claimed that the Communist side would be much better off with this aggressive approach. Timidly searching for any other strategy—something that involved no immediate and decisive action—merely would allow U.S. forces to improve their positions. To waiver, Truong argued, would result in the further destruction of the Viet Cong and the NVA units.\textsuperscript{66}

Not all agreed with Thanh and Truong Son. North Vietnamese military expert Vuong Thua Vu supported the "traditionalist" views of Giap. Vuong was skeptical about the efficacy of a strategy of large-scale, Viet Cong and NVA unit battles. Vu urged caution; he believed that Truong's concepts should be "developed more profoundly"—\textit{e.g.}, debated at length in Hanoi.\textsuperscript{67}

NVA Major General Tran Do, the third-ranking officer in the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), seemingly sided with Giap. At least, he stressed the worth of the guerrilla force operations. He argued that further significant gains still could be made by guerrilla warfare with repeated attacks aimed at American lines of communication and rear bases. This was a strategy of patient effort, and Tran Do noted that in a 1966 message, Ho Chi Minh stated: "The war may still last ten, twenty years, or longer."\textsuperscript{68} In Hanoi, the strategist, La Ba, also extolled the virtues
of guerrilla warfare, giving it credit for numerous Viet Cong successes in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{FOR LACK OF A PLAN, MORE OF THE SAME:}

The Communists' 1966-67 Winter-Spring (or Dry Season) campaign began in late October 1966. Notwithstanding the very spirited debate over strategy during the summer of 1966, the Viet Cong and NVA forces continued to fight according to the strategy previously adopted by Hanoi; \textit{i.e.}, their attacks were neither frequent nor massive. The Communists continued to pursue the classic People's War phase two conventional war-of-movement concept.\textsuperscript{70} Meanwhile, during that campaigning season the U.S. forces for their part successfully stepped up search-and-destroy operations. Thus, for a second straight year, the Communist forces were roughly treated by their foe.\textsuperscript{71} Even before the end of 1966 it was clear to virtually all of the Communist leaders that the Viet Cong and NVA forces had lost the initiative. Had they also lost the war in South Vietnam?

\textbf{IV. HO CHI MINH, AND THE 13TH PLENUM ASSESSMENT}

\textbf{THE SITUATION IN EARLY 1967:}

The year 1967 began with more bitter debates within the North Vietnamese Politburo over what to do in South Vietnam. The so-called "North firsters," like Giap, Truong Chinh, and their supporters, held firmly to the position that priority should be given to political struggle (\textit{dau tranh}) and to increased guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam. The rival view, espoused by Nguyen Chi Thanh and Le Duan, was that the key to victory lay in big battles between the Viet Cong and NVA units and the large U.S. ground combat units.\textsuperscript{72}

\textbf{THE EFFECT OF U.S. STRATEGY:}

General Westmoreland's concept of operations in 1966 and early 1967 made the Communist debate irrelevant. The U.S. forays into the Communist base areas, and the hard-hitting mobile operations along the frontiers of South Vietnam had effectively undermined the foundations on which both Giap and Thanh had built their competing strategies. The U.S. offensives in the interior base areas (\textit{e.g.},
the Cedar Falls and Junction City operations) nullified Giap’s strategy of protected guerrilla war. The Americans had driven the Viet Cong and the NVA units away from the guerrillas and deprived the latter of vital combat unit support. Thanh’s concept also suffered severely. The Viet Cong and NVA units were no match for the Americans. They lost every battle. The Communist had lost the ability to move large units freely which was essential to Thanh’s strategy.73

HO CHI MINH INTERVENES:

By early 1967, the Communists’ offensive military capability in South Vietnam had deteriorated so dangerously that Ho Chi Minh became certain that the time had arrived for a sweeping reappraisal of the Communist military strategy.74 Ho believed that the military needed to implement a new strategy to deal with the massive intervention of U.S. combat troops and firepower in the ground war. It was clear to Ho that the on-going debate over a proper response was not the way to resolve the critical problem.75 It was equally clear to Ho that if an acceptable counter-strategy was not devised, and if Communist units merely continued to employ the tactics and strategy drawn from the Second Phase of the People's War, then the Communist's military effort against South Vietnam would end up being little more than a nuisance to the government in the South. In addition, worse things might soon happen in the North or in Laos.76

Exercising his unquestioned absolute political power, Ho told his principal advisors that on the military, the political, and the diplomatic fronts, one thing was clear—Hanoi now was losing the war. Ho told Giap and Thanh, and other key military comrades, that the strategy of "more of the same" in the South had to be restudied—and probably abandoned. A similar message was delivered to the Communist political leaders. Ho was certain of the need for a new strategy.

THE 13TH PLENUM IS CONVENED:

For the purpose of contemplative governance, Plenums were convened from time to time in Hanoi to study critical policy decisions. For example, in December 1965, the 12th Plenum was convened when the arrival of large numbers of U.S. combat troops in South Vietnam prompted the need for a reappraisal of the Communist's military and political strategy. In early 1967, there was the need to convene another. Thus, probably during March, 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.\(^77\) Ho’s charge to that body contained a *precommitment to change*. The stage was set for a new and radical strategy—one that would return the initiative of the war to Hanoi.\(^78\)

**THE PLENUM’S DECISION AND RECOMMENDATION:**

When the members of the 13th Plenum studied the military and political situation in South Vietnam, they came to several conclusions about various interrelated aspects of the overall war effort. These aspects included the following: base areas, casualties, pacification, bombing of North Vietnam, invasion threats, dissent in North Vietnam, the Soviet-Chinese schism, and Ho’s age. All these of aspects were important to the final conclusions of the Plenum members. Each will be discussed in detail later in this Paper.

In general the Plenum concluded that Hanoi was faced militarily with a "use it or lose it" situation. Given the precommitment to adopt a new strategy, the fact that the Plenum returned a recommendation for change is not surprising. The war was being lost; they had but to resolve how to win it. In plain terms, it was time to snatch victory from defeat. How could this be done in theory?

The answer was surprisingly simple: the military effort would be concentrated on an immediate war-ending solution. The long drawn out "People’s War" approach had given way to a program for victory in a single season of campaigning. The Plenum members concluded that a general military offensive which led up to simultaneous attacks on all the major cities of the South, coupled with a popular uprising, had a reasonable chance to succeed. In short, the military effort would be focused on the contemplated last days of the third or final victory stage of the Peoples' War concept.\(^79\)

The general matters noted above were the issues that shaped the final recommendation of the Plenum.\(^80\) When the Plenum ended its deliberations in May 1967, its members issued a final report. The report recommended a radical new course of military action: the slow, steady progression of the classical People’s War was to be replaced with a new war-winning strategy; one that would end the war of national unification in the near term. The Plenum's call was for a
"spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time." By contrast, the resolution of the 12th Plenum in 1965 called for "victory within a relatively short period of time." The consensus of the 13th Plenum clearly required prompt decisive action: the time for protracted war was past; the next offensive was to be last; and it would be an all-out drive for victory at one stroke. That was the key to the new strategy.\(^8^1\)

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 are 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 Communist and U.S. 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 concept's implementation 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.\(^8^2\) Once the political aspect—the strategic decision-making aspect—of the Plenum and Politburo's business was concluded, it was General Giap's responsibility to devise a plan of action to implement the recommended new strategy. It is by no means clear whether, by this time, Giap had as an alternative, the power to go back and tell Ho that the Plenum's overall strategic recommendation would never work. All that is known for sure is that Giap went forward with the development and implementation of an operational plan.

**GIAP'S PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS:**

Part and parcel of every military operations plan are the stated or implied assumptions about the factors bearing on the conduct of operation.

Such assumptions generally include suppositions about future enemy strength or action, terrain, weather, one's own forces, and other conditions which the planners foresee as pertinent to the execution of the operation.\(^8^3\)
As a military planner North Vietnam's Defense Minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the principal author of the 1967 Winter-Spring Offensive, was no different in how he went about his business. He based his concept of TCK-TKN on three categories of interrelated assumptions: some about his own situation and forces; some about the GVN and its forces; and some about the U.S. political situation and the American forces.84 Because these assumptions had a profound impact on the offensive plan that was developed to carry out the mandate of the Plenum and Politburo they merit further discussion.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE COMMUNIST SITUATION:

General Giap, used the following assumptions about the Viet Cong and NVA forces in developing his plan for implementing the concept of the TCK-TKN offensive:

The Communist forces that would be available for combat action were sufficient to accomplish the military objectives of the offensive campaign.

The requisite degree of operational secrecy could be maintained; strategic surprise was possible.

The success of the general offensive-general uprising strategy was all but guaranteed, so failure was not a realistic outcome of going forward; on the contrary, to do nothing was fraught with danger.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM:

Five general assumptions about the state of affairs in South Vietnam were used by General Giap in developing his plan for the TCK-TKN offensive:

The Government of Vietnam (GVN) had no support among the people of South Vietnam; it would collapse in the face of a nationwide offensive.

The people of South Vietnam would stage a popular uprising if the conditions for it were right.
The people of South Vietnam would rally behind a coalition government led by the Communists.

The Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) lacked motivation and would desert or defect when struck a hard blow.

The people and the armed forces of the GVN despised the Americans and would turn on them.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE AMERICANS:

General Giap, used the following assumptions about the U.S. in developing his concept of $TCK-TKN$:

- President Johnson and the American public lacked the will to fight indefinitely in Vietnam.
- The firepower and mobility of the American military could be neutralized by increasing the number of targets the U.S. had to defend.

V. THE WINTER-SPRING OFFENSIVE PLAN: $TCK-TKN$

THE TCK-TKN OUTLINE:

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 1967 Winter-Spring Offensive was to end the U.S. presence in South Vietnam. In theory that was to be accomplished after formation of a coalition government in Saigon following the fall of the Thieu-Ky government and the collapse of the RVNAF. In conjunction with the new government, the NLF would play a major rôle in arranging for the Americans to leave South Vietnam. The beauty of the plan was that the exit of the Americans would be accomplished with a minimum of actual combat between Communist
and American forces.\textsuperscript{85} Alternately, the U.S. forces would be ejected after the capture of Khe Sanh, Hué, and Da Nang.

The \textit{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 U.S. political and military institutions; and then oust the U.S. from Vietnam through follow-up negotiations.\textsuperscript{86} The quick unification of Vietnam under the Hanoi regime was the ultimate goal of the strategy on which the 1967 Winter-Spring Offensive was based.

