

INTELLIGENCE AND THE *TÊT* OFFENSIVE: THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE VIEW OF THE THREAT

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PART I — *TÊT*: THE HOLIDAY AND THE OFFENSIVE

Têt — The Lunar New Year Holiday

At midnight on 29-30 January 1968, as the ancient tradition dictated, the households of South Vietnam began to celebrate the first of the seven days of the *Têt* holidays. Earlier in the afternoon they had made the *Tat Nien* sacrifices—offerings made to their deceased family members. At midnight the *Giao Thua* sacrifices were made—the deceased were called upon to join the living to celebrate the holidays. Believing that the good fortune *genii* had gone to heaven for the *Têt* period, the people erected the *Cat Neu* totems, and they set off long strings of firecrackers to scare away the evil spirits of Na Ong and Na Ba who feared the noise and light.¹ It was the beginning of the Lunar New Year. The year of the Monkey—*Têt Mau Than*—had begun.

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1. Ann Caddell Crawford, *Customs and Cultures of Vietnam* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Publishers, n.d., circa 1967), pp. 191–92, 222.

In countries with a Western or a Christian tradition there is nothing quite like *Tết*. Nowhere are there any national or religious holidays which quite rival *Tết* in all of its rich local significance. For Americans, *Tết* has been described as a time “corresponding to ... Christmas, New Years, Easter and the Fourth of July combined.”² *Tết* is a time when the Vietnamese, if they can go home, will do so, no matter how far they have to go. The *Tết* holidays, it is said, is “an overall manifestation of a way of life.”³ For example, consider this:

*Tết is a time for correcting all faults, forgetting [everyones] past mistakes, pardoning others for their offenses, and no longer having enemies. One should behave in a friendly manner to all and should not have any grudges, envy or malice at this time.*⁴

In both the North and South, *Tết* was Vietnam’s most important and most sacred holiday. It was a time universally cherished by every religious group and social class.⁵ It was supposed to be an annual period of peace.

Tết The Communist Offensive

Two hours after the people of South Vietnam began to revel in the delights of the *Tết* holiday, gunfire was exchanged in Nha Trang. The Communists’ 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising—the so-called *Tết* Offensive—had begun. As the night wore on, half a dozen of the cities in the northern and central parts of

2. *Id.*, p. 189.

3. Herbert Y. Schandler, *Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Unmaking of a President* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 71, citing MACV, *Command Information Topic 5–65, Vietnamese Tet*.

4. Crawford, *Customs and Culture*, p. 190.

5. Schandler, *Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*. 71, citing MACV, *Command Information Topic 5–65, Vietnamese Tet*.

South Vietnam came under heavy enemy artillery fire; ground assaults followed. One day later, just after midnight on the morning of Wednesday, 31 January, the Battle of *Tết* began in Saigon, the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam.⁶ It is the latter date that marks the official start of one of the most interesting battles—actually a campaign that lasted over a year—in the second half of the 20th Century.

The senior American officials in Vietnam and their South Vietnamese counterparts were expecting the *Viet Cong*⁷ and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces to mount a major offensive throughout the country right around *Tết*. However, they were not expecting the country-wide attacks on the cities, or attacks on the scale they were mounted.⁸

There are no definitive figures detailing how many *Viet Cong* and NVA troops were committed during the course of the year-long battle.⁹ Both the American

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6. T.L. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS: Was Intelligence Corrupted by Policy Demands?" in *Leaders and Intelligence*, Michael I. Hamdel ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. 1988), p. 169, Cabbage citing letter to wife (Saigon: 1 February 1968, p. 1).
 7. "*Viet Cong*"—a pejorative term, which means literally a "Vietnamese Communist"—is the term generally used to describe the *Viet Minh* in the post-1957 period. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), p. 8. Also referred to herein as the "VC" or as "Charlie."
 8. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 119, quoting writer's letter to father (Saigon: 8 February 1968), pp. 1–2 ("We [in military intelligence] knew Charlie was planning to hit right around *Tết*... We were not entirely anticipating the attacks on the cities countrywide on the scale they mounted."; see also William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1976), pp. 380–81.)
 9. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 119, citing "Report of Chairman J.C.S., on Situation in Vietnam and MACV Requirements," 27 February 1968, para. 3.a.(1), reprinted in E. W. Kenworthy, "The Tet Offensive and the Turnaround," in *The Pentagon Papers*, Gerald Gold, Allan M. Siegal and Samuel Abt, eds. (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971), p. 617; Phillip B. Davidson, Letter to writer (San Antonio, TX: 28 September

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that approximately 84,000 *Viet Cong* and NVA troops were committed to the battle in the opening phase of the *Têt* Offensive, *i.e.*, January-February 1968.¹⁰ MACV analysts made a count of all the enemy units identified, and estimated the number of support troops that probably were involved. This gave a rough number of 75,000 to 85,000. Of these, about 67,000 were in *Viet Cong* Local Force (LF) and Main Force (MF) battalions, companies and platoons, or in regular NVA units. The remainder were from the *Viet Cong* guerrillas, administrative services, and political infrastructure (VCI).¹¹

The exact number of enemy troops involved in the initial attacks of the *Têt* Offensive is not important. The nature of the attacks made absolute numbers unimportant. For example, only fifteen men—all from the *Viet Cong* Saigon C-10 Battalion (Sapper)—attacked the U.S. Embassy Compound.¹² In terms of the eight coordinated attacks in the capital and its suburbs, and all the other assaults on the cities in the enemy's countrywide attacks, the action at the American Embassy was, at best, a minor nuisance. The Chancery building was not entered and the Embassy was open for business at noon. Nevertheless, this tiny action

1987). "No previously unidentified [enemy] unit showed up." Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, 390.

10. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 119, citing Phillip B. Davidson, Letter (28 September 1987). *Cf.* Don Oberdorfer, *TET!* (1971; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1972), pp. 22–23.
11. J-2 MACV, "Cost and Impact Upon the Enemy of the Tet Offensive (Update)," dtd. 20 Mar 68, para. A.1, Box No. 3, Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office 1917–, Westmoreland v. CBS Litigation Collection 1966–1972, Modern Military Records (MMR), National Archives Records Service (NARS), Suitland, Maryland [herein cited "RG 407, Westmoreland Litigation Collection, NARS"].
12. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 169; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 23.

symbolized for many what was described as the palpable evidence of a U.S. defeat at *Têt*.¹³

Têt A Turning Point in History

Call it what you will: *Têt* 1968, the Battle of *Têt*, the *Têt* Offensive, the 1968 Winter-Spring Offensive, or even the General Offensive-General Uprising; the military action in South Vietnam in early 1968 marked a turning point in modern American history. All of the events of that time—both military and political—merit much more detailed study.

Despite earlier books and papers that have dealt with the War in Vietnam and the Communist's 1968 Winter-Spring Offensive, it is appropriate to examine the *Têt* 1968 once again. There still are a number of questions about the time for which no satisfactory answers have been provided. In the spring of 1988, at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, during the U.S. Army War College's Third Annual International Conference on Intelligence and Military Operations, Professor James J. Wirtz noted:

Twenty years after the Têt offensive, it is now possible to provide new answers to ... questions [about Têt] and to gain a fresh perspective on the events leading up to the surprise attack launched by the Communists. Even though the Hanoi régime has not opened up its archives, documentary evidence of Communist intentions is now available in the form of captured documents, POW interrogation reports and intelligence analyses which have been recently declassified by the U.S. government. Admittedly, the historical record is far from complete. 'Non-events' are rarely represented in the documents and incidents that failed to come to the attention of the American intelligence agencies are

13. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 119, citing letter to wife (Saigon: 1 February 1968), p. 1.

not discussed in materials contained in government archives. With the aid of hindsight and a thorough knowledge of how the battle [of Têt] developed, however, it is possible to offer a [fair] description of the communist goals during the Têt offensive and [to make] some judgments about the strategy employed by the Communists to deceive the allies.¹⁴

It is fair to add that because we now can make these judgments about the Communist intentions and plans, we also are able to better understand what prompted Hanoi to act as it did in 1968. In addition, we can make better assessments of what use was made of intelligence by the American and South Vietnamese in the pre-*Têt* period. Still, without a yardstick to measure what was planned by the adversary, it is presumptuous to say what could or should have been known or understood about the Communist's intentions and capabilities. In this paper, the enemy's intentions are revealed through the captured documents, tapes, and interrogation reports which are discussed and quoted.

The purpose of this paper is to explore only one facet of the events which preceded *Têt*. It is done with the intention of broadening the historical understanding of the *Têt* Offensive.

First, last and always, the so-called Second Indochina War (that period from 1962 to 1975) was a civil war in Vietnam. It was North against South. It was a Vietnamese war fought mainly on South Vietnamese soil, and the main protagonists were the people of Vietnam. America, and a number of free world allies, fought on the side of the Republic of Vietnam, but in the end they all left the battlefield.

14. James J. Wirtz, "Improving the Prospects of Surprise: The Communist Strategy of Deception Prior to the Tet Offensive," photocopy, a paper presented at the Third USAWC International Conference on Intelligence and Military Operations, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA., 17–19 May 1988 (copy in the possession of the writer), p. 3.

Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to look at the period that preceded *Tết* from the perspective of the South Vietnamese. The paper begins at a point in time when the leadership of North Vietnam was deciding to change its military strategy with regard to military operations in South Vietnam. The paper examines all that we know that the South Vietnamese government (GVN), its intelligence services, and high military commanders knew about their enemy's plans. The paper also looks at other events which the South Vietnamese should have know about—these were events that were done in the open with no obvious intent to conceal the event (although perhaps its significance).