\textbf{THE THREE-PRONGED PLAN:}

Giap's overall concept of the \textit{TCK-TKN} operation was bold and imaginative: "[I]n one operation [there] was [to be] the mating of [both] political \textit{dau tranh} [(struggle)] and military \textit{dau tranh} leading to the culminating General Offensive-General Uprising."\textsuperscript{87} In broad outline, the plan of attack "had three independent parts, and the Communists dubbed it a three-pronged offensive—[one with] military, political, and … troops proselyting."\textsuperscript{88} According to Giap, "[t]he military prong would be the most important—the Communists called it the `lever.' Giap’s lever had three distinct phases to be carried out over a period of several months."\textsuperscript{89}

\textbf{COORDINATED OFFENSIVE:}

By the end of 1967, the Viet Cong and NVA strength in South Vietnam, and that available in the neighboring border sanctuary areas, was approximately 323,000. This figure does not include those units and men then in the infiltration pipeline. Of that total, approximately 130,000 were combat troops; the guerrilla forces and \textit{Viet Cong} infrastructure were about 160,000 strong. The balance was made up of administrative and rear service elements. Giap's Order of Battle consisted of twelve infantry divisions located in I, II and III CTZ areas. These divisions and other separate units comprised a total of 44 infantry regiments supported by 20 artillery and air-defense regiments. Stated otherwise, Giap had over 230 combat and six sapper battalions. The available combat force seemed adequate for the tasks given to it.\textsuperscript{90}
In the event, the number of Viet Cong and NVA troops actually committed to the initial Phase II attacks was about 84,000. Of this number 67,000 were in Viet Cong Local Force (LF) and Main Force (MF) battalions, companies and platoons, or in the regular NVA units. The remainder were comprised of guerrillas, along with administrative services, and some political infrastructure (VCI) personnel.\footnote{91}

**TCK-TKN (PHASE I):**

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 Têt attacks on 30 January 1968.\footnote{92} The Viet Cong and 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.\footnote{93}

By these border assaults, [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 Viet Cong to storm the cities (his eventual targets), all located in the interior."\footnote{94}

Once the U.S. 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. Phase I actions also would serve to mask the preparations being made for the assaults against southern cities at the start of Phase II.\footnote{95}

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 U.S. 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 Têt 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.\footnote{96}
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 Viet Cong and 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 plans.97

TCK-TKN (PHASE II):

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.98

During Phase II the NVA forces in I and II CTZ would engage American forces. However, the Viet Cong units, as well as the guerrilla forces, would avoid all contact with the American ground forces. Instead the Viet Cong and guerrillas would attack the South Vietnamese cities, the ARVN 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 ARVN and U.S. 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.99

Giap gave the Viet Cong the role of attacking the ARVN 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 rôle also afforded a better opportunity for the Viet Cong forces to infiltrate into attack positions prior to the offensive. The NVA forces would have been given away by their accents. Using the Viet Cong 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.100
The second prong of the three-pronged offensive—troops proselyting—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 ARVN 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 ARVN's ranks. Giap foresaw whole ARVN units either melting away, or better yet, turning their weapons against other ARVN units or the Americans.¹⁰¹

During Phase II, according to Giap's plan, the puppet Thieu-Ky government would be overthrown; the RVNAF would be defeated; Saigon, Hué, and most of the major metropolitan areas of the South would come under the control of the coalition government; the U.S. forces would be isolated; and President Johnson would discover that he could no longer count on a puppet government to justify a continued U.S. presence in South Vietnam. Faced with such circumstances, Giap believed, the U.S. 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.¹⁰²

TCK-TKN (PHASE III):

During Phase III of the offensive plan the Viet Cong and NVA units, augmented with defecting ARVN forces, would maintain a constant military pressure on U.S. units which would be isolated amid a hostile population. In addition, NVA units, held in reserve near Hué, reinforced by the divisions that had captured Khe Sanh, would be used to engage U.S. 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.¹⁰³
VI. DETAILS OF THE PLENUM'S CONSIDERATIONS

THE PLENUM'S ESTIMATE OF THE SITUATION:

In order to make valid judgments later about the rationality of the Plenum's decisionmaking, a closer look at the factors it considered is required. The Plenum's decision problem and decision frame must be put into context.

A "decision problem" is defined by the acts or options among which a decisionmaker must choose, the possible outcomes or consequences of these acts, and the contingencies or conditional probabilities that relate outcome to acts. The term "decision frame" refers to the decisionmaker's conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice. The frame that a decisionmaker adopts is controlled partly by the formulation of the problem and partly by the norms, habits, and personal characteristics of the decisionmaker, or by the restraints of his institutional setting.104

Reviewing the military situation in the South the Plenum members concluded that four factors necessitated an immediate change in Communist strategy, namely:

The U.S. forces in the South were much stronger than the French forces had ever been. In the First Indochina War, the Dien Bien Phu victory by the Viet Minh had sufficed to bring about the Geneva Accords. In the present war, and given the military might and firepower of the U.S., the Communists entertained no hopes of achieving a similar decisive victory in a series of set-piece battles against U.S. forces.

North Vietnam's strategy of "enveloping the cities with the rural areas," a tactic proven to be effective during the First Indochina War, no longer worked in the face of the combined US-RVNAF efforts. The old and clearly obsolescent strategy not only failed to bring about a single decisive victory, but it also retrogressed the war toward Mao Tse-tung's first strategic phase of guerrilla warfare.

If protracted war was to continue in its present course, North Vietnam would incur ever-increasing losses. In the long run, aggravated attrition
in manpower and material resources might cause even the Communist regime in the North to collapse.

Since discontinuance of the war was not an option, and neither was the status quo, the only alternative was taking decisive action in the South.\textsuperscript{105}

These matters were among the critical issues that shaped the final recommendation of the Plenum.\textsuperscript{106} The time for a clear change in strategy seemed to be at hand, or so the Plenum members thought.

BASE AREAS:

With regard to base areas—as focal points of the Communist military effort—the situation inside South Vietnam was seen by the Plenum members as critical. In the short-term, or in terms of what General Westmoreland hoped to accomplish with his search-and-destroy efforts, the U.S. forays into the base areas were failures. The total Communist casualties were relatively light, and the Viet Cong and the NVA units escaped intact. Still, the Plenum could not ignore the long-term effect of these search-and-destroy operations.\textsuperscript{107}

Both Generals Thanh and Giap viewed the U.S. incursions into the base areas as real disasters for the Communists. From Hanoi’s perspective, the American search-and-destroy operations were effectively dealing with the Viet Cong and NVA forces, and the guerrilla threat to South Vietnam. The Viet Cong and NVA units could operate only in the border areas. Without large-force support the guerrillas were isolated and impotent.\textsuperscript{108}

The Plenum concluded that the Communists in South Vietnam had lost initiative on the battlefields in the South. Both the Viet Cong and the NVA forces repeatedly had to abort attacks in support of guerrillas in the populated areas. U.S. search-and-destroy operations meant that the Viet Cong and NVA units could not be safely based near any of the populated areas. In short, the U.S. efforts to shield the South Vietnamese cities and populated areas had forced the Communist military to rely almost exclusively on the border sanctuaries as a means of surviving on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{109}
The use of border sanctuaries—the so-called "peripheral strategy"—had clear disadvantages. In order to operate in the border areas, the Communists had to move supplies from secure areas in Laos and Cambodia to the Viet Cong and NVA units located deep inside South Vietnam. Where once Hanoi was able to support many of its forces by sea with relative ease, U.S. naval efforts had established an effective blockade of the coast of South Vietnam. The U.S. naval operations forced Hanoi to abandon plans to bring in large tonnages of supplies by sea. Weather conditions imposed restrictions on the Communists' land lines of communication (LOC's), especially during the wet season. North Vietnam's petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL), wheeled vehicle, and vehicular maintenance needs were increasing. Use of the long rugged Ho Chi Minh Trail land supply route through Laos had its attendant difficulties.\textsuperscript{110}

Even within the South the Viet Cong and NVA commanders were hard pressed to support any large-scale military operations along the coastal plains because of the long, insecure LOC's from the border areas to the coastal regions. Thus, it was virtually impossible to make the presence of the large Viet Cong and NVA units felt in the heavily populated areas. Worse still, access to manpower, taxes, rice and other supplies, all normally procured from the populated coastal areas, was being denied to the Communists. Hanoi was forced to supply manpower from the North, and to make up for supplies of rice from the coastal provinces of I and II Corps, Hanoi was forced to transport rice from North Vietnam and buy rice from Cambodia.\textsuperscript{111}

The Plenum recognized that even Giap's favored strategy—emphasis on guerrilla warfare—had ceased to be a viable option for successful military operations in the South. The American operations directed against the Communist base areas also were affecting indirectly the guerrillas operating near the populated areas. The guerrillas had lost the operational support of the Viet Cong and NVA units, without which they had little more than nuisance value. The guerrilla units' actual troop strength also declined as the better-trained soldiers were reassigned to make up losses in the Viet Cong battalions. Of equal concern, the guerrillas' once plentiful sources of arms and ammunition dried up when they were separated from the larger units which were their main sources of logistical support. Feeling isolated, the morale of the individual guerrillas was on the decline.\textsuperscript{112}
MOUNTING CASUALTIES:

Neither Giap's nor Thanh's strategy would work if the size of the Communist force in South Vietnam was seriously cut. The Plenum members took note of mounting casualty figures. Despite Hanoi's advocacy of protracted warfare as the means to meet and cope with America's enlarged war effort, by 1967 North Vietnam began to feel the war's increasingly debilitating impact. The ratio of human losses—one American for every ten Communist soldiers—was of great concern to President Johnson and the Americans, but the number brought no joy in Hanoi. 

After the entry of U.S. ground-combat forces into Vietnam, the numbers of Viet Cong and NVA casualties increased rapidly. In 1966, Communist battle deaths totaled about 5,000 men a month. By early 1967 the total Communist losses (i.e., all the KIA's, WIA's, MIA's, POW's, the defectors and nonbattle casualties) exceeded 15,000 per month. On the replacement side of the troop strength ledger, the figures were equally grim. The Viet Cong could recruit only about 3,500 men per month. NVA infiltration replacements averaged about 7,000 per month. The so-called "cross-over point" had been exceeded, i.e., more Communist troops were being put out of action than could be recruited in-country or infiltrated from the North.

GVN'S PACIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS:

The Plenum was concerned about the character and the pace of the Government of Vietnam's pacification and development programs. There appeared to be a clear chance that if more was done in that regard, particularly with more U.S. emphasis, the programs would be successful. In the South the Communists had lost control of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Vietnamese in the last half of 1966 and the first quarter of 1967. This reduced the Communist tax and food base and made recruiting more difficult. As a corollary to that, control of the "lost" people gave the Thieu-Ky government in Saigon consequent political and economic advantage.

Saigon's real efforts at nation-building in the South were even more alarming to the Plenum members. The GVN's growing efforts to establish a real constitutional government, coupled with the relative stability of the Thieu-Ky regime, were seen by the Plenum members as the beginning of a significant shift in the political situation in South Vietnam. The Thieu-Ky clique was looking less like a puppet
regime. If this trend continued it meant that the nationalistic patriots in the South could not be counted on to support the National Liberation Front (NLF).\textsuperscript{116}

The NLF was Hanoi’s creation, but it had a nationalistic as well as a Communist program. The Plenum members were concerned that the NLF, acting on its own—its leadership overwhelmed by its nationalist members—might attempt to reach an agreement with the Saigon government to settle the military struggle in the South. The ultimate purpose of the military struggle, from Hanoi’s perspective, was the expulsion of the Americans from South Vietnam, collapse of the GVN, and the unification of the North and the South. A separate peace in the South could thwart forever the objectives of Hanoi.\textsuperscript{117}

DESTRUCTION INSIDE NORTH VIETNAM:

The Plenum had to acknowledge the ever mounting destruction inside North Vietnam. The U.S. air attacks on North Vietnam simply could not be ignored. The American air force and naval aviation sortie rate over North Vietnam had risen from about 2,400 a month in June 1965 to nearly 12,250 a month in September 1966. The inclement weather in the North inhibited the number of U.S. air attacks after October 1966 to under 9,000 sorties per month. However, even this reduced level of air attack continued to cause serious damage in North Vietnam during the winter of 1966 and into early 1967. Then on 24 January 1967, President Johnson authorized the United States air arms to attack sixteen new and critical targets around Hanoi. Thus, in addition to an increase in the number of attack sorties, the level of the “pain” caused by the air effort also rose in North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{118}

By early 1967 most of the roads, bridges, POL facilities, and North Vietnam’s limited amount of heavy industry were either destroyed or heavily damaged. Unintended by the Americans, but no less real was the collateral bomb damage to homes, schools, office buildings, and other civilian or government structures located near the military targets. All of this had to be reckoned with by the Plenum members. The Plenum members noted that North Vietnam’s economy, which had gained some headway toward recovery between 1954 and 1965, was being ravaged by the U.S. bombing attacks against targets of strategic significance. The accumulating bomb damage and the incidental North Vietnamese civilian casualties were generating a growing undercurrent of bitterness and frustration. That, in turn, jeopardized Hanoi’s long-term war effort.\textsuperscript{119}
The Plenum also considered the indirect cost of America's air campaign—costs which exceeded the purely destructive effects. Between 500,000 to 600,000 civilian workers were diverted from other vital tasks to deal with air defense activities or to repair bomb damage. The bombing caused economic deterioration and dislocation. The agricultural sector was particularly hard hit. All of these results of the U.S. air campaign had a cumulative impact over time. So, as 1966 turned to 1967, the people of North Vietnam were experiencing severe shortages of food, clothing and medicine. Cases of malnutrition appeared. Along with the deprivations and the harsh living conditions, there also were signs of internal unrest in the North: lack of real zeal among cadres; black market activity; and profiteering.120

The Plenum also considered what Pham Van Dong and others considered to be a potential for a dangerous escalation of the bombing campaign against the North. Dong feared that the United States was planning to attack the dikes along the Red River and its tributaries. Such fears were reasonable. The U.S. air-target planners were considering bombing the Red River dikes upstream from Hanoi. There the dikes had been built up through the centuries so that the river flowed in a man-made channel above the surface of the surrounding countryside. If the waters of the Red River were released, the resulting flood damage would be enormous. If the dikes were breached during the northern monsoon or flood period, thousands of square kilometers of valuable North Vietnam farm land would be flooded along with numerous villages and cities. Hanoi would be under eleven feet of water. The task of breaching the river dikes from the air with conventional iron bombs would be difficult, but it was possible. That was another war-losing possibility which the Plenum members had to forestall.121

THE DANGER OF INSURRECTION:

The Plenum could not ignore the very grave effect that continued, and even more destructive, bombings in North Vietnam, or a U.S. offensive against Laos or North Vietnam, might have with regard to the regime in Hanoi. Suppressed popular antipathy could surface, and possibly crystallize into an insurrection, even among high-ranking officials in Hanoi. As long as there were divisions in the ranks of the cadres and the leadership along "North firster" or "liberate the South" lines, such concerns could not be swept aside.122
The fears of the Plenum were well founded: dissent in the North was real. In September 1967, the authorities in Hanoi arrested and detained over 200 government officials—some leading Communist party members—on the charge that they were dissenters. The most notable of those detained were Hoang Minh Chinh, director of the Lao Dong Party's school of theoretical political studies, and Colonel Le Trung Nghia, director of the DRVN's Central Intelligence Agency. Other prominent Party official also were arrested. In all cases the crimes charged were those of heretical thoughts and opposition to the conduct of the war. At the end of October, the National Assembly Standing Committee of the DRVN approved a special decree imposing harsh punishments—long prison terms or death—for "reactionary" crimes; e.g., sabotage, spying, and opposition to, or obstruction of, national defense enterprises. President Ho Chi Minh signed the decree on 10 November 1967.123

EXPANSION OF THE GROUND WAR BY AMERICA:

The Plenum studied the issue of the expansion of the ground war by the Americans. Giap reported to the Plenum that he believed that the United States forces would invade either North Vietnam or Laos in late 1967, or Cambodia in 1968. Such incursions would open the possibility of a war-losing disaster for the North Vietnamese. For the Communists, the base areas in these three sanctuary states were indispensable. Even with them, the war was being lost. Losing them, Giap said, meant certain defeat for North Vietnam's war effort. Ho Chi Minh shared Giap's concern that the United States probably would expand the war beyond South Vietnamese territory. Predicting the future, Giap told the Plenum members that he anticipated that the United States probably would expand the war into Laos and possibly into Cambodia. It was also possible, said Giap, that the Americans might mount a major amphibious landing in North Vietnam.124

The Plenum concluded that if the U.S. invaded North Vietnam, the People's Republic of China probably would intervene. Still, invasion was an event against which North Vietnam also had to be prepared. Several years earlier North Vietnam had prepared itself to face a possible amphibious and airborne landing by organizing a large local paramilitary force and by building an extensive self-defense system. The concerns in Hanoi about invasion were such that the theretofore number one priority, economic production, had become secondary to
national defense. No invasion had come in 1965 or 1966, but the danger for late
1967 seemed much more real—and the belief that if that event occurred there
was a possibility of Chinese reinforcements did not allay the Plenum's concern
about an invasion of the North.\textsuperscript{125}

Despite the fact that the possibility was rated as slight, an invasion of North
Vietnam would force Ho and Giap to defend Hanoi and the North with all available
units. In that event the war in the South would be relegated to a secondary
operation. Thus, for all practical purposes, an invasion of North Vietnam would
end the war in the South. The \textit{Viet Cong} and NVA units there would have to
scavenge for themselves; in the event this happened they would be subject to
piecemeal annihilation.\textsuperscript{126}

The Plenum recognized that a U.S. invasion of Cambodia did not have the
potential for creating a war-ending disaster on the order which gave rise to the
Communists' forebodings about North Vietnam and Laos. Still, a U.S. attack into
Cambodia and against the cross-border base areas would severely interfere with
future Communist operations aimed at the heavily populated areas around Saigon
and in the Mekong Delta.\textsuperscript{127}

The Plenum members' greatest concern was about an American invasion of Laos
in the area west of the DMZ. Such an attack would be extremely disruptive to the
Communist war effort. Such an invasion would destroy a major cross-border base
area. It also would interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail. If such an attack came the \textit{Viet
Cong} and NVA forces in the South would be effectively deprived of supplies and
reinforcements.\textsuperscript{128}

The Plenum recognized that the trail was so vital to the war effort in the South
that to parry a U.S. ground attack, North Vietnam would be forced to mount a
major counteroffensive. The Communists would be forced to try to break a U.S.
hold on this vital LOC. That prospect appalled Giap. He told the Plenum that such
a counteroffensive would pit major North Vietnamese forces in one or more set-
piece battles against at least a United States Corps-sized force. The Americans,
Giap said, would be operating under conditions favoring defeat of a
counterattack. It was fair to assume, he said, that a desperate counteroffensive
would result in the virtual destruction of every Communist unit utilized. The very
backbone of the NVA also might be broken, something that would make defense of the North against invasion impossible.\textsuperscript{129}

The Plenum recognized that an expansion of the war into Laos and Cambodia, and especially into North Vietnam, was what Hanoi always had sought to avoid. Since all these sanctuary areas were strategically interdependent, an attack in one area would disrupt the entire Communist war effort.\textsuperscript{130} The base areas in the three border countries were indispensable. Losing them, Giap said, meant certain defeat.\textsuperscript{131} The Plenum recognized clearly that the potential invasions of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had to be forestalled.\textsuperscript{132}

THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT:

The Plenum was very concerned about the Sino-Soviet split. The schism was both philosophically and pragmatically distressing to Ho and the Plenum members. North Vietnam depended on both Russia and the People's Republic for supplies. The Chinese furnished small arms, food, trucks, and other smaller materials. They also provided highway and railroad maintenance assistance in northeast North Vietnam. The Russians gave North Vietnam its antiaircraft guns, missiles, tanks and other sophisticated equipment. To further complicate the matter, North Vietnam's two allies espoused different strategies on how North Vietnam should win the war.\textsuperscript{133}

China, drawing on its own experience, advocated the "protracted war" approach, emphasizing political \textit{dau tranh} and guerrilla warfare in the South carried out largely by the \textit{Viet Cong}. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, pushed for a strategy of negotiations, which, implicitly at least, advocated large-scale attacks by NVA Main Force units in the South in an effort to create favorable conditions for bargaining [with the Americans].\textsuperscript{134}

The Plenum recognized the need to carefully steer a neutral course between its two big allies. Hanoi's leaders constantly stressed their independence from both China and the Soviet Union. Still, the uneasy truce between the two Communist superpowers worried the North Vietnamese. The Plenum understood that the future course of the Sino-Soviet split could not be predicted with certainty. Thus, a quick solution to the war in the South would be best.\textsuperscript{135}
THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH AND IN WASHINGTON:

While the 13th Plenum members recognized that the Communist military situation in the South had reached a crisis point, they also believed that "the political situation in South Vietnam would allow the instigation of a General Uprising (Khoi Nghia), a [country-wide] political-military initiative whereby the South Vietnamese population and even [the Southern] Army . . . units would revolt against the government."136