The paper details what happened over time in the year prior to *Tết*. The reader will see all of the intelligence that became available. Every effort is made to show what the Southerners did with the material with which they had to work. Since this is not a story of American intelligence gathering and analysis, the U.S. estimates will be mentioned only when they are relevant to see what use their ally made of the information passed on by the Americans.

The story will not be ruined if the reader knows in advance that in the end the South Vietnamese were the victims of a strategic surprise. How this happened will be dealt with in the closing pages of the paper where a few observations are made and several conclusions are drawn about the significance of what happened.¹⁵

15. This paper is *part* of a broader effort by this writer. To put the content of *Tết* in its full context would require, at a minimum, the following: putting the Communist military situation in perspective; examining Hanoi's need to explore new strategy options; detailing the Communist debate about strategy; looking at Hanoi's offensive plan and its objectives. In addition, one must examine the objectives and views of the war, both from the perspective of the South Vietnamese and their American ally; and with an understanding of what was to transpire, examine what the South Vietnamese knew and when they knew it. The same must be done with regard to the Americans. The pre-*Tết* intelligence estimates of both allies must be reviewed, and the warnings and alert notices must be looked at in context. To fully close the information loop, the final course of the *Tết* battles must then be charted. Only then, against a complete and a fully

Ironically, the military historian studying this important period owes much to General William B. Westmoreland's personal sense of duty, honor and service to country. Because of attacks on him—demonstrably baseless attacks—he felt compelled to sue the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and others. A rich and voluminous historical record came out of that lawsuit. Much material that long might have remained classified became a part of the public record because of Westmoreland's defense of his reputation.¹⁶

PART II INTELLIGENCE AND WARNING

Early Indications

The problem with *Tết* from the South Vietnamese viewpoint—both within the government and the military—wasn't any lack of reliable intelligence. Rather it was a profound lack of any real understanding of the data that was available. The South Vietnamese had all of the indicators of a nation-wide offensive by the enemy on a scale previously unknown. Still, they failed to comprehend what the information was signaling. They had all of the pieces to Hanoi's warplans puzzle, but the government and military leaders never fully understood their content in context. To be sure, some military officers in the Army of South Vietnam

developed historical background, can observations be made and conclusions drawn about the significance of what happened.

16. For more on that case, and the events that led to it, see Cubbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," pp. 118–80, also in *Intelligence and National Security*, 3 (July 1988). Despite their obvious biases, the testimony of the witnesses in *Westmoreland v. CBS et al.*, and the documents declassified and produced in response to Freedom of Information requests for use in that case, form a unique record with regard to the War in Vietnam. The telling of this story—one from the view-point of the South Vietnamese—does not require much use be made of the available litigation records, but for other aspects of his studies, this writer has reviewed them, and some are used in this paper

suspected localized actions, and their units were on alert when the so-called Tet Offensive was launched, but most did not.¹⁷

Despite elaborate security precautions, the Communists were not able to implement their extensive preparations for the *Têt* Offensive in total secrecy. There were numerous telltale signs that the enemy's annual Winter-Spring offensive effort was going to be something extraordinary. Most of the indicators could be found in the enemy documents that the U.S. and ARVN units captured during a series of pre-*Têt* operations. Other, more palpable, signs of unusual activity existed in the form of *Viet Cong* and NVA attacks against cities—mostly in the border areas—that preceded the *Têt* Offensive. Finally, broadcasts by Hanoi Radio revealed much of what was to come.¹⁸

The question that naturally arises at this point in the narrative is this: To what extent did the South Vietnamese know in advance about the 1967–1968 General Offensive-General Uprising? The corollary question is: If there really were good indicators of what was to come, how were the *Viet Cong* and NVA troops able to surprise the South Vietnamese? As this paper proceeds, both questions will be answered. For our purposes, the story begins in the spring of 1967.¹⁹

Viet Cong 5th Division Papers

In March 1967, ARVN units captured an enemy document in the III Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ). The document, which was but one found with many other papers of the *Viet Cong* 5th Division, discussed, in summary fashion, a plan to attack the

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17. The *leitmotiv* of this paper may be summed up in the phrase “content in context.” This is how this writer sees intelligence
 18. Hoang Ngoc Lung, “The General Offensives of 1968–1969” (Indochina Monographs), microfiche (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 31; Don Oberdorfer, “Oral Interview, No. II,” 17 September 1981 (Washington) Ted Gittinger,
 19. Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 31.

city of Saigon. The warplan was rudimentary in form. In fact, the particular captured document was so amateurish that both the ARVN and U.S. intelligence analysts quickly dismissed it as someone's flight of fancy—some soldier's pipedream.²⁰ It probably was just that, for, as best we know, the decision—at least not the final decision—to attack Saigon and the other cities had not been made at that time.²¹

Khe Sanh Round One

Since the start of Operation PRAIRIE in October 1966, light elements of the U.S. 9th Marines had been conducting patrols out of the Khe Sanh Combat Base south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in western Quang Tri Province. The base was on a plateau that overlooked two infiltration routes from Laos into the province. On 24 April 1967, a patrol from the single company of Marines holding the base ran into a strong enemy force on one of the strategic hills northwest of the base. The fire-fight that followed prematurely triggered an elaborate NVA offensive designed to overrun Khe Sanh. What later became known as the “Hill Fights” had begun. The drive on Khe Sanh was but one part of the enemy's 1967 Winter-Spring offensive, the ultimate object of which probably was the capture of Hué. The entire 3d Marines reinforced and launched spoiling attacks. By 5 May the Marines had captured the three key hilltops that overlooked the Combat Base and a badly mauled NVA 325th Infantry Division had withdrawn to rest and refit. When the battle ended the 3d Marines withdrew and were replaced by the 1st Battalion of the 26th Marines.²²

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20. *Id.*, p. 32. One American officer noted, in jest: Surely the *Viet Cong* “fired that planner.” Don Oberdorfer, *TET!* (1971; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 154.
21. See text associated with footnote 45 (13th Plenum) at page 18 *infra*.
22. Moyer S. Shore II, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1969), pp. 8–17. The NVA 325th Division lost 940 (confirmed) troops. *Id.*, p. 17.

Interrogation of Ba Tra

Two months later—in May 1967—National Police agents in Saigon apprehended a high-ranking enemy cadre named Ba Tra. He was a high official of Sicovina—one of the largest textile firms in Vietnam. His cousin, Dr. Phung Van Cung, a former Saigon physician, was Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Under interrogation, Ba Tra said that he was the Deputy Chief and the Operating Leader of the NLF Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals in the Saigon-Cholon area.²³

Ba Tra revealed that since mid-1966 he had contacted many anti-government organizations, businessmen, and intellectuals to determine who would speak up “at the right moment for a coalition government and peace.” He told his captors that during the last week of March 1967, he had attended a high-level conference in War Zone “D” northeast of Saigon. There, from the leadership of the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), he learned that “the fighting-and-negotiating phase” of the war would begin at the start of 1968. Accordingly, Ba Tra had instructions to intensify his efforts to prepare “spontaneous” political support in the capital area. Ba Tra also said that North Vietnam had notified both China and the Soviet Union that Hanoi soon would open negotiations with the Americans, and that one of the principal demands would be the formation of a coalition government. He said that those at the conference were told that Moscow was pleased with Hanoi’s plan, but China’s Premier Chou En-Lai was very much against it.²⁴

Ba Tra said that after he returned to Saigon he began to line up prominent citizens for leadership positions in what was to be called the Alliance of National

23. Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 32; Oberdorfer, *TET!*, p. 79.

24. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 79.

and Peace Forces. He said that the new organization would be publicly revealed during the 1968 *Tết* holidays as a pro-coalition government group.²⁵

One of the documents seized when Ba Tra was arrested was a list naming a few members of the Saigon intelligentsia who had met with Ba Tra. It listed those who had agreed to serve in either the Alliance, or as cabinet members of a future coalition government for South Vietnam. All of those on Ba Tra's list also were arrested and interrogated.²⁶

The information supplied by Ba Tra, and the others, gave the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) the first indication that a new Communist-sponsored coalition-government organization was being formed in South Vietnam. After all of the information Ba Tra, and those he recruited, could give was analyzed, the motives behind the coalition-government project, as well as the objectives contemplated by the COSVN authorities remained unclear to the GVN.²⁷

During the late summer and fall of 1967 many rumors concerning the formations of coalition government gained widespread notoriety throughout South Vietnam. These rumors upset the people, caused concern in the GVN, and were a matter of consternation to the Americans. It began to look as if the coalition-government business was one of Hanoi's black propaganda tricks designed to sow discord among the allies in South Vietnam.²⁸

25. *Id.*, pp. 79–80.

26. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 32.

27. *Id.*, p. 32. The Communists already had the NLF acting as a front organization; so why did they need another group? One plausible reason is that the NLF "cover" had grown a trifle

28. Oberdorfer, *TET!*, p. 80. For two variations of the rumor, see Oberdorfer's book. In Saigon, the gossip grape-vine was so well developed it was even had a name—"Radio

Recall of Ambassadors

In July 1967, Mai Van Bo, the most senior North Vietnamese diplomat in Paris was summoned to Hanoi. Before long it was clear that other North Vietnamese ambassadors also were going back to Hanoi for some sort of conference. The ambassadors in China, England, and Indonesia were identified as among those who were on their way to North Vietnam. In time it was learned that all of the important North Vietnamese diplomats stationed abroad were absent from their posts. These movements—most of them publicly noted by free-world journalists—soon became the subject of speculative reporting.²⁹

On 13 July, under the headline “Hanoi Attitude Softening,” the diplomatic correspondent for *The Times* of London, reported the meeting of ambassadors in Hanoi, and he speculated that a Communist peace overture was in the making. In Hanoi, Bernard Joseph Cabanes, a journalist with *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), actually asked the North Vietnamese foreign office about the recall. He was told that “it was a routine affair.”³⁰

In December 1965 Hanoi also had recalled all of its ambassadors at the same time. That recall was for the purpose of having them attend the 12th Plenum of the *Lao Dong* Party Central Committee. In that Plenum, Hanoi set the strategy for dealing with the arrival of American combat formations in South Vietnam.³¹

Neither the GVN leaders nor the military hierarchy at the Joint General Staff (JGS) attached any particular threatening significance to the 1967 news stories. If the matter was given any serious thought at all, the matter was associated with

Catinat.” The stories were spread at the hotels and numerous bars of Tu Do Street, which was formerly the Rue Catinat. Crawford, *Customs and Culture*, p. 105.