The Plenum members believed that President Johnson and the American military were losing the psychological war in the United States. That belief was verified in September 1967, when a public opinion poll showed for the first time that more Americans opposed the war than supported it. The Plenum also believed that the U.S., with its self-proclaimed rôle as the free world's firebrigade, could not maintain a large military force in South Vietnam for any long period. They believed that the U.S. would be worn down by the war and, sooner or later, would have to negotiate for its end on terms seen as advantageous to the Communist side.137

HO CHI MINH'S AGE:

The Plenum members considered Ho Chi Minh's age. This factor suggested that a quick fix solution would be best. Ho's age (he was 75) was a goad to a quick victory. By 1967 Ho was an old man, and seriously ill. There was little time for "final victory" if it was to come during Ho's lifetime. For fifty years the unification of Vietnam under communism had been Ho's consuming goal. He wanted to see it happen in his lifetime. Ho couldn't wait for a protracted war strategy to work, or for lengthy negotiations. Others in the leadership—Giap, Pham, Truong Chinh, Le Duan—were his disciples. They loved and respected Ho. They wanted to give Ho one last great present: "decisive victory in the shortest possible time." No less important was "Uncle Ho's" stature in South Vietnam as the chief nationalist, anti-colonial figurehead. If the quick victory scenario was to have a chance, a living Ho was important to the Communist cause. The Plenum took due note of this.138
NEED TO CHANGE:

And so it was, after several months of deliberations, the members of the 13th Plenum decided upon a recommendation for the future course of military operations. It is not important to know whether the members of the Plenum believed all of the facts or assumptions upon which their decision was based. What is of importance is the fact that they did recognize that they had to come up with some kind of a near-term solution to the severe strategic problems that existed. In the South the Communists could not keep on losing battles, people and influence. The Communists had to change their strategy for successfully concluding the war and accomplishing Hanoi’s ultimate objective.\(^{139}\)

VII. GIAP’S PLANNING HYPOTHESES DISCUSSED:

Human actions cannot be explained without some reference to or assumptions about the views of the actor regarding the nature of the world and his situation. Herbert Blumer notes that:

\[\text{An individual's behavior is not a result of such things as environmental pressures, stimuli, motives, attitudes, and ideas, but arises instead from how he interprets and handles these things in the action which he is constructing.}\] \(^{140}\)

Others argue that while the outcomes of state behavior can be understood largely in terms of the decisionmaker's "operational environment"—the capabilities and intentions of relevant actors—the decisions themselves must be understood in terms of the decision-makers' "psychological environment"—their belief about the world and other actors.\(^{141}\) In addition, the decisionmaker's image of his opponent is an important component of this environment.\(^{142}\) Since General Giap was the master architect of the Tết Offensive, his planning assumptions will be explored in depth.

VIET CONG AND NVA CAPABILITY:

As Giap envisaged the overall offensive plan of action, the practical effectiveness of attacks depended on the judicious use of three kinds of military forces: main,
local and guerrilla. These forces were to be used in two different but very effective tactical ways: combined, and independent operation. As Giap viewed the situation, combined tactics relied primarily on infantry units supported by artillery, engineers, and sappers troops. This was to be the tactic used by the Viet Cong and NVA units who would operate as battalion-size and larger forces. Independent tactics, on the other hand, would involve the use of smaller, but highly combat-effective, special-task units which would carry out raids or shell U.S. installations, airbases, and other strongpoints. The local forces and guerrillas, led by special cadres, would mount such independent tactic attacks. In this way, thought Giap, the whole of the available fighting forces in the South could be brought to bear at the proper time and place with tasks best suited to their strength and capability.  

As regards the employment of forces for attack, Giap also felt that the use and deployment of Viet Cong and NVA units had to be consistent with the local situation in each area. Therefore, he decided to concentrate these forces initially in strategic zones instead of dispersing them over the entire battleground of South Vietnam.

Giap believed that a combined tactics and strategic zone approach had proven successful in the Tri-Thien Front and in the Central Highlands. In both areas Giap noted that this approach forced the U.S. Command to move its units away from populated areas, especially from the Mekong Delta region, and redeploy them to northern and less populous battlegrounds. The American redeployment, in turn, curtailed GVN pacification efforts in the populated areas. Giap believed that the combined tactic had effectively disrupted the GVN's effort to eliminate the Communist infrastructure in the South. Giap saw in the concepts of combined tactics and strategic zones effective means to manipulate U.S. deployments up to the moment when the Phase II country-wide offensive would be launched. Giap believed that he could use combined tactics in the first phase of the Communist's 1967 Winter-Spring campaign to draw more U.S. units away from the populated areas, especially away from the area around Saigon and Huế.

Looking ahead, and considering the near-term future conduct of the war, Giap foresaw the need for Communist forces in the South to place more emphasis on the coordinated use of the three forces during Phase I of the 1967 Winter-Spring Offensive effort. Giap also saw the need for the guerrillas to expand and upgrade
their capabilities so they could accomplish their new strategic rôle. Giap's message to the guerrilla cadres was that he saw the potential for their units to become important strike forces.\footnote{146}

Giap was well aware that the Communists would suffer great losses during Phases I and II of the offensive. But the total casualty count was not a serious concern to Giap. First, he believed the Viet Cong and NVA had the capacity to field replacements at a rate that was three times that of the Government of South Vietnam. Second, if the objectives of the offensive plan were achieved, the dead would be mourned, but they would not have to be replaced. Giap considered that the plan was within the offensive capability of the Communist forces. Sufficient troops were available, he thought, and the anticipated casualty levels would not leave the Communist forces with too few soldiers to deal with any follow-up fighting against die-hard ARVN units.\footnote{147}

SECRECY AND SURPRISE:

Giap knew that despite the best security precautions, the Communists would not be able to cloak the extensive and necessary preparations for the 1967 Winter-Spring Offensive in total secrecy. There were going to be numerous telltale signs that the Communists’ upcoming annual offensive effort was going to be something extraordinary. Most of the indicators probably would be found in the documents that the U.S. and ARVN units could be expected to capture during pre-Têt military operations. Other and more palpable signs of unusual activity would exist in the form of Viet Cong and NVA attacks on cities—mostly in the border areas—that would precede the Têt Phase II offensive operations. Finally, Giap realized that even broadcasts by Hanoi Radio would reveal much of what was to come. This could not be helped: Hanoi had to disseminate the offensive plans and the political indoctrination had to be coordinated. Nevertheless, Giap believed that the Americans and the South Vietnamese would not be able to put all of the pieces of the intelligence puzzle together in time to upset Hanoi’s new strategic plan. He also was of the view that strategic surprise could be achieved by having the general offensive phase of the campaign begin during the Têt holidays rather than before or after.\footnote{148}
AMERICA’S POLITICAL WILL:

Ejecting the U.S. forces from the South was the goal of Hanoi’s new strategy. Was it realistic to consider that this could be done with a continued political and military effort? General Vo Nguyen Giap had witnessed the disintegration of French morale in 1940, and again in 1954. He believed that Americans were like the French in that neither had the national temperament or will to wage long wars. Beyond the perceived American inability to deal with serious matters on a long-term basis (as opposed to the “fix it and forget it” approach), Giap sensed that the U.S. goals for the use of force in the war were not well understood by the American people. There simply was no national consensus to make all-out war on North Vietnam to drive it out of the South. General Giap perceived the lack of a political resolve in Washington and the American national character as strategic weaknesses of his opponent. Correctly appreciating that he did not have the military means to defeat the U.S. forces in a standup, toe-to-toe fight, Giap focused on how he could leverage his forces by constructing a plan that would make the perceived American strategic weakness work for him.\(^{149}\)

As Giap saw it, the United States strategic policy toward Vietnam always had been predicated on a desire by President Johnson to prevent the political, economic, and social life of the American people from being seriously affected by the war. Giap believed that this effort was failing, and that a radical change in political direction regarding the war would come as a result of the growing dissent in the United States.\(^{150}\)

General Giap believed that the United States presidential election to be held in November 1968 was an operational timing opportunity that could be exploited. If the Thieu-Ky regime collapsed when confronted with a general offensive and popular uprising, Giap reasoned, the Johnson administration—already facing political difficulties because of a strong and growing opposition to the war—would not be able to bring more troops to South Vietnam. Instead, the Congress would compel the U.S. president to reduce the troops strength in Vietnam, and Johnson would be forced to seek negotiations for a peaceful withdrawal of U.S. forces on terms advantageous to Hanoi.\(^{151}\)

Even though Giap wrote in a mid-September 1967 article that the presidential election was merely a device for the U.S. party in power to reshuffle its ranks,
and that the American policy of aggression would remain unchanged regardless of the election outcome, Giap also was well aware of the fact that in election years, U.S. presidents (from the Democrat Party) seldom made bold policy decisions without strong backing from America’s electorate.\textsuperscript{152}

Giap also believed there was an increasingly influential international opposition to the United States’ continuing direct intervention in Vietnam—an opposition that had an effect on Washington policymaking. General Giap believed that a series of stunning victories by the Communists—and the fall of Saigon and Huế coming hard on the heels of the capture of Khe Sanh certainly would be sensational—would widen and strengthen this global opposition. It would, Giap thought, combine with the growing U.S. domestic opposition and force the Americans to terminate their involvement in Vietnam—even against the will of President Johnson. Thus, no matter how strong the actual personal resolve of President Johnson, Giap believed that a host of other political forces could be brought to bear that would render President Johnson powerless to continue the war in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{153}

\textbf{U.S. MILITARY POWER:}

General Giap closely studied his main opponent, the U.S. General Westmoreland, and the tactics "Westy" was employing in South Vietnam. Clearly Westmoreland had the initiative on the battlefield in early 1967. However, Giap concluded that even with the undeniable numerical strength and strong firepower of the U.S. forces, Westmoreland was barely able to gain that initiative in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{154}

General Giap also concluded that the U.S. forces were being asked to do too much with too little. They were being used more like neighborhood policemen than as mobile combat units. The Americans were trying to be everywhere at once and trying to protect too many targets. Even in the DMZ border area, which was under constant attack, the U.S. Marines were spread thinly along a defense line that was nearly 100 kilometers long. In the Central Highlands the U.S. units were trying to defend an area of more than 50,000 square kilometers.\textsuperscript{155}