29. *Id.*, p. 63.

30. *Id.*

the new rumors of a coalition government, and what a serious peace initiative would mean for the GVN and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). The real strategic significance of the recall of Ambassadors was not appreciated.

Action on the Political Front

The NLF had been organized by the Communists to serve as a vehicle to garner a wide-based support in South Vietnam. In the summer of 1967 Hanoi took further steps to enhance the image and to strengthen the appeal of the NLF. For example, in mid-August an extraordinary Congress of the NLF was held in the jungle northwest of Saigon.³² Then, On 1 September, the clandestine COSVN Liberation Radio told of the congress and detailed its manifesto. The new NLF program, said the announcer, promises:

*[F]ree general elections, ... freedom of speech, freedom of [the] press, and publication, freedom of assembly, trade union freedom, freedom of association, freedom to join political parties, freedom of creed, freedom to demonstrate, ... freedom of residence and lodging, secrecy of [private] correspondence, freedom of movement, freedom to rest and work, and the right to study.*³³

What apparently was being promised was total freedom from the tyranny of government.

Naturally, the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky—the Thieu-Ky régime—was denounced as the puppet oppressor in league with American colonialism. The NLF's 7,500-word political program was aimed both at exciting nationalistic yearnings in the youth of South Vietnam, and

31. For details regarding the 12th Plenum, see Oberdorfer, *TET!* pp. 68–69.

32. *Id.*, p. 78.

reawakening the anti-colonial fervor of those who had helped oust the French in 1954. What Hanoi hoped to accomplish by way of the NLF's new approach was to neutralize government officials, police, and soldiers in the South. The Liberation Radio announcer told his listeners that the NLF would welcome defecting "puppet" officers and officials. He said that those who actively fought against the Americans would be rewarded and given "adequate positions." In addition, the NLF promised that all those who sympathized with the NLF program and refused to carry out the orders of the Americans or the "puppet" masters would "have their merits recorded."³⁴

Interrogation of Sau Ha

In, September 1967, another important enemy cadre, named Sau Ha, was arrested and detained by the National Police. Subjected to continued interrogation, Ha disclosed that he was the deputy to Tran Bach Dang, a high-ranking officer at COSVN. He said that he had been in contact with members of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon since July in an attempt to set up an exchange of prisoners. Dang's wife and several of the Saigon cadre had been arrested as a result of information learned during the interrogation fo Ba Tra. Sau Ha said he was offering to turn over several of the high-ranking Americans military prisoners of war being detained by COSVN.³⁵

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 32–33. In his monograph, Lung does not identify the *Viet Cong* cadre who was captured by the National Police—calling him "X——." From the timing of the event, and the details of the story, this writer deduces that Lung is describing the arrest and release of Sau Ha, which is also described by Truong Tang. See, Truong Nhu Tang, with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1985), pp. 119–20.

When Tran Dang discovered his comrade had been arrested by the National Police he contacted the Americans through another emissary. Dang bitterly denounced the Americans for their failure to insure the safety of the COSVN negotiator. Viewing the Thieu-Ky régime as nothing but puppets of the American, Dang assumed treachery. The Americans, in turn, were enraged when they discovered that Sau Ha had been arrested on the order of President Thieu. Fearing that Dang might kill the American prisoners, the Embassy brought strong pressure to bear to force Sau Ha's release.³⁶

Among other things, Americans Embassy officials were said to have claimed that Sau Ha was serving as a double agent for the U.S. Embassy, or to be more exact, the Central Intelligence Agency officers in South Vietnam. That is most unlikely; however, saying that may have been the face-saving cover agreed to by the Americans and President Thieu. The U.S. Embassy people were extremely upset by Sau Ha's arrest. Unprepared for the American anger, the GVN authorities agreed, albeit reluctantly, to the release of Sau Ha, and with him Madame Dang and several others.³⁷

The American's saw in Sau Ha something more than a channel for the exchange of prisoners. He also spoke of the possibility that "other matters" of interest might be explored if prisoners were exchanged. The U.S. President's National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, was very interested in the *Viet Cong* initiative. He, along with others, speculated that Hanoi might be ready to come to some terms of settlement, and had chosen the *Viet Cong*, in the person of Sau Ha, as their

36. Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir*, p. 120.

37. *Id.* See also Oriana Fallaci, *Nothing and So Be It*, Isabel Quigly, trans. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 85–87 (gives details of the South Vietnamese motives).

channel of communication. Thus, the American anger at the actions of the GVN was understandably real.³⁸

ARVN Joint General Staff (JGS) officers were told of the arrest of Sau Ha, and knew that he was being interrogated. They heard nothing more from the National Police, except that, as rumors had it, he was claimed by the Americans, and that, along with a few other enemy cadres who had been detained for some time, was released. No intelligence of value from Sau Ha was furnished to the JGS.³⁹

Rumors of a Deal

By the end of September 1967, all Saigon reeked with rumors that a high-ranking Communist cadre was apprehended by National Police after making secret contact with the U.S. Embassy, and that he was released shortly thereafter as a result of strong U.S. pressure on the government. These rumors led to another story that General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the Director General of the National Police, had tendered his resignation in protest of the U.S. pressure and intercession. President Thieu and the National Assembly were said to have refused to accept Loan's resignation.⁴⁰

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38. Oberdorfer, *TET!* pp. 80–81. Sau Ha—codenamed BUTTERCUP—was one of eight channels through which the United States was attempting to open a diplomatic dialog with Hanoi. Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1968* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. xvii and 144 n. 2. See also Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1988), pp. 691–92.
39. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 32–33.
40. *Id.*, p. 26; Fallaci, *Nothing and So Be It.*, p. 87 (said Americans asked that Loan be fired). The National Police Chief, General Loan became an instant celebrity and a vivid symbol of the brutality of the war when he summarily executed a *Viet Cong* suspect in Saigon during the *Têt* Offensive. The event was recorded by Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer, and Vo Suu, a National Broadcasting Company television

Although these stories were never substantiated publicly, they persisted as doubts in the inquisitive minds of the people of Saigon. So, when the Communist offensive materialized, the suspicious people in Saigon were interested in the fact that no U.S. installations—save for the sapper action against the U.S. Embassy and unintended attack on BOQ No. 3—came under enemy attack. In particular, they also noted that no U.S. personnel, in any great number, were targets of the enemy troops, even though the Americans moved freely about the city and its environs. No one familiar with the Saigon scene was surprised when the capital's citizens—with their very suspicious minds—reached the one conclusion that the leaders in Hanoi probably hoped would be drawn.⁴¹ Thus, in the days following *Tết*, more rumors circulated to the effect that a private agreement had been reached between the U.S. and the COSVN leadership regarding the *Tết* Offensive, but nobody seemed to know any specifics.⁴²

Giap's Article

When the North Vietnamese made public the text of Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap's article "Big Victory, Giant Task"—which Hanoi Radio carried from 14 to 16 September 1967 in its daily programs—the South Vietnamese analysts immediately sensed that something new had been injected into the enemy's war policies. As usual, the Communist rhetoric only made sense when it could be read between the lines. The fact that a change of strategy was occurring was

cameraman. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (1983; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 529, and p. 518 (for Adam's still picture of the event).

41. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 26. The Vietnamese, and in particular the educated class, openingly acknowledge being a conspiratorial-minded people. They have the same sense of politics, having learned it from the French. They tend to view all political motivation and maneuver as being not only subtle; but conducted to the extreme; and they love it. The people of Saigon especially loved all of the stories and rumors about Americans that involved conspiracy theories. Oberdorfer, "Oral Interview, No. II," p. 17.
42. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 33.

transparent enough, but nobody in the GVN or at the JGS could decipher the exact direction the new strategy would take.⁴³

Most read the article as presaging a return to protracted guerrilla war. They focused on the following sort of statements in Giap's long paper:

Wanting a blitzkrieg, the U.S. imperialists have been forced to fight a protracted war. ... Protracted resistance is an essential strategy in a country that is not large and crowded and [which] has limited economic and military potential.... The Southern people, as well as the people in our entire country, are ready to carry out the resistance for five, ten, twenty or more years, and are firmly confident of victory. In the protracted resistance against the U.S. imperialist aggressors, our people in the South can gain time to score increasingly great achievements and are determined to do so.... On the South Vietnam battlefield, guerrilla activities have been expanded. In the days ahead, the guerrilla units clearly will show their ability in annihilating the enemy everywhere, forcing the enemy to disperse in order to defeat him The people's war of the heroic Vietnamese people is certain to win total victory!⁴⁴

Giap's references to what the guerrillas would accomplish was meant to be understood by the Communist cadres as applicable to the period from October 1967 to the end of January 1968.

Giap's words were meant as a "pep talk" speech—one made to exhort the *Viet Cong*, and the NVA forces, in the South to reach new heights of determination and bravery. For example, it contained statements such as this:

43. *Id.*, p. 33. For the full text of Giap's article, see Patrick J. McGarvey, ed., *Visions of Victory: Selected Vietnames Communist Military Writings, 1964–1968* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institutions Publications, 1969), pp. 199–251.

44. McGarvey, *Visions of Victory*, pp. 213, 221–22, 243, 251.

A glance at all [current] aspects of the antiU.S. national-salvation resistance war shows that the war situation has never been so favorable as it is now. The armed forces and people in the entire country have stood up to fight the enemy, and are achieving one great victory after another.... This great victory of our army and people is eloquent proof of the great power of our country's people's war, and is a firm argument on the basis of which we conclude that we are fully able to completely defeat over a million U.S., puppet, and satellite troops in the military field. This ability is becoming a reality.... The successes and invincible strength of our people's war strategy and tactics are paving the way for greater successes in the days ahead.... The great achievements of the past provide a firm base from which our people can move forward to final victory.... The people's war of the heroic Vietnamese people is certain to win total victory!⁴⁵

This speech was a summons to greatness, and did not signal to its intended audience any scaling back of the war effort.

The speech also outlined the means by which a new Communist offensive would break the back of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), destroy the puppet government, and, finally, after the American forces were isolated, they would be compelled to withdraw from the South. Giap's speech told how the "victory now" mandate of *Lao Dong* Politburo Resolution No. 13 would be implemented. For example, Giap said this about a coordinated offensive that would include actions in the cities:

The striking characteristic of the offensive strategy of our Southern people is to comprehensively and continuously attack and to gain the initiative in attacking the enemy everywhere, with all forces and weapons and with all appropriate methods. The comprehensive

⁴⁵. *Id.*, pp. 206, 235–36, 238, 251.

*offensive is a coordinated military and political offensive, and included attacks on U.S. troops and puppet troops and administration in the mountains and jungle areas, the deltas, and the cities. This requires a very great determination and very flexible, creative modes of attack.*⁴⁶

Giap emphasized the progress made in “fighting with concentrated forces” and noted that the “tactic of attacking cities is being developed.”⁴⁷ He discussed how all of the fighting arms, the infantry, artillery, sappers, engineers and guerrillas played a part in coordinated and mutually supporting action.⁴⁸ Giap’s long article certainly was not meant as an apology for turning back the clock or scaling back the intensity of warfare in South Vietnam.

Resolution No. 13

It was not until early October 1967 that ARVN intelligence was able to obtain, through its clandestine agent network, the first lead on the new strategic direction in Hanoi’s planning. A copy of Resolution No. 13 of the North Vietnamese Politburo was obtained. 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.⁴⁹

In early 1967, probably in March, Ho Chi Minh had convened the 13th Plenum of the *Lao Dong* Party Central Committee. To that group, President Ho gave the task of (1) studying in its entirety both the military and political situation in the North and South, and (2) recommending a course of action. After a long

46. *Id.*, p. 224.

47. *Id.*, pp. 225–26.

48. *Id.*, pp. 227–29.

49. Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 33.

deliberation, the report of the 13th Plenum was issued. It called for a “spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time.” The recommendation of the 13th Plenum called for a radical new course of military action: the slow steady progression of the classical People’s War—the protracted guerrilla war—was to be replaced with new war-winning strategy; one that would end the war of national unification in the near term.⁵⁰

COSVN’s Armored Troops

Another revealing document was captured in October during an allied operation against enemy forces in III CTZ. The paper was identified as belonging to *Viet Cong* Unit 16. This small, elite unit was COSVN’s armored force directorate. While COSVN had neither tanks or armored fighting vehicles (AFV’s), it had NVA-trained specialists who, among other things, studied the use of tanks and AFV’s by the U.S. and ARVN forces. The captured document discussed conducting Unit 16 training efforts that focused on sapper-supported attack tactics. It also described how to start and operate the various types of armored vehicles that might be captured by the *Viet Cong*.⁵¹

TCK-TKN Outline

On 25 October 1967 in Tay Ninh Province, III CTZ, still another important enemy document fell into ARVN’s hands. The paper, dated 1 September, contained this introductory remark: “This is instructional material to help better understand the new situation, and our new task.”⁵² Apparently, the document was meant for middle-level *Viet Cong* cadre. The document consisted of two parts. The first part

50. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946–1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 441.

51. Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 33.

52. *Id.*

outlined the main objective to be achieved by the Communist forces: ending the American presence in South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by the establishment of a coalition government. In conjunction with the new government, the NLF would play a major role in arranging for the Americans to leave South Vietnam. The second part of the document discussed the strategy of a “three pronged offensive” which was designed to: (1) defeat the RVNAF, and particular institutions; and (3) instigate a country-wide insurrection of the people of South Vietnam. The projected offensive bore the abbreviated designation TCK-TKN. These six letters stood for the phrase “*Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia*” (General OffensiveGeneral Uprising).⁵³

Siege of Con Thien

In July the NVA reinforced its long-range artillery bases along the Ben Hai River in the DMZ, and mounted a major thrust against the U.S. 9th Marines at Con Thien. The Marines moved against the enemy force with Operation BUFFALO. In a fortnight the enemy suffered 1,290 killed in action (KIA). After being rebuffed on the ground, the NVA increased the frequency and intensity of attacks by long-ranged fire. By mid-September the Marine firebase at Con Thien was under intense daily artillery attack. On 15 September the Marines counted 1,200 incoming rounds.⁵⁴ By 4 October, the siege of Con Thien was broken. It had taken a massive use of artillery, tactical air, and B-52's, but the NVA guns finally

53. *Id.*, pp. 33–34.

54. Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh*, pp. 19–21; Bruce E. Jones, *War Without Windows: A True Account of a Young Army Officer Trapped in an Intelligence Cover-up in Vietnam* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1987), p. 97. Jones' case for a cover-up is not convincing; nevertheless, his first-hand account of what he saw, heard, and did, is informative.

were silenced. The losses in men and equipment suffered by the NVA units that took a part in the siege of Con Thien were enormous.⁵⁵

Attack on Song Be

On 27 October the NVA 88th Regiment launched an attack northeast of Saigon near the village of Song Be in Phuoc Long Province in III CTZ. The target of the attack was the command post of a battalion of the ARVN 9th Regiment. The troops of NVA regiment tried three times to overrun the ARVN position. Each time they rushed the ARVN command-post position they were repulsed. Finally, when it was obvious that they could not capture the ARVN base, the NVA regiment retreated. At that point, the defenders sallied forth, pursued them, and turned the NVA withdrawal into a rout. In the end the 88th Regiment lost over 130 KIA; at least that was the count of the bodies that the retreating NVA soldiers could not recover.⁵⁶

Attack on Loch Ninh

Two days after the NVA force was repulsed at Song Be, men of the *Viet Cong* 273d Regiment—part of the VC 9th Division—attacked in Binh Long Province in III CTZ. The object of this enemy effort was the town of Loch Ninh, north of Saigon and near the Cambodian border. The only South Vietnamese forces in the area were three Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) companies, a Regional

55. William C. Westmoreland, "Section II: Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964–June 1968," in *Report on the War in Vietnam (As of 30 June 1968)*, U. S. G. Sharp and W. C. Westmoreland, eds., (Washington, DC: US Gov't Printing Office, 1969) [hereinafter "Report on Operations (1967 or 1968)"], p. 155. The B-52's attacked in 3-plane cell. Flying at 30,000 feet, out of the sight and sound of the enemy below, each of the strategic—turned tactical—bombers dropped a 28 ton load of mixed 500- and 750-pound bombs. With the effective burst radii of the bombs, a single cell would devastate an area of 1 by 3 km. Jones, *War Without Windows*, pp. 163–64.

56. Westmoreland, Report on Operations (1967), p. 155.

Force (RF) company, and a Popular Force (PF) platoon. The battle for the town went on for several days. As the fight developed the friendly troops were reinforced by ARVN units, and by the 1st Brigade of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. The *Viet Cong's* sustained effort to capture Loch Ninh did not end until 8 November. During ten days of heavy fighting the 273d Regiment lost over 850 KIA.⁵⁷

Thieu-Ky Inaugurated

On 31 October, in Saigon, President Thieu and Vice President Ky were inaugurated and the Directorate was dissolved. At the same time the Lower House of the National Assembly was installed and the Constituent Assembly ceased to exist. South Vietnam was maturing politically. The days of endless *coups* had ended. The President appointed Nguyen Van Loc to the post of Prime Minister of the Republic of South Vietnam.⁵⁸

For those in the GVN who were trying to make sense out of the Song Be and Loch Ninh attacks, there seemed to be a tie-in with political events in South Vietnam. The III CTZ actions—just up the road, so to speak—were seen as an enemy effort to embarrass and undermine the newly installed government.

B-3 Front Document

On 3 November 1967, in Kontum Province, ARVN forces found an important document. The originator of the paper was the B-3 Front—the headquarters controlling the enemy forces in the Central Highlands. The document described a

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

major attack that the B-3 Front forces were to launch against Dak To, northwest of Kontum City.⁵⁹ Prisoners of war gave the same story.⁶⁰

The B-3 Front document revealed four objectives that the Communists planned to achieve by launching a major offensive in the Central Highlands:

- 1. To destroy the bulk of the U.S. forces in the Central Highlands, thereby forcing them to bring in reinforcements [from Saigon and the III CTZ area], and to destroy and disrupt a major part of the ARVN forces operating in the II CTZ area.*
- 2. To improve Viet Cong and NVA combat tactics and techniques, and concentrate on efforts designed to destroy major enemy units.*
- 3. To weaken the enemy's vitality, liberate as large an area as possible, and consolidate the Viet Cong base area logistical system. By doing this, the VC/NVA units actually would take part, as well, in the political struggle for national liberation.*
- 4. To harmoniously coordinate B-3 Front efforts with other fronts across South Vietnam in order to implement actions correctly, and thereby unify the new Viet Cong and NVA policies.⁶¹*

This document proved to be self-validating with regard to its authenticity. Three days after it was captured, the B-3 Front headquarters launched a major offensive against Dak To.

59. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 34.

60. Jones, *War Without Windows*, pp. 129–30.

61. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 34.

Quang Tri Paper

Another important enemy document was seized by elements of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division in Quang Tin Province (I CTZ). Found on 19 November, the document provided substantial detail on an offensive that was about to unfold. A critical passage in the document said that the “Central Headquarters [(i.e., COSVN)] concludes that the time has come for a direct revolution, and that the opportunity for a general offensive and general uprising now is within reach.”⁶² Another part of the Quang Tri document stated:

*This is the time we should proceed with our General Offensive-General Uprising. Through the coordinated use of military forces, combined with a countrywide popular uprising, we shall attack every provincial city, and every district town, including the capital Saigon, which we shall liberate.*⁶³

The document also contained details concerning how the attack plan would be carried out:

The Central Headquarters has ordered the entire army and people to implement a general offensive and a general uprising in order to achieve a decisive victory.... [The army units must] use very strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities. Troops should flood the lowlands. They should move toward liberating the capital city [of Saigon], take power, and try to rally enemy brigades and regiments to our side one by one. Our propaganda should be broadly disseminated among the population in general, and leaflets should be used to reach [puppet] enemy officers and enlisted personnel. The above subject should be fully

62. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 136.

*understood by cadre and troops; however, our comrades should not say that this order comes from the Lao Dong Party or even from Uncle Ho, but to say it comes from the Front—the NLF in the South.*⁶⁴

Thus it was that the very essence of the enemy's forthcoming Winter-Spring 1968 offensive was made known fully to the GVN and the military planners of the RVNAF at the JGS. While they did not know the date for the offensive to begin, the JGS staff were able to guess with reasonable certainty that it would come—as had all of the enemy's other annual offensives—in January or February of the upcoming new year.

Drop in Number of Ralliers

The GVN had a program to encourage enemy defections. The *Chieu Hoi*—Open Arms—Program of the government offered to all who rallied (the *Hoi Chanh*) a GVN amnesty, job training, and other incentives. In response to the program, thousands of Communist soldiers and members of the *Viet Cong* infrastructure had surrendered to South Vietnamese authorities.⁶⁵

Toward the end of 1967 the number of defections from the ranks of the *Viet Cong* and NVA began to drop, and the total *Hoi Chanh* numbers were down significantly. That fact was duly noted by the GVN and JGS—its recognition was a matter of simple bean-counting sagacity—but its true significance was not discerned. If the RVNAF intelligence officers and the decisionmakers at the JGS had exercised a little intelligence acumen, they might have guessed the reasons

63. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 34.

64. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 137; Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (1977; abridged edition, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 63.

65. Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 244.

for the drop in defections. The enemy troops were being told that a great victory, through a final offensive was almost at hand. The enemy units also were being rearmed and brought up to strength. Only a fool would want to switch sides if he had any inkling that his side might be able to carry-off the offensive.⁶⁶

Enemy Command Changes

At about the same time, apparently reliable information concerning a reorganization of the enemy's territorial control in South Vietnam began to be reported by both the U.S. and the ARVN human source (secret agent) intelligence networks. Most significant among the features of the realignment were the changes brought into the enemy's territorial organizations in the I and III CTZ areas.⁶⁷

In the I CTZ area, the enemy Tri Thien-Hue Military Region (MR-TTH) was transformed. Now it had four military subdivisions instead of two (Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces). In the III CTZ area, the enemy's Military Region 4 (MR-4), commanding the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh sector, was reorganized. Now it had five military subregions whose interboundaries converged on Saigon-Cholon. Another enemy document, classified "Top Secret," which was captured in January 1968 from the COSVN's Communication and Transportation Section, confirmed the new III CTZ organizational realignment.⁶⁸ Organizational changes such as these indicated that the enemy was showing more than a normal interest in the capital, and the northernmost part of the country.

66. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 137 ("precipitous drop in defections" noted.).

67. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 34.

68. *Id.*, pp. 34–35.

Attack at Dak Son

On 5 December enemy troops attacked the Montagnard village of Dak Son in III CTZ. This attack in Phuoc Long Province was not against any military force. Instead, it was a wanton terror attack on defenseless civilians. Using flamethrowers, hand grenades, and satchel charges, the Communist troops attacked home after home in the village, slaughtering the occupants in the process. In all, more than 200 of the Montagnards were murdered (70 percent were women and children). Another 400 of the Dak Son villagers were taken away by the enemy to serve as forced laborers. The destruction of the village left the remaining 1,300 Montagnard people homeless.⁶⁹

Strange Happenings in the Delta

Coupled with all of the other out-of-the-ordinary attacks at Song Be, Loc Ninh, Dak Son, and the Siege at Con Thien, the intelligence officers of the JGS staff had to determine how yet another series of events fitted into the enemy's strategy. In Dinh Tuong Province, in the Mekong Delta region, the *Viet Cong* launched several nearly simultaneous attacks against government facilities, military outposts, and towns. This activity had to be reckoned with because Dinh Tuong Province in northern IV CTZ was a region where the *Viet Cong* frequently tested new military tactics.⁷⁰

Redux of Ho Chi Minh

On 22 December 1967, the old and ailing Ho Chi Minh made a rare public appearance in Hanoi. He spoke to a packed house at the National Assembly Building. The ostensible purpose of Ho's appearance was to celebrate both the twenty-third anniversary of the founding of the People's Army of Vietnam—the

⁶⁹. Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1967)," p. 156.

PAVN or NVA—and the twenty-first anniversary of the beginning of the war of liberation against the French.⁷¹

It was on 22 December 1944, that General Vo Nguyen Giap had organized the Vietnam Propaganda and Liberation Unit. Two days later Giap's unit attacked two small French outposts at Phai Khat and Na Ngan and annihilated them. By one account, Giap's thirty-four man force was able to achieve complete surprise by attacking on Christmas Eve and by dressing his men as pro-French partisans. The French let his men in by the main gate.⁷²

Fighting between the French and *Viet Minh* continued, but the First Indochina War—the war between the *Viet Minh* and the French—officially began two years later, on 19 December 1946. On that day, the Commander in Chief of French Forces, General Jean Etienne Valluy, demanded that the *Viet Minh* forces in Hanoi be disarmed. The reply of Ho and Giap to the French *démarche* was a surprise attack on the French garrison in Hanoi.⁷³

The real reason for Uncle Ho's appearance in Hanoi in 1967 was to officially open the Communist pre-*Têt* campaign of martial enthusiasm, a campaign that was to culminate when the highly motivated Communist forces began the *Têt* Offensive. Ho had not appeared in public in four months and his appearance before the Hanoi crowd was greeted with enthusiastic clapping and cheering. Dressed in the uniform of the Commander in Chief of the NVA, Ho made a point of telling the

70. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 137.

71. *Id.*, p. 83.

72. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 23.

73. *Id.*, p. 45. On 21 November 1944 the French had ordered the *Viet Minh* out of Haiphong.

assemblage that “I feel twenty years younger.”⁷⁴ His talk was short, strong and solemn. Obviously speaking to Vietnamese both in the North and the South he stated, in his oratory style of old:

*[Because the Americans persist in their aggression] the thirty-one million Vietnamese [—seventeen in the North and fourteen in the South—], young and old, men and women, must be [united as] thirty-one million resistance fighters, fearing neither hard-ships nor sacrifice, going forward in the wake of their victories to accomplish [new and even] greater feats of battle.*⁷⁵

His speech lasted for nine minutes, but four minutes of that time was taken up by the applause of the audience. At the end of the speech, Ho appealed to the people of the North and South to undertake new efforts and achieve new victories in the new year.⁷⁶

Newspaper Articles and Editorials

The newspaper *Nhan Dan*—the official news organ of the *Lao Dong* Party—characterized Ho Chi Minh’s speech as “an order to advance in our victorious drive. It is a signal for a new wave of attacks. It is the order of the day coming from the supreme command.” Echoing that theme, the NVA’s newspaper, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, stated that “the words of Uncle Ho are like a war trumpet announcing battle.... The solemn appeal of Chairman Ho is the mobilization order

74. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 84.

75. *Id.*

76. *Id.*

to the fatherland passed to one after another of the thirty-one million fighters....”⁷⁷

The Chinese language newspaper *Ban Tan Viet Hoa*, serving the ethnic community in Hanoi, said that Ho Chi Minh’s words evoked “war drums pounding, cannons resounding,” and said: “This is the command to advance! This is the call to charge.” In the days immediately following Ho’s speech there were editorials in the Hanoi papers which asked all the people to heed the word’s of the President.⁷⁸

Despite the fanfare, and the obvious martial tone of the speech and the newspapers articles and editorials, the GVN saw nothing more sinister in all of this than more of the usual Communist war propaganda.