Giap recognized that U.S. firepower was both considerable (especially that delivered by the B-52) and varied. Still, as Giap viewed the battlefield, all of that
tremendous firepower and the mobile U.S. forces could not be effectively employed. Its use required that the Communists be first found and then fixed in places where the firepower could be effectively used. Thus, the Communists had control of one of the variables for the use of that firepower, for in People's War—even in the Second or Movement Phase—the Viet Cong and NVA units could be scattered and hidden everywhere until the moment of attack. Thus, according to Giap's perception, there was a serious weakness in Westmoreland's plan that could be exploited. Giap would use military activity in Phase I of his operational plan to further disperse the U.S. forces and dilute their firepower.¹⁵⁶

THE IMAGINED DIEN BIEN PHU PARALLEL:

Giap looked at the U.S. Marine outpost at Khe Sanh and saw it as a great threat to his forces. At the same time he viewed the base as a great military and political opportunity that he could exploit. If there was going to be a U.S. invasion of Laos, Khe Sanh would be the jumping off point. The Khe Sanh base also interfered with infiltration into the Tri-Thien Front area. Therefore, the Marine base had to be destroyed. In early 1967 the Khe Sanh base was only lightly defended—less than a regiment of U.S. Marines held the base and surrounding hills. Giap concluded that a corps-strength sweep of the area by NVA units could overrun the Marine forces at Khe Sanh with relative ease.¹⁵⁷

The more Giap focused his attention on the U.S. Marine outpost at Khe Sanh, the more certain he was of the idea that he also could turn the attack on Khe Sanh into a world-wide news media event—for color broadcast on the evening news in America—and repeat the greatest triumph of his past. Giap believed that he could besiege and trap the Marines at Khe Sanh and, at the appropriate time, overrun the base as he had done in 1954 when he captured the French base at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁵⁸

As it turned out, instead of trapping the Americans at Khe Sanh, Giap trapped his own forces. By focusing his planning on the "news" impact of the anticipated capture of Khe Sanh, Giap himself was ensnared in the "myth" of Dien Bien Phu.

[At] Dien Bien Phu … Giap had destroyed the equivalent of only one French division, yet it was touted all over the world as a great victory. The fantasy of Dien Bien Phu that Ho, Giap, and others had come to
believe was that the North Vietnamese soldier was invincible in siege operations.”

There were some similarities between Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh, but the differences were enormous. Giap focused on the former and ignored the latter.

The destruction of the Khe Sanh base was one of the primary goals of the Tết offensive. The destruction of the base would end the threat to the LOC’s in Laos. Equally important to the offensive was ending the use of the base to interrupt the flow of men and material into Quang Tri from Laos. The same forces that would overrun Khe Sanh also had other missions of vital importance to the success of TCK-TKN operations. Once Khe Sanh was captured the NVA corps-sized force was to sweep down on Hué in Phase II and capture Da Nang in Phase III. Giap made the mistake of assuming that Khe Sanh could be taken out in a “bump and go” operation. He misjudged the situation. Giap underrated the defensive posture of the base, the tenacity of its Marine garrison, the American resupply capability, and the ground and aerial firepower that Westmoreland could marshal to support the base. Worse yet, by assembling his own forces for the attack on Khe Sanh and the movement on towards Hué, Giap gave to General Westmoreland the targets of opportunity that the U.S. forces had long sought.

ARVN INSTABILITY:

Prior to the entry of U.S. ground forces into Vietnam in mid-1965, the Communist forces had been able to deal effectively with ARVN forces. Giap did not believe that either the fighting ability or national spirit of the ARVN forces had improved since the Americans arrived in strength; instead, he thought, it had declined. The ARVN forces certainly were better dressed and armed in a parade-ground sense, but not for combat. General Giap believed that ARVN forces were not combat-effective for either offensive or defensive action. Thus, he concluded, if ARVN forces throughout South Vietnam were confronted with a simultaneous set of sharp blows, the integrity of the South Vietnam Army would collapse.

Giap concluded that the ARVN forces were so weakly led, and so lacking in national cohesion, that simultaneous attacks by relatively weak Viet Cong and NVA forces would precipitate the total collapse of ARVN. Each ARVN unit, Giap believed, would be isolated by the simultaneous attack, and being thus unable to
appreciate the magnitude of the local threat, would simply run away or surrender. This belief led, in turn, to the relaxation on the part of the Communists of their usual methodical practices with regard to the planning for local attacks.

ANTI-U.S. SENTIMENT IN THE SOUTH:

Giap believed that the Vietnamese people in the South hated the Americans. According to Giap’s view, the U.S. forces were seen in South Vietnam as another foreign colonial power intent on dominating the South Vietnamese. Giap believed that the same feelings that the Vietnamese people had about the French were held with regard to the Americans. That anti-U.S. sentiment, Giap believed, would cause the people to disavow the Americans and rally to the Communist-backed, nationalist-front coalition government when the Thieu-Ky regime was ousted.\textsuperscript{161}

GVN INSTABILITY:

Giap also believed that the Thieu-Ky regime was hated by the South Vietnamese people. According to Hanoi’s perspective, the GVN, and its key leaders, were seen as the mere corrupt puppets of the foreign dominator—a government lacking any real popular power base.\textsuperscript{162} Giap was convinced that the people in the South were palpably demonstrating their total antipathy for the U.S.-backed Thieu-Ky regime with frequent massed public demonstrations, and by joining popular opposition organizations such as the National Salvation and the Buddhist movements.\textsuperscript{163} Giap believed that the popular movements that had rocked several cities in the South reflected indications of not only anti-government but also anti-war feelings.\textsuperscript{164} Giap also saw all the anti-GVN activities as signs of a popular sympathy for the goals of the Communist insurgency.\textsuperscript{165}

Giap’s belief that he could count on the support of the South Vietnamese people was further enhanced by the presidential election in the South in the fall of 1967. Heady with notions of democracy, ten slates of candidates stood for the election. The slate of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky won, but with only thirty-four percent of the popular vote. The slate of the first runner-up, Truong Dinh Dzu, collected seventeen percent of the ballots. Dzu’s slate had run on a platform which called for restoring peace and ending the war. This was a goal that coincided with the political line of the NLF. Giap, and others
in Hanoi, interpreted the votes for Dzu's slate, and the weak showing of Thieu-Ky, as confirming a current popular sympathy for Hanoi's cause.\textsuperscript{166}

**OPPORTUNITY FOR AN UPRISING:**

The basic objective of the People's War, as formulated by Mao Tse-tung's tenet, dictated that the final victory should have a political significance and toward that end, be made to look to all like a popular mandate rather than a mere military success.\textsuperscript{167}

In August 1945 the Communists seized power in North Vietnam in a virtually bloodless popular uprising. Giap's experiences and key rôles in the "August Revolution" had a profound influence on the way his strategic concepts and schemes of operation were later implemented.\textsuperscript{168} Giap viewed the "August Revolution" as the successful antecedent to the "General Uprising" that would sweep the Communists to power and victory the South in 1968.\textsuperscript{169}

Giap thought that a repeat of the epic 1945 revolutionary event could be achieved in 1968 through the same political device—a popular incitement for a general uprising.\textsuperscript{170} Giap also held the belief that the mood of the people of the South evidenced a current ripeness for a popular insurrection, and a readiness of the people—particularly those in the cities of the South—to join the Communist side.\textsuperscript{171} Giap concluded that a massive general offensive with coordinated attacks on South Vietnam's urban areas would be the spark that would ignite another popular uprising.\textsuperscript{172} With this belief, and others, in mind, Giap saw the opportunity to develop the final solution campaign under the conceptual strategic formula of a "General Offensive-General Uprising."\textsuperscript{173}

Not every Communist soldier believed in the center-piece of Hanoi's \textit{TCK-TKN} plan. Several of the junior officers captured during the Têt Offensive confessed that they never expected the urban dwellers in their area of operations to revolt. Instead, they carried out their mission with the hope that their own assault, when combined with all the urban attacks would lead to a general uprising in other areas.\textsuperscript{174}
COALITION GOVERNMENT:

A key aspect of the overall plan, as Giap conceived it, was that the people would rise up, and after overthrowing the Thieu-Ky regime, rally to a new national coalition government. It was essential that the new government be both nationalist in appearance, and Communist-controlled. Giap believed that the people of the South would rally to the banner of the National Liberation Front.\textsuperscript{175}

The first instance of political preparation occurred in May 1967. COSVN summoned the deputy chairman of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals to a meeting. There he was assigned the mission of contacting and keeping close in touch with those personalities earmarked by the Southern Communists to take part in a future coalition government.\textsuperscript{176} Despite the early efforts to create a coalition government, no concrete progress was made. In the event, no new coalition government stepped forward. There never was any group around which the people of the South could rally during the early and decisive days of the Têt Offensive.

PERCEIVED GUARANTEE OF SUCCESS:

Giap believed that the Plenum's new approach was a "win-win" strategy. Giap confidently expected the new strategy and his operational plan to succeed. Even when he conceded, for the purpose of argument, that the Winter-Spring offensive might not accomplish all of its explicit goals, he did not concede that it would end in a defeat. Giap truly believed that the overall offensive would be successful. Even a partial failure of the plan—no uprising of the people—would not adversely effect the Communist war effort, especially if Khe Sanh was overrun and Hué was captured.\textsuperscript{177}

Under the doctrine which guided Hanoi's military thinking, People's War always had been rooted in the rural and mountainous areas. Thus, a military failure in the urban areas would simply require the Communist forces to regroup. They would return to their old redoubts and to their old ways of waging People's War for a time at a lower level of hostility.\textsuperscript{178} At the same time, Giap never doubted that the operation plan for action in the Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces would succeed. Thus, at a minimum, Khe Sanh would be overrun, Hué captured (an even better place to set up a coalition government), and Da Nang would be
rendered unusable as an American combat base. To do even this would, in Giap's mind, accomplish those few critical things that needed to be done to steal the initiative from Westmoreland and set the stage for a political solution to the continued U.S. presence.\textsuperscript{179}

Not everyone is convinced that Giap planned the \textit{TCK-TKN} Offensive with full confidence that it was the right strategy, and that his operational plan could achieve the stated goals of the strategy. According to General Davidson, based on what he calls "an unimpeachable and still secret source," Giap argued at length with Ho and his colleagues that the all-out offensive would fail, and that it would entail heavy casualties. Davidson believes that "Giap held obstinately to his theory of the protracted war and for its emphasis on political \textit{dau tranh} and guerrilla-type warfare." He also argues that Giap fought adamantly during July, August, and September 1967 to get the concept abandoned or somehow greatly modified.\textsuperscript{180} This author does not agree with Davidson's views on this point. The known and reliable evidence supports the opposite conclusion. In any event, to say that Giap believed that the so-called "all-out offensive" (simultaneous attack) might fail, or involve heavy casualties, does not lead to the conclusion that in the end the operational plan would not achieve the essential ends of the new strategy. In fact, for Giap to have failed to point out to Ho and the others that there would be high casualties and local failures would have been imprudent (especially since the success of the total plan did not rely on local successes everywhere in the South).