Peace Talks

On Saturday evening, 30 December 1967, during an routine diplomatic reception in Hanoi for a visiting Mongolian People’s Government delegation, an apparent peace feeler was announced publicly. Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh, with the North Vietnamese Premier, Pham Van Dong standing behind him, stated that after the United States announced that it has begun an unconditional cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam, the government in Hanoi “will hold talks” with the United States on matters of mutual interest. Prior to this time, the leadership in Hanoi had been vague about what would happen if the Americans stopped the bombing of North Vietnam. The AFP newsman in Hanoi, Bernard-Joseph Cabanes, was at the reception. To him were given both French and English translations of Trinh’s remarks. To be certain that the United States would hear of

77. *Id.*

78. *Id.*

this “offer,” Hanoi Radio also broadcast the terms of Trinh’s peace overture in English on its international news service.⁷⁹

Uncle Ho’s Poem

On Saturday, 30 December, throughout Hanoi, government messengers delivered individually addressed envelopes to all of the high officials of government, to leading citizens, and to the paper on which was printed a short poem in Vietnamese. The poem was signed “Ho Chi Minh.” It read:

*This Springtime certainly will be more joyous
than all such previous seasons,
For news of victories will come from all parts
of the land.
North and South (our people and our soldiers) will
compete in the anti-American struggle.
Forward we go,
And total victory will be ours.*⁸⁰

79. *Id.*, pp. 85–86.

80. Pham Van Son, ed., *The Viet Cong “TET” Offensive (1968)* (Saigon: Military History Division, Joint General Staff, RVN Armed Forces, 1969), p. 47. There also is another translation of the poem that goes like this:

*This Spring far outshines the previous Springs,
Of victories throughout the land come happy tidings.
Let North and South emulate each other
in fighting the U.S. aggressors! Forward!
Total victory shall be ours.*

Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 85. Yet another reads thus:

*This Spring is entirely different from previous ones,
Because every household is enjoying news of victory.
North and South are now forever reunited.*

On 1 January 1968 it was broadcast on the Hanoi Radio domestic service—which means that it could also be heard in South Vietnam. In Chairman Ho’s poem, the word “Springtime” was meant to be understood by all of those “in the know” as being “*Têt*.” The poem was broadcast to stimulate all of the Communist troops in the South who were preparing for the *Têt* Offensive.⁸¹

New Year’s Truce Ends

On 2 January 1968, at 0600 hours, the 36-hour New Year’s truce period ended. During the day and a half of cease-fire the Communists initiated 64 major and 107 minor incidents according to the U.S. count. The ARVN forces suffered 50 KIA and 137 more wounded in action (WIA). The U.S. casualties were 27 KIA and 191 WIA. In the same time period, 598 of the enemy were killed.⁸² Such happenings in the truce periods were not uncommon. The following day, the Communist began three days of rocket attacks on the Da Nang Airbase. From 3 through 5 January 122-mm rockets rained down on the U.S. Marines at their airfield.⁸³

Captured Attack Plans

On 4 January 1968, during an operation in the Dak To area, a unit from the U.S. 4th Infantry Division captured yet another significant document. This, in conjunction with the earlier B-3 Front paper, revealed that the Central Highlands

Forward!

Total victory will be ours.

Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 29.

81. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 85; Lung, “General Offensives,” p. 29.

82. Westmoreland, “Report on Operations (1968),” p. 182. The local time in South Vietnam was that of the “HOTEL” military time zone. Thus “Saigon time” was thirteen hours ahead of the local time in Washington.

of II CTZ also was of special interest to the enemy in regard to the upcoming offensive campaign.⁸⁴

The Dak To document, titled "Urgent Combat Order No. 1," was a five-page plan for the movement of troops and the conduct of attacks in Pleiku Province. One passage of the enemy's plan specified action that had to be taken "before the *Tết* holidays." The plan indicated that roads were to be interdicted, outposts were to be attacked, and "popular demonstrations" were to be started as soon as Hanoi issued the signal. It was read by the U.S. and ARVN intelligence officers as indicating that Pleiku City would be attacked before *Tết*.⁸⁵

In mid-January, a unit of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division seized an enemy document during an operation in III CTZ. It showed that the *Viet Cong Dong Nai* Regiment was to participate in coordinated attacks in Binh Duong Province. Phu Cuong, the provincial capital of Binh Duong, and seat of the ARVN 5th Division Headquarters, was to be attacked. In addition, the Headquarters of the ARVN 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron, also in the province, was to be captured. This information subsequently was corroborated by a rallier from the *Viet Cong 273d* Regiment, 9th Division.⁸⁶

On 20 January 1968, the ARVN 23d Infantry Division captured an enemy plan for an attack against Ban Me Thuot City. However, this plan did not specify when the attack would take place. The same day, the ARVN 22d Infantry Division also

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.*, p. 35.

85. *Id.*; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 144.

86. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 35.

seized a document. It stated that Qui Nhon was to be attacked. Again, no date for the attack was contained in the document.⁸⁷

Ominous Pattern of Attacks

On 8 January *Viet Cong* and NVA soldiers mounted an attack on the district town of Phu Loc in I CTZ between the cities of Hué and Da Nang. That same day the enemy also attacked Khiem Cuong in III CTZ. Khiem Cuong was the capital of the border province of Hau Nghia. The town was 35 km northwest of Saigon.

Counting these two attacks, in the period since the year began, the Communists had launched 42 attacks against district and provincial capitals, and they had conducted scores of raids against smaller towns, airfields and military outposts.⁸⁸ The pattern of attacks, and the fact that they all were against towns was unusual.

Khe Sanh Under Siege

In mid-January the JGS received word from the Americans that the NVA 304th Division had infiltrated across the border from Laos. The 304th was an elite Home Guard formation, and, in 1954, it had participated in the capture of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. The division had joined the NVA 325C Division in the vicinity of Khe Sanh. General William C. Westmoreland, the Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, told this to General Cao Van Vien, the Chief of the JGS. General Westmoreland also told General Vien that the senior American intelligence officer at his headquarters (the J-2 MACV) believed that the NVA divisions would mount a full-scale attack on the Marine base at Khe Sanh in the last half of January. General Westmoreland also told Vien that he and General Davidson, the J-2, also believed that the NVA 320th Division—which was in the DMZ—probably would attack along Route 9 toward the U.S. Marine

87. *Id.*

88. Braestrup, *Big Story*, p. 64.

firebase at Camp Carroll. It was at Camp Carroll that the U.S. Army 175-mm gun battalion also was stationed. The long-range guns of the Army provided fire support for the Khe Sanh base.⁸⁹

The NVA activity around Khe Sanh increased each day until 21 January. On that day a prolonged rocket and mortar attack on the Khe Sanh base destroyed the main ammunition dump. The loss of the munitions stockpile created a serious situation at the base. However, under heavy anti-aircraft fire, transport planes and helicopters kept the isolated base supplied.⁹⁰

During this period, a rallier from the NVA 325C Division reported that in addition to the 304th and 320th Divisions, there were two more NVA divisions—the 308th and 341st—in the northern part of I CTZ. The rallier said that the NVA units were going to repeat the victory of the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Just as they had surrounded and defeated the French in 1954, the Communist planned to besiege and capture the garrison at Khe Sanh.⁹¹

The Pueblo Incident

On Sunday, 21 January, North Korean commando infiltrators unsuccessfully attempted to raid the South Korean presidential mansion at Seoul. It was the most dramatic action mounted by the North against the South since the end of

89. Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1968)," p. 182. In mid-January 1968 at the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, in Saigon, the South Vietnamese analysts were telling their American counterparts that they believed the Communists would attack Khe Sanh during *Tết*, and that they also would attack all of the cities, especially Saigon. Jones, *War Without Windows*, pp. 158–59.

90. *Id.*; Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 42.

91. Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1968)," p. 182; Shore, *Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 39. The rallier said that the NVA forces were going to overrun Khe Sanh, then go on to attack Hue.

the Korean War.⁹² Two days later, in international waters, off Korea, the American Navy intelligence gathering ship USS *Pueblo* was seized by the North Korean Navy. The crew of the U.S. vessel was captured and taken to North Korea.⁹³ The GVN and JGS took no special note of these two incidents. It apparently did not occur to them that a crisis situation in Seoul might prompt the recall of the two divisions and one brigade of South Koreans serving in South Vietnam.⁹⁴

To this day there is no hard evidence that the North Korean actions in January 1968 were anything more than coincidentally connected to the *Têt* Offensive. What is known for sure is that on 11 August 1967, a North Vietnamese delegation, led by Deputy Premier Le Thanh Nghi, was in Pyongyang. There the Deputy Premier signed a new military aid pact with North Korea.⁹⁵ Thus the North Vietnamese had an opportunity to discuss with the North Koreans what was about to happen in South Vietnam. It is not difficult to imagine that Nghi asked the Koreans to do what they could to put pressure on Seoul to bring its troops home.

Assuming that there was a connection between the actions of the North Koreans and what Hanoi had planned, the timing of the North Korean actions is a bit odd. Certainly the timing of events is a bit tight; it would be hard to have moved the

92. Oberdorfer, *Tet*, p. 357.

93. *Id.*, pp. 128, 180, 181 n.1, 357.

94. Stanley Robert Larsen and James Lawton Collins, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1975), pp. 16, 24, 132, 135–36, 138, 141. The ROKA Capital (Tiger) Infantry Division was deployed in the Qui Nhon to Phu Cat Mountain area. The 9th (White Horse) Division's two regiments were at Tuy Hoa (28th Regt.) and Cam Ranh Bay (29th Regt.), while the division's headquarters was at

95. *Id.*, p. 352.

two Korean divisions out of South Vietnam in the week that remained before *Tết*. On the other hand, perhaps a serious air of crisis in South Vietnam, with the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) forces on alert to return home, could have been all that was needed to neutralize the divisions during the first critical days of the *Tết* Offensive. That seems to be the more plausible explanation of what the North Koreans were trying to accomplish, if—and even this we do not know—there was a connection between the North Korean actions and the offensive in South Vietnam. In the event, the ROKA units were not neutralized.