VIII. ANALYSIS OF THE PLENUM'S DECISIONMAKING

The time has come to look critically at the decisionmaking process of the 13th Plenum for the purpose of determining how it can fairly be characterized. To do this, the decision analyst must look first at the situational appraisal conducted by the Plenum members. As used here, a "situational appraisal" is a systematic approach for identifying and ranking the practical concerns that form the core of the decision problem. Identifying concerns means answering several related questions. What is the current situation, and how does it differ from the military objective? What are the decisions that need to be made? What new strategic policy or new operational plans should be implemented? What changes in the old
situation are anticipated? What opportunities for new forms of action exist? Answering these questions will result in the gathering of the types of pertinent information needed to conduct a meaningful problem analysis—i.e., coming to an understanding of why the current strategic policy and operational plans are not producing the desired results on the battlefield. It is only when the situational analysis (the problem analysis) is complete that the decisionmaker should go on to decision analysis stage (which is the systematic process for making a choice).

Overall, it is fair to say that the members of the 13th Plenum acted properly in regard to performing the first part of the decisionmaking process. In general the Plenum concluded that Hanoi was faced militarily in the near term with a "use it or lose it" situation. Given the precommitment to adopt a new strategy, the fact that the Plenum returned a recommendation for radical change is not surprising. The war was being lost; they had but to resolve how to win it. Considering the debate that had been going on between Generals Giap and Thanh, and others, the recommendation of the Plenum was actually inventive.

The Plenum's answer to the military problem was surprisingly simple: the military effort would be concentrated on an immediate war-ending solution. The long drawn out "People War" approach of Giap and the large-scale battle approach of Thanh was to give way to a program for victory in a single season of campaigning. The Plenum members concluded that a general military offensive which led up to simultaneous attacks on all the major cities of the South, coupled with a popular uprising, had a reasonable chance to succeed. In short, the whole of the military effort would be at once focused on the contemplated last days of the third or final victory stage of the Peoples' War concept. The slow and steady progression of the classical People's War, and the massive clashes of a series of big battles, was to be replaced with a war-winning strategy; one that would end the war of national unification in the near term. The consensus of the 13th Plenum clearly required prompt decisive action. The time for protracted war was past; the next offensive was to be last; and it would be an all-out drive for victory at one stroke. That was the key to the new strategy. The core message of the Plenum's recommendation was simple: do not be distracted from the end game by the presence of Americans on the battlefield. Instead, look to the fact that the conditions for a final victory are at hand.
It is clear that the Plenum's recommendation was innovative. But was it "rational" in any of the senses by which that term can be defined? The Plenum was given a mandate to recommend a new strategy. The recommendation was one of radical change. Given that the primary motive behind the Plenum's action was ousting the U.S. forces from South Vietnam, it is possible to examine the Plenum's understanding of the decision problem. On one level the Plenum members believed that three factors necessitated immediate change in Communist strategy, namely:

In the face of the military firepower and air mobility of the U.S., the Communists entertained no hopes of achieving a final victory in a series of set-piece battles against U.S. forces.

The strategy of "enveloping the cities with the rural areas" did not work in the face of the combined US-RVN AF efforts.

A continuation of protracted war would result in an aggravated attrition in manpower and material resources might cause even the Communist regime in the North to collapse.

This assessment suggests a reasonably good understanding of the situation that faced the Communist forces. To get a better feel for the Plenum's analysis of the situation and the problem, more of the concerns of the Plenum need to be examined.

The Plenum members considered the U.S. incursions into base areas to be real disasters for the Communists. U.S. search-and-destroy operations meant that the Viet Cong and NVA units could not be safely based near any of the populated areas. The use of border sanctuaries caused serious problems. Hanoi already had been forced to abandon its plans to bring in large tonnages of supplies by sea. Both weather conditions and aerial bombardment imposed restrictions on the Communists' LOC's. Within the South the Viet Cong and NVA commanders were hard pressed to support any large-scale military operations along the coastal plains because of the long, insecure LOC's from the border areas to the coastal regions. Thus, it was virtually impossible to make the presence of the large Viet Cong and NVA units felt in the heavily populated areas. The guerillas, having lost
the operational support of the *Viet Cong* and NVA units, had become little more than a nuisance.

Plenum members also took note of mounting casualty figures. The so-called "cross-over point" had been exceeded, i.e., more Communists troops were being put out of action than could be recruited in-country or infiltrated from the North. There was concern about the character and the pace of the Government of Vietnam's pacification and development programs which reduced the Communist tax and food base and made recruiting more difficult. As a corollary to that, control of the "lost" people gave the Thieu-Ky government in Saigon consequent political and economic advantage. The Plenum members viewed the relative stability of the Thieu-Ky regime as the beginning of a significant shift in the political situation in South Vietnam. If this trend continued it meant that the nationalistic patriots in the South could not be counted on to support the National Liberation Front.

The Plenum also acknowledged the ever mounting destruction inside North Vietnam caused by the U.S. aerial campaign. To deal with this problem over 500,000 civilians workers were diverted from other vital tasks to deal with air defense activities or to repair bomb damage. The bombing caused economic deterioration and dislocation. Amid the deprivations and harsh living conditions, there also were signs of internal unrest in the North: there was a lack of real zeal among cadres; black market activity; and unrest. The Plenum worried about whether suppressed popular antipathy could surface and crystallize into an insurrection in the North.

Worse still, high-ranking officials in Hanoi believed that there was a potential for a dangerous escalation of the bombing campaign against the North—some feared that the Americans were planning to attack the dikes along the Red River. There also was a concern that the United States forces would invade either North Vietnam or Laos in late 1967, or Cambodia in 1968.

There were several reasons why a decision concerning whether Hanoi's policy should change could not be delayed. The Plenum was very concerned about the Sino-Soviet split. North Vietnam's two allies espoused different strategies on how North Vietnam should win the war. The Plenum recognized the need to carefully steer a neutral course between its two big allies. The Plenum members believed
that the political situation in South Vietnam would allow the instigation of a General Uprising (Khoi Nghia), a country-wide, political-military initiative during which the South Vietnamese population, and even the Southern Army units, would revolt against the government. The Plenum members believed that President Johnson and the American military were losing the psychological war in the United States. They believed that the U.S. would be worn down by the war and, sooner or later, would have to negotiate for its end on terms seen as advantageous to the Communist side. The Plenum members considered Ho Chi Minh’s old age and ill health. This suggested that a quick fix solution would be best. "Uncle Ho" was seen as the chief nationalist figurehead, so a living Ho was important to the Communist cause. In the South the Communists could not keep on losing battles, people, and influence. The Communists had to change their strategy for successfully concluding the war and accomplishing Hanoi’s ultimate objective.

Except for what was believed about the fragility of the GVN and the South Vietnamese forces, it seems clear that the Plenum members had a very good understanding of the decision problem that was facing them. Given the magnitude of the problem there were only two strategic policy options: win the war in the near term or withdraw from the South. It seems clear that the Plenum was not at liberty to recommend a withdrawal from the war effort.

Viewed from the perspective of the judgment paradigm, the recommendation of the Plenum members appears reasonable. It is a novel resolution of the military debate, and reflects a belief that the military commanders had become more interested in waging the war than in winning it. At the same time, it is reasonable to describe the Plenum’s policy recommendation as one that resulted in a military debacle. In the event, the plan to implement the policy was abandoned after its implementation was undertaken. The problem with the debacle paradigm as a measure of judging the quality of decisionmaking is that it goes beyond the decision problem to the execution of the operational plan and does not provide for a convenient way to account for either chance events, or the strength and plans of the opponent.

At this point the Plenum’s recommendation appears to be a rational decision, reflecting reasonable judgments, that led to a debacle. The very fact that such an
ambiguity in analysis can exist provides convincing proof for the need to have alternative paradigms for decision analysis.

To this point the recommendation of the 13th Plenum has not been put to the test under the High Quality Paradigm. Tested with this theory, the decision of the Plenum appears clearly as a low-quality or defective decision. Remember, under this analysis paradigm, any gross failure to meet one of the seven criteria can be regarded as a symptom of defective policy making.

With regard to the Plenum's deliberation, we lack sufficient information to state whether the Plenum members surveyed a wide range of objectives to be fulfilled while taking into account the multiplicity of values that were at stake. But, for the sake of argument, we may assume that they did. It is clear, however, that the Plenum did not canvas a wide variety of alternative courses of action; rather, they were restricted by the mandate that Ho Chi Minh gave them. It followed that they did not intensively search for new information relevant to evaluating any alternatives. There is evidence that the Plenum did not take account of new information which did not support the course of action initially preferred. The members appear to have looked hard at the positive and negative consequences of the alternatives (Giap's and Thanh's options) originally considered unacceptable before making the final choice. However, no consideration was given to the question of ending the war altogether. There is no evidence that the Plenum took anything like a hard look at the cost, risks, and negative consequences that could flow from the recommendation that it preferred. Worst of all, there is no clear evidence that the Plenum called for the making of detailed provisions for implementing and monitoring the chosen course of action. There was no special attention given to contingency plans that might be required if various known risks were to materialize.

From what has been said about the failure of the Plenum to follow several of the criteria of high quality decisionmaking, it necessarily follows that the Plenum's recommendation was the result of a defective decisionmaking process. The Plenum came up with what appeared to be an elegant and innovative solution to a very grave problem. The members of the Plenum were faced with a very difficult decision problem, and they came up with a recommendation that was an answer to all of their questions and a solution to all of their problems. They recommended what they thought was a panacea.
There seldom is a panacea for solving a serious problem. This author believes that the real problem with the recommendation of the 13th Plenum is put in focus by Daniel Goleman who observed, in *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception*:

> **We live at a particularly perilous moment, one in which self-deception is a subject of increasing urgency. ... In the face of our individual [or national] powerlessness, we find it somehow reassuring to cling to the illusion that there is something ... that can protect us against the high anxiety of the moment.**\(^{181}\)

Goleman characterizes self-deception as a natural psychological device to relieve anxiety on a personal level, with social group implications. People look for panaceas.\(^{182}\)

It is clear that by 1967, Ho and others in Hanoi recognized that they were facing a crisis situation. They sought a solution to their immediate problem, but they did more. They looked past the immediate military problem to the issue of when and how the war itself was to be resolved. They found a solution that would both resolve the current difficulty and win the war. They found something that could relieve the high anxiety of the moment. The "something" that Hanoi was relying on was the belief that the people of South Vietnam shared their view of the Americans as a neo-colonial power and that a general uprising was near at hand—provided the spark was present. This made it all but impossible for the Plenum members to appreciate the futility of the task they undertook to accomplish. It took the defeat of the Communist forces during the Têt Offensive to refocus the minds of Plenum members in Hanoi. By 1975 they had found a workable formula for winning the Second Indochina War. In the absence of the Americans they brought the war to an end through the use of conventional warfare methods.

**IX. ANALYSIS OF GIAP'S DECISIONMAKING**

The recommendation of the 13th Plenum was flawed. Once it was approved by the Politburo, it was General Giap's task to turn the new strategic policy into a workable operational plan. Good decision practices cannot ensure good
outcomes. All outcomes are ruled, to one degree or another, by chance, and all outcomes are influenced by the operational plans. Thus, the fact that the 13th Plenum's recommendation did not reflect good decision practices did not necessarily ensure that General Giap's operational plan would fail. Sometimes good outcomes can flow from flawed plans.

This study would not be complete without a critical look at General Giap as a decisionmaker in regard to the development of the operational plans for the Tết Offensive. The same type of analysis that was used to examine the quality of the Plenum's decisionmaking will be used to critique the planning assumptions that were used by General Giap. That means beginning with Giap's situational appraisal and going on to his problem analysis before his decision analysis is reviewed.

To determine whether Giap's operational plan decisions were "rational" in the rational actor paradigm sense it is appropriate to assume that his motive is known and straightforward. Giap had a simple task, *i.e.*, to devise an operational plan to implement the Plenum's recommendations. The evidence suggests that he did not have a good understanding of the decision problem. First, Giap assumed that Communist forces that would be available for combat action were sufficient to accomplish the military objectives of the offensive campaign. This proved not to be the case. Second, Giap assumed that the GVN had no support among the people of South Vietnam and would collapse in the face of a nationwide offensive. This proved not to be the case. Third, Giap assumed that the people of South Vietnam would stage a popular uprising if the conditions for it were right. This proved not to be the case. Fourth, Giap assumed that the people of South Vietnam would rally behind a coalition government led by the Communists. This proved not to be the case. Fifth, Giap assumed that ARVN lacked a proper motivation and would desert or defect when struck a hard blow. This proved not to be the case. Sixth, Giap assumed that people and the armed forces of the GVN despised the Americans and would turn on them. This proved not to be the case. Seventh, Giap assumed that the firepower and mobility of the American military could be neutralized by increasing the number of targets the U.S. had to defend. This proved not to be the case. Eighth, Giap assumed that the tactical situation at Khe Sanh in 1967-68 paralleled that of Dien Bien Phu in 1953-1954. This proved not to be the case. All of these assumptions were critical
components of the Têt Offensive. In view of Giap's lack of understanding of the decision problem facing him it is fair to conclude that his decisionmaking with regard to the operational plan was irrational. No other conclusion seems reasonable.

When Giap's decisionmaking is examined through the lens of the judgment paradigm there appears to be better method in the apparent madness. The primary object of Giap's operational plan was to oust the Americans from South Vietnam. In order to do that Giap had to pick a fight with the Americans where he could inflict a sensational defeat on the U.S. forces. He believed that he could do that along the DMZ at Khe Sanh. Giap also had to destroy the base at Khe Sanh to prevent General Westmoreland from using it as a base from which to launch an offensive into Laos. In early 1967 the Khe Sanh base was only lightly defended—less than a regiment of U.S. Marines held the base and surrounding hills. Giap concluded that a corps-strength sweep of the area by NVA units could overrun the Marine forces at Khe Sanh with relative ease. The destruction of the Khe Sanh base also would end the use of the base to interrupt the flow of men and material into Quang Tri from Laos. The same forces that would overrun Khe Sanh also had other missions of vital importance to the success of TCK-TKN operations. Once Khe Sanh was captured the NVA corps-sized force was to sweep down on Hué in Phase II and capture Da Nang in Phase III. Giap made the mistake of assuming that Khe Sanh could be taken out in a "bump and go" operation.

It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if Khe Sanh had been overrun and the three NVA divisions had swept on to capture Hué and then lay siege to Da Nang. If that had been the result of Communist action in the DMZ perhaps President Johnson would have been forced by the Congress to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam. We can never know. Neither can we know whether the GVN and ARVN would have survived the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1968.

From the Judgment Paradigm point of view it can be said that Giap's concept of the operational plan appears rational. The key to the plan was the capture of Khe Sanh. He had three divisions available to do that, and they faced only one regiment. He could attack when the weather would not favor aerial counterattack and resupply by the U.S. The attack and overrunning of Khe Sanh would focus the attention of the Americans and interfere with the ability of the U.S. to come to
the rescue of ARVN forces in other areas. Giap's plan was an elegant solution to a very serious military problem. The problem with the plan was that Giap's assumptions about Westmoreland's air attack and intelligence capabilities were well off the mark. When Westmoreland struck at the NVA Corps headquarters that controlled the three divisions that were to execute the plan to capture Khe Sanh, the vital command node was destroyed. Giap's plan failed to provide for an alternative means to control the vital divisional forces and the attack which was the key to the entire plan failed to materialize. For a commander of Giap's rank and position to have failed to provide for such an obvious contingency suggests that while his judgments appear on the surface to be rational, they were not.

It is clear that Giap's operational plan was abandoned, and for that reason the decisionmaking that went into it can be fairly described as being beyond simply bad. The operation was a classic debacle. Throughout South Vietnam the plan resulted in a military disaster for the Communist forces. Giap's plan showed numerous symptoms of defective planning.

X. SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

HANOI'S STRATEGY:

Hanoi's strategy through the end of 1968 failed the ultimate test. The war was not won. The guerrillas in Vietnam were never able to achieve decisive results on their own. Neither the Viet Cong nor NVA forces were a match for the Americans. The concept of a revolutionary war lacked a true foundation. Even at the very end of the Second Indochina War in 1975, the government in Saigon was not overthrown by popular mass-uprising. The basic premise of People's War is that the end—the victory for the revolutionary forces—comes in the form of a final massive assault on the weakened government forces. So it was that, in 1975, the final assault that resulted in the Communist victory in South Vietnam came at the point of twenty-two divisions worth of Communist guns and bayonets backed up by tanks and artillery. The Winter-Spring Campaign in 1967-68, with its attendant Tết Offensive, did not lead to a short-cut to final victory. The Tết Offensive did not end the serious problems that faced the Communists prior to the convening of the 13th Plenum by Ho Chi Minh.
LIMITATIONS OF THE HUMAN COGNITIVE SYSTEM:

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 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.\(^{183}\)

It is now generally recognized that decisionmaking involves a multi-stage cognitive process. One lesson—perhaps the most important lesson—to be learned from the papers presented in this conference is that it probably is wise to avoid using the term "rationality" in regard to descriptions of either strategic policymaking or operational planning. It is clear that the very concept of rationality is used with different meanings. Rationality can no longer be defined exclusively by formal coherence and consistency. Helmut Jungermann suggests an alternative way of handling this difficulty: distinguish explicitly various meanings of the term. Besides the notion of formal or normative rationality, "concepts like substantive rationality and procedural rationality might be useful for a theory of judgment and decision."\(^{184}\)

According to Jungermann, the concept of substantive rationality "captures an important aspect of the term as it is used in common language, namely, how realistic, correct, adequate some judgment or decision is with respect to the real world—the paranoid with his perfectly consistent beliefs and values provides an example." Thus, rationality is not simply a question of whether a particular decision or choice of an alternative form of action is in line with a person's beliefs and preferences, but it also a question of what sort of preferences and beliefs the decisionmaker holds. Differently stated in Jungermann's words,"a decision might be consistent (and thus formally rational), but the [decisionmaker's] judgments that provide the input for the decision might be very poor (and thus the choice might be substantively not rational)."\(^{185}\)

The concept of substantive rationality seems appropriate to describe the policy and plan that came from the 13th Plenum and the office of General Giap. That is, the strategic policy and operational policy were consistent with the beliefs and
values of the Communist leadership in Hanoi, but as responses to the decision problem they were very bad choices.

The alternative perspective, according to Jungermann, is that of procedural rationality. Procedural rationality can be linked to substantive rationality if one asks what information is searched for and used by the person to form values and beliefs, whether the person tried hard enough to anticipate future consequences of current actions and future preferences for those consequences, etc.¹⁸⁶

This concept captures the notion of assessing decisionmaking in terms of its high or low quality according to the seven criteria proposed by Irving Janis. Jungermann notes that in institutional or ideological decisionmaking contexts, when decisions have to be justified, the procedural rationality of the actors can be more important than the substantive aspect of the decision problems about which agreement cannot be reached.¹⁸⁷

In a procedural rationality sense, the members of the Plenum appear to have been reasonably well informed about the nature and seriousness of the problems facing the Communist forces. They were less well informed about the capability of their forces, and the stability of the GVN and the ARVN. Thus, they exhibited a high degree of procedural rationality with regard to the analysis of the problem, but a low degree with regard to the consideration of the alternative chosen to resolve the problem. When General Giap's planning is examined in a procedural rationality sense it is easy to see why his plan led to a debacle. He did little to gather the kinds of high quality information he needed to make a good plan. Instead, he relied on numerous faulty assumptions. In addition, Giap did little to think his plan through, to anticipate what were the probable consequences of the failure of his troops to execute his extremely complex plan.

RATIONALITY AND STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING:

The very concept of "rationality" in regard to both strategic policymaking and operational planning is inexorably related to the idea of making decisions. The notion of rational decisionmaking (or of decision analysis) "is a quintessentially Western idea, an act of hubris to a believer in Eastern philosophy and a joke to the enlightened."¹⁸⁸ According to Ronald A. Howard:
[W]e in the west are captives of our culture and so we are usually strong believers in the idea of making decisions. Yet many of us have had the experience of knowing that certain actions are beyond decision, particularly actions concerning love, the infinite asset which need never be allocated. Here, perhaps we perceive the world with the undifferentiated gaze of the East.\textsuperscript{189}

It is well to ask whether a \textit{post hoc} study of whether a particular instance of 1967 decisionmaking was "rational" is of any practical value in the 1990's. Certainly there is no great value in being able to say that this or that decisionmaker was irrational or exercised bad judgment on a particular day. That is a historical judgment, but it serves no practical day-to-day purpose in terms of a person who is on the outside and looking in with the hope of knowing what a current-time actor will do in a given instance.