Interrogation of Nam Dong

One week before the *Tết* Offensive began—that is about 24 January—the GVN obtained an unprecedented intelligence windfall in the person of Nam Dong, a high-ranking enemy prisoner. Dong was the chief political commissar for the *Viet Cong* MR-6 headquarters. He was captured in an ambush while he was on his way back from a conference at COSVN headquarters. Nam Dong had important information, but he did not disclose it before the offensive began.⁹⁶

It was only after a prolonged interrogation—one lasting several weeks—that Nam Dong disclosed all the reasoning which prompted the North Vietnamese leadership to switch from their old strategy—one of protracted warfare—to one based on a single general offensive combined with a general uprising. Hanoi's actions were seen as a radical departure from the conduct of the 1946-1954 First Indochina War.⁹⁷ Although the interrogations of Nam Dong did not result in

⁹⁶. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 21. Phillip B. Davidson, the J-2 MACV during the *Tết* Offensive, revealed in his book that he never knew of the capture of Dong, and never received any of the vital information that was obtained from his interrogation. Davidson says that he believes that the Dong's interrogators probably got "from Dong what they wanted *prior* to the initiation of the offensive." Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 480.

⁹⁷. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 21–22.

avoiding the surprise of the attack, it did help the JGS to understand what was happening, and why the enemy was implementing a new strategy.

Nam Dong revealed that Hanoi's decision to make a radical change in strategy was attributed to four factors:

1. The U.S. forces were much stronger than French forces. In the First Indochina War, the victory of Giap and the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu had sufficed to bring about the Geneva Accords. In the present war—given the military might and awesome firepower of the U.S., the Communists entertained no real hope of achieving a similar victory.

2. North Vietnam's strategy of "enveloping the cities with the rural areas"—a military tactic that had been effective during the First Indochina War—proved no longer to be effective in the face of the combined U.S./RVNAF effort. The old, obsolescent strategy not only failed to bring so much as a single decisive victory, but it also retrogressed the war back to Mao Tse Tung's strategic First Stage of guerrilla warfare.

3. If protracted war was to continue on its present slow course, North Vietnam surely would incur ever increasing losses. Hanoi feared that, in the long run, an aggravating attrition in manpower and material resources might cause even the Communist regime in the North to collapse.

4. To set things right, the time had come for big, bold and decisive actions in the South. In Hanoi's view, the general military offensive, coupled with the anticipated popular uprising, had every chance to

*succeed because the Communists would enjoy what were seen as “two strategic opportunities and one tactical advantage.”*⁹⁸

The leadership in Hanoi saw that *war was content in context*, and had decided on a bold new initiative. The Americans, with their men, material, mobility and firepower had changed the face of the war in South Vietnam in the 1965-1967 period. Now Hanoi was going to change things back to its clear advantage. It was either that, or end the war on the American terms, and for Ho and the northern leadership, the latter was unthinkable.⁹⁹

From the perspective of Hanoi, one “strategic opportunity” was the United States presidential election that was scheduled for November 1968. The leadership in Hanoi believed that in the face of a Communist victory, the Johnson administration—which already had run into difficulties because of a strong and ever growing opposition to the war—would not be able to send more troops to South Vietnam. Hanoi also reasoned that America would not fight alone if the Thieu-Ky régime collapsed. Instead, the Americans would be compelled to reduce its troop strength and seek negotiations on terms advantageous to the Communist side.¹⁰⁰

In all respects, Nam Dong’s statements to his interrogators about the nature of the offensive proved to be reliable. His revelations corroborated several previously unconfirmed reports; e.g., Vo Nguyen Giap’s interest in the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Even though Giap wrote in his September article that such an election was merely a device for the U.S. party in power to reshuffle its ranks, and that the U.S. policy of aggression would remain unchanged regardless of the election outcome, Giap and the other top leaders in Hanoi were well aware of the

98. *Id.*, p. 22.

99. *Id.*

100. *Id.*; McGarvey, *Visions of Victory*, p. 216.

fact that in an election year, U.S. presidents seldom were inclined to make bold policy decisions.¹⁰¹

As Hanoi saw it, the United States policy toward Vietnam was predicated on an effort to prevent the political, economic and social life of the American people from being affected by the war, thus the phrase “guns and butter” was heard in Washington. Giap predicted that this policy was failing, and that a change in policy regarding the war would come as a result of the growing political dissent in both the United States and South Vietnam.¹⁰² Accordingly, the American target of the *Tết* Offensive was not on a South Vietnam battlefield, but was the Oval Office. Hanoi’s object was to restrict President Johnson’s options to one—withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam.

The other “strategic opportunity,” said Nam Dong, came from an increasing opposition, both domestic and international, to America’s continuing intervention in Vietnam. A big Communist victory—one that toppled the GVN—would make the opposition stronger and more widespread. This, in the end, would force the U.S. to terminate its involvement in Vietnam, even against the President’s own will.¹⁰³

Giap believed that the new offensive plan was based on a “win-win” strategy. When asked about Hanoi’s plans in the event of a defeat, Nam Dong reiterated Vo Nguyen Giap’s belief that the Winter-Spring offensive would be successful. But, even if it turned out that it was not wholly successful, or even ended in defeat, Giap did not think the result would adversely effect the Communist war effort. The “People’s War” always had been rooted in the rural and mountainous areas. A military failure in the southern urban areas, therefore, simply would

101. Lung, “General Offensive,” p. 23; McGarvey, *Visions of Victory*, p. 216.

102. *Id.*, pp. 23–24.

103. *Id.*, p. 22.

require the Communists to return to their old base areas.¹⁰⁴ As protracted guerrilla warfare was always the final option—*the start-again alternative*—nothing made better sense than to make the great effort at winning the war with one general offensive and popular uprising. The political policymakers in Hanoi had decided that *it was time to stop playing at People's War, and end the war.*

Nam Dong revealed that the Communists were aware that the assault units would suffer great losses when they attacked the cities. But human losses were not Hanoi's main concern. There would be great losses on both sides. Nam Dong explained to his captors that North Vietnam had a capacity to field replacements estimated to be about three times that of South Vietnam. Thus, even if both sides were badly mauled, the Communist forces would be reconstituted faster than would ARVN. Besides, since this was to be the last offensive, the *Viet Cong* and NVA units still in the field would be sufficient to deal with the consolidation of the victory.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, one of the basic assumptions of the offensive plan was that numerous ARVN units would either lay down their arms, or fight on the side of the *Viet Cong* and the NVA forces.

Nam Dong revealed other advantages which the planners in Hanoi thought would favor the Communist side. In Hanoi, said Dong, it was genuinely believed that the RVNAF was no longer combat-effective—that ARVN was incapable of either offensive or defensive operations. Hanoi also believed that the South Vietnamese people hated equally both the Thieu-Ky régime and the Americans—seeing the latter as foreign dominators, like the French. The people had, Hanoi believed, demonstrated their antipathy for a thinly disguised American colonialism. This was shown, Hanoi thought, by the frequent and often violent public demonstrations, and by the people when they joined such popular organizations as the National Salvation or the militant Buddhist movement. Hanoi, said Dong, saw in

104. *Id.*, p. 23.

105. *Id.*

the popular manifestations that had several times rocked South Vietnam's big cities a real indication of the profound anti-government and anti-war mood of the people. These also were seen as signs of a popular sympathy for the goals of the Communist insurgency. Thus, the leadership in Hanoi was convinced that the mood of the people of the South demonstrated a ripeness for a popular insurrection, and a real readiness to join the Communist side in the event of a general offensive. In fact, said Dong, the belief in Hanoi and at COSVN Headquarters was that coordinated attacks on urban areas would be the spark that would ignite the uprising of the people.¹⁰⁶

It is interesting to note that nothing which Nam Dong told his interrogators could not have been gleaned from a careful reading of Vo Nguyen Giap's mid-September "war-winning pep talk" which had been broadcast to South Vietnam over Radio Hanoi's Domestic Service.¹⁰⁷

No Truce at All

On Saturday, 20 January, General Westmoreland went to see President Thieu. Westmoreland told the president that he viewed the enemy threat in I CTZ as extremely imposing. The situation was so critical, said Westmoreland, that he had come to Thieu to try to get approval for cancelling the customary cease-fire over the *Tết* holiday, or at least reduce it from forty-eight to only twenty-four hours. Both President Thieu and General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, told Westmoreland that they could not agree to a total cancellation. It would be too sharp a blow to the ARVN soldiers and the people, they said, to eliminate all

¹⁰⁶. *Id.*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁰⁷. McGarvey, *Visions of Victory*, pp. 199–251.

observance of the nation's most important holiday. Also, to do so would give the enemy a propaganda club to be wielded against the GVN.¹⁰⁸

At Westmoreland's urging, Thieu did agree to shorten the allied *Tết* cease-fire period to thirty-six hours. General Vien promised that *Tết* leaves for ARVN troops would be limited, and that a minimum of 50 percent of all the available troops in all units would be on full alert during the *Tết* truce period.¹⁰⁹

What is interesting about this agreement is that *none of the participants believed that the enemy would attack during Tết*. Instead, they believed that if the attack did not come by the eve of *Tết*, it would come after the enemy's declared seven day truce period ended. Westmoreland, in asking for and getting a shortening of the GVN cease-fire, wanted to give the enemy as few days of grace as possible—recognizing that the enemy would use the cease-fire period to make his final preparations for a post-*Tết* attack, if the attack did not come prior to *Tết* as Westmoreland anticipated.