Decisionmaking is what a strategic policy and operational plan decisionmaker does when he does not know intuitively what to do. Beyond that, decision analysis is a formal cognitive process that enhances effective military decisionmaking by providing for logical, systematic analysis and imaginative creativity. The decision analysis procedure permits the systematic analysis of the decision problems that the policymaker and planner faces. It is a process that allows the decisionmaker to deal better with all of the information and preferences concerning the uncertain, complex, and dynamic features of the decision problem that he is facing.\textsuperscript{190} Thus, knowing whether a decisionmaker, particularly one that is an adversary, strives to practice good decision analysis procedures is important information. This knowledge will enable those who are studying a person or institutions to better judge the likely quality of the decisions that will be made.

CONFRONTING THE PARADOX:

Every time a military decisionmaker attempts to solve tough decision problems, a paradox must be confronted: \textit{Even superior decisionmaking practices cannot ensure good outcomes}. As all military strategies and plans are played out in the actual event, all outcomes are ruled, to one degree or another, by pure chance. Thus, bad outcomes can occur no matter what decision-making steps are taken. \textit{The better the quality of the strategy or plan, the greater the probability that a}
good outcome may result, but there are no guarantees of success. Therefore, the very best that any strategic policymaker or operational planner can do is follow good problem-solving procedures with the hope that by doing so he will increase the prospect of understanding all foreseeable risks and allowing for possible bad outcomes.\footnote{191}

There is no clear evidence that either the 13th Plenum or General Giap understood this important concept when they studied the military problem and made a choice of the type of action that Communist forces should take. There is no evidence to support the idea that the Têt Offensive failed in its purpose because of bad luck. The Têt Offensive had a bad outcome because it was based on a bad strategy and a bad operational plan.

WISHING WILL NOT MAKE IT SO:

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 the eighteenth century "rationalists" that Herbert Simon spoke of, 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 this belief. As Eric Hoffer noted, "action is often the nemesis of ideas, and . . . of the men who formulated them."\footnote{192}

- The End -


5. At this point it is fitting to acknowledge T.L. Cubbage III, my son and a law student at the University of Texas. He edited this Paper and made numerous helpful suggestions.

6. Midnight on 29-30 January 1968 marked the start of a new Lunar New Year, it was the start of Tết holidays, and it was the start of fierce fighting in the then Republic of South Vietnam. Call it what you will: Tết 1968, the Battle of Tết, the Tết Offensive, the 1968 Winter-Spring Offensive, or even the General Offensive-General Uprising; the country-wide military action in South Vietnam in early 1968 was a major event in the course of modern American military and political history.

7. The Latin phrase *vel non* translates literally as "or not." It is used in this paper, as it is in law, to mean that the two sides of an issue are to be explored. Thus "rationality *vel non*" means rationality or the lack of it.


10. James J. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," a paper delivered at the Third USAWC International Conference and Military Intelligence (May 1988), pp. 4-5. Whenever mention is made of "Viet Cong units," that phrase should be understood as meaning the Viet Cong Main and Regional Force units, but not the guerrilla forces which will be mentioned separately as appropriate to the situation. When "Viet Cong and NVA units" are mentioned, this author refers to the battalion and larger-sized forces of the latter two groups.


15. Id., pp. 7-8.


17. Id.
18. *Id*, pp. 293-94 (“The rational actor paradigm provides us with efficient means to handle problems in the area of international politics. It always leads us to expect the worst, and as a consequence, we are not likely to be taken by surprise.”).

19. *Id.*, pp. 294-95.

20. *Id.* p. 294.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*, pp. 294-95.


24. *Id.*


26. Brehmer, "The Role of Judgment in Small-Group Conflict and Decision Making," p. 295 (“This entails giving up the basic tenant of the rational actor paradigm—that decisions are based on a complete understanding of the decision problem [which amounts to the same thing as assuming that judgments are based on facts].”).

27. *Id.*


30. *Id.*


34. Id., p. 367.

35. Id.

36. Id.


38. Id.


44. Palmer states that Hanoi's decision to go public as an over actort "may well have been the key command decision of the war." *Id.* This author views it as simply one decision in a continuum of decisions.

45. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 2. The first attack came in the form of a ground attack on Camp Holloway, a U.S. base near Pleiku. The second attack involved the sabotage of a hotel in downtown Qui Nhon which served as a billet for U.S. personnel. *Id.*


49. *Id.*


51. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 11.

52. *Id.*


55. *Id.*

56. *Id.*, p. 418.


58. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 419.
59. *Id.*


61. *Id.*, p. 15.


63. *Id.*

64. As General Davidson notes:

   *Underneath it all, there was the irritation of the independent commander (Thanh) at those who sat back in high headquarters and criticized the efforts of the commander in the field. This resentment is universal; it disregards time, location, or nationality....*

Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, pp. 419-20.

65. *Id.* The meaning of the phrase is explained by Davidson in his book. *Id.*, p. 420.


68. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 421, citing a speech by Tran Do (aka Cuu Long [Mekong River]) broadcast by COSVN’s Liberation Radio, 7 September 1966.

69. *Id.*, p. 421, citing a 4 October 1966 article in the Hanoi press by La Ba.

70. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 421.

An act of precommitment involves committing oneself to a particular choice in advance. According to Richard H. Thaler,

The first recorded act of precommitment was taken by Ulysses in his encounter with the Sirens, a popular singing group in Ulysses’s time whose songs were highly addictive. Anyone on the seas who heard their songs would feel compelled to draw ever nearer to land, inevitably crashing on the rocks near shore. Ulysses’s strategy was to have himself tied to the mast so he could not alter the course of his ship.

Richard H. Thaler, "Illusions and Mirages in Public Policy," in Hal R. Arkes and Kenneth R. Hammond (eds), Judgment and Decision Making: An Interdisciplinary Reader (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 167. Thaler notes that Ulysses’s method of dealing with the Sirens was an act of rational precommitment. It satisfied the two conditions that are necessary for precommitment to be rational: (1) a change in preferences is anticipated; and (2) the change will be for the worse. Ulysses knew that he would alter the course of his ship if he had the option, and that the change in course would be for the worse. Id.

Id.; Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 5. For another, and more guarded, analysis of the Communist position see "The Vietnamese Communists Will to Persist," 26 August 1966 (CIA: Office of Current Intelligence, Office of Research and Reports, Office of National Estimates, and Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs), pp.

80. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 3.


82. Id., p. 441, citing Pham Van Son, ed., *The Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive 1968* (Saigon: Printing and Publication Center A.G./Joint General Staff, RVNAF, 1969), p. 46. It was not until early October 1967 that ARVN intelligence was able to obtain a copy of Resolution No. 13 of the North Vietnamese Politburo. In terms that were unmistakably clear, Resolution No. 13 called for victory in a short time, and it prescribed the strategy of a large-scale offensive as the means to achieve an immediate and final victory. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 33.

83. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 442.

84. Id.


86. Id., referring to a COSVN document (1 September 1967).


88. Id., p. 442.

89. Id., p. 443.


93. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 443.

94. *Id.*

95. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 8. In mid-September 1967 a very long article appeared in two newspapers in Hanoi—*Nhan Dan* (*People's Daily*) and *Quan Doi Nhan* (*People's Army Daily*). The article was attributed to Giap. The article, titled "The Big Victory, the Great Task," contains an outline of the objectives of the upcoming offensive campaign and describes how offensive operations would be conducted. With the aid of hindsight, all this now seems clear. Giap's article was published and broadcast to the cadres in the South for use as an indoctrination tool. The article was disseminated just as the so-called "border battles" began. It is fair to assume that the article was published when it was in the expectation that the Americans and South Vietnamese would make the mistake of connecting the article with the border battles. *Id.*, p. 23.

96. *Id.*; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 443.

97. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 443.

98. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 8; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 443.

99. *Id.* (both)

100. *Id.* (both)

101. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, pp. 443-44.


103. Contrast, Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," pp. 8-9 (Khe Sanh to be principal target).


106. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 3.


108. Id., p. 429.


111. Id.


116. Id.(both)

117. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 438. Some of the NLF leaders suspected that the reason for placing the Viet Cong in the forefront of the Têt offensive was to eliminate the NLF leadership and its fighting forces. Id. See also, Troung Nhu Tang, with David Charnoff and Doan Van Toai, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985), pp. 186-90. This author does not share that belief.


123. *Id.* (both)


126. *Id.*


128. *Id.*

129. *Id.*


131. *Id.*, p. 20; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 436.


133. *Id.*, p. 439.

134. *Id.*

136. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 6; Davidson, Vietnam at War, p. 449.


139. Id.


142. Jervis, The Logic of Images in International Relations, pp. 4-5. "A decision-maker's image of another actor can be defined as those of his beliefs about the other that affect his prediction of how the other will behave under various circumstances." Id., p. 5

143. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 18-19. The term "local forces" as used in this paper refers to Viet Cong units of company or platoon strength.

144. Id., p. 18.

145. Id., p. 19.

146. Id.

147. Id., p. 23.


149. Summers, On Strategy, pp. 11-12.

151. Id., p. 22.

152. Id., p. 23.

153. Id., p. 22.

154. Id., p. 18.

155. Id.

156. Id.


158. Id.

159. Id.


161. Id.

162. Id.

163. Id.

164. Id., p. 24.

165. Id.

166. Id.

167. Id.


170. Id.

171. Id.


174. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," pp. 20-21. See also Rostow's Memos to LBJ, dtd. 6 February 1968, pp. 2-4, Joint Exhibit # 427, Clearwater Collection, and 7 February 1968 (with text of Bunker's Cable to LBJ), Joint Exhibit # 696.

175. Id., p. 25.

176. Id.

177. Id.

178. Id.

179. General Westmoreland believes that Giap had the lesser objectives in mind when he planned for the Tết offensive. William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier's Report (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 378. See also, Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (1983; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 535, quoting General Vo Nguyen Giap ("For us you know, there is no such thing as a single strategy. Ours always is a synthesis, simultaneously military, political, and diplomatic—which is why, quite clearly, the Tết offensive had multiple objectives."). Joseph Hovey, a CIA analyst stationed in Saigon, suggested that the Tết Offensive had both maximum and minimum objectives. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise," p. 6, quoting Carver memo to Rostow, dtd. 15 December 1967, with attached Memorandum, dtd. 8 December 1967, pp. II-6-7, Joint Exhibit #420, Clearwater Collection.

180. Davidson, Vietnam at War, p. 450.

182. *Id.*


184. *Id.*, pp. 640-41.

185. *Id.*, p. 641.

186. *Id.*

187. *Id.*


189. *Id.*

190. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 443.

191 Nutt, *Making Tough Decisions*, pp. xiv, and 3 ("No book, expert, or test can be used to find the truth in decision making.").