Enemy Tanks in Laos

On 23 January NVA forces operating west of Khe Sanh in Laos overran a Laotian Army post at Ban Houei on Route 9. The enemy used Russian PT-76 amphibious tanks in the attack. Later in the day, five of the tanks were spotted inside South Vietnam. The tanks were moving toward Lang Vei and Khe Sanh on Route 9. The bad seasonal weather prevented effective air attacks on the enemy armored force. However, American fighter pilots did confirm the presence of tanks, and they claimed that at least one of the tanks was destroyed in the course of what air attacks could be made. The surviving members of the overrun Laotian Volunteer 33d Battalion retreated eastward into South Vietnam. For a while they were in the

¹⁰⁸. Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁹. *Id.*

Khe Sanh village area, but on 8 February, again retreating from new NVA attacks, they ended up at Khe Sanh Combat Base.¹¹⁰

Thieu, Westmoreland and Bunker Meet

On Thursday, 25 January, at 1900 hours (7:00 pm local time) United States Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and General William Westmoreland met with President Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon at the Presidential Palace. General Westmoreland's purpose was to talk to the president about having the planned *Tết* truce not apply in I CTZ and in the area of North Vietnam south of Vinh. After some talk about the issues involved, Thieu told the Americans that the plan gave him no problems, and that he was wholly in agreement that it was the correct thing to do. However, Thieu did emphasize that the decision must be closely held, and only announced publicly at the last minute. Thieu proposed a meeting of the ambassadors who represented the Manila Conference powers on the Monday morning, 29 January, to get their concurrence. Thieu said the public announcement would then be made at noon on Monday. The president told Westmoreland and Bunker that he would see General Cao Van Vien, the Chief of the Joint General Staff, that evening, and that he would tell Vien of the plan at that time. Other than Vien, Thieu said he would tell no one of what they had just agreed to do in I CTZ.¹¹¹

ARVN Rangers at Khe Sanh

Although the American Marines were bearing the brunt of the fighting at Khe Sanh and along the DMZ, the JGS was sensitive to what the enemy activity in that region portended for the rest of I CTZ. On 27 January the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion—four companies totalling less than 400 men—arrived at Khe Sanh to

¹¹⁰. *Id.*; Shore, *Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 69.

¹¹¹. MACV Msg. No. 01219, 251416Z January 1968, paras 1–5, p. 1, Box No. 24, RG 407, Westmoreland Litigation, NARS.

join the U.S. Marines in the defense of the base.¹¹² At best, most thought, they were sent to Khe Sanh to give the GVN a real presence, and a symbolic part in the battle. Later, in the face of frontal assaults, the ARVN troops fought well and prevented elements of the NVA 304th Division from penetrating the eastern perimeter of the base.¹¹³

Briefings at II Corps Headquarters

On 24 January all of the American forces in Pleiku Province were placed on alert, and a platoon of U.S. tanks were sent to Pleiku City to serve as a quick reaction force if needed. The enemy's "Urgent Combat Order No. 1" required that certain things were to be completed before *Tết*, and Major General Charles Stone, commander of the U.S. 4th Division, made sure that the Americans in the province were as ready for action as they could be as the holidays approached.

On 26 January, Stone assembled all U.S. unit commanders, and all the American advisors in Pleiku Province. He briefed them concerning the latest intelligence on the enemy's plans. He told them that it looked like the enemy would attack before the holidays began. Stone also briefed Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, the commander of ARVN II Corps, and his senior staff. General Loc, who maintained an elaborate villa in Pleiku, told Stone that he too had noticed some indications that the enemy was up to something. However, to Stone's surprise and disgust, Loc said that what he saw in the way of upcoming enemy action was not serious enough to prompt him to cancel plans to be in Saigon for the *Tết* holidays.¹¹⁴

¹¹². Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1968)," p. 183.

¹¹³. Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 124.

¹¹⁴. Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, p. 386; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 144. According to Westmoreland, "Vinh Loc was an enigmatic man, tall for a Vietnamese, a playboy, sophomoric, cantankerous, one whom I considered no better than marginally competent for such an important command as II, Corps." *Id.*

Have a Happy Tết

Apart from the palpable threat in I and II CTZ, the general situation in the remainder of South Vietnam was relatively calm. It was in the context of this relaxed situation that plans were approved to give the ARVN troops leaves during the *Tết* ceasefire period. The people in the capital had all but forgotten the war going on in the country: it was all out of the sight and the sound of Saigon and Cholon. The government also was taking steps to make *Tết* as normal as possible for the common people of the South.¹¹⁵

One of the things that the government did was to authorize the use of firecrackers. Premier Nguyen Van Loc signed an order that provided for the use of fireworks in the four-day of *Tết* ending on 2 January. The people were ecstatic, so much so that firecrackers could be heard in Saigon and Cholon for ten days before the Lunar New Year began. The National Police made no effort to restrain the people from shooting off the long strings of fireworks even before the official period for their use began under Loc's order.¹¹⁶

VC/NVA Truce Period Begins

On 27 January, at 0100 hours, the enemy's announced ceasefire in observance of the *Tết* holidays began. The truce period that the Communists' proclaimed was to run for seven days until 0100 hours on 3 February. The allied cease-fire was to come at 1800 hours on 29 January, but not in I CTZ.¹¹⁷

115. Son, *The Viet Cong "TET" Offensive*, p. 24.

116. Id. The Vietnamese believe that firecrackers frighten the two wicked spirits that prey on the people during *Tết* when the good *genii* of the neighborhoods are away in heaven. Crawford, *Customs and Culture*, p. 222.

117. Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1968)," p. 183.

In one of the war's strange ironies, the gravely threatened Khe Sanh front would be quiet when the *Tết* Offensive began. It is probable that the enemy planned to overrun Khe Sanh during the opening days of the offensive. It is equally probable that a massive bombing effort—a SLAM operation in NIAGARA II—conducted by American Strategic Air Force B-52 bombers and U.S. tactical aircraft, forced the NVA forces at Khe Sanh to change their plans. An intense American intelligence effort—Operation NIAGARA I—pinpointed an NVA headquarters in Laos. Because of the heavy radio transmissions that were associated with the headquarters site, it was deduced that the NVA unit was acting as the Front Headquarters for the Khe Sanh operation. The Communists at the headquarters were buried under a massive air attack that saturation bombed the same area. The radio transmissions ceased, and the Khe Sanh area suddenly became quiet. This happened during the weekend that preceded the *Tết* holidays.¹¹⁸

Qui Nhon Tapes

On Sunday, 28 January 1968, in the coastal city of Qui Nhon in II CTZ, the ARVN Military Security Service (MSS) headquarters received several agent reports concerning secret meetings being held in the city by enemy cadres. During a cordon and search operation of one of the neighborhoods where two meetings were being held, MSS personnel apprehended 11 enemy cadres, both male and female. The detainees had with them a tape recorder and two pre-recorded tapes. The tapes were propaganda exhortations. The cadres said the tapes were to be played on the government radio. The radio station was to be captured by a

¹¹⁸. *Id.*, pp. 163, 183; *Shore, Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 53; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 128; The NVA network was not heard from again for two weeks. *Id.* "SLAM" stands for "Seeking, Locating, Annihilating, and Monitoring." It refers to the use of intelligence to locate a target, followed by the massive use of air and ground firepower to destroy it, and a post-attack monitoring. Westmoreland, "Report on Operations (1968)," p. 143. In the two attacks, 45 B-52's dropped 2,350 tons of bombs on the Laotian Headquarters area. Jones, *War Without Windows*, p. 168. Bruce Jones says that the B-52 attacks came over the weekend, that is on 29–30 January. *Id.*

Viet Cong Local Force unit at the start of a planned offensive—one which would involve raids on Qui Nhon, and other cities, during the *Tết* holidays.¹¹⁹

The tapes were taken to Lieutenant Colonel Pham Minh Tho, the Province Chief, and played for him. One of the tapes said that the military commander of Qui Nhon had joined the uprising. The other tape gave full details of what the enemy attacks were to accomplish, and stated why they were planned. The full text of one of the tapes gives a good appreciation of the anticipated scope of the enemy's offensive:

To all people in the province, and all people in the city of Qui Nhon. To all [military] officers and men, [public] officials, and policemen in the city of Qui Nhon. Pay attention. We will read an appeal from the Action Committee of the People's Forces Struggling for Peace and Sovereignty for Vietnam in the province of Binh Dinh.

Officers and men of ARVN, the security forces, the popular forces and fighting youths. The sound of gunfire of national salvation of the people is resounding throughout the South. The people are rising like a storm. Their uprising is now smashing the dictatorial, fascist régime of Thieu and Ky.

The people and the dissident regiments and the divisions of the People's Forces Struggling for Peace and Sovereignty for Vietnam have occupied and now control the cities of Saigon, Hué, Da Nang, etc. Many units of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam of the

¹¹⁹. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 35; Son, *The Viet Cong "TET" Offensive*, p. 383. See also Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, p. 390. Westmoreland's account of the results of the interrogation gives the impression that the enemy cadre were less definite about when the attack on Qui Nohn and the other cities would occur: "The VC, the prisoners admitted under questioning, probably would attack Qui Nohn and other cities *during the Tết holidays.*" *Id.* Emphasis added.

Thieu-Ky puppet régime have joined the people and the dissident troops in an uprising throughout the South.

The government of Binh Dinh Province is perplexed and wavering, and is rapidly falling apart. Many ARVN units have changed sides and fought hard to save the nation. Many district and provincial capitals have been liberated. In these critical times, the time has come when you cannot use American weapons to fight the people, who are your kith-and-kin. You must act urgently:

1) Join the people and the dissident forces and turn your guns to overthrow the Thieu-Ky régime, thus taking over the entire government for the People's Forces Struggling for Peace and Sovereignty for Vietnam.

2) Immediately cease all armed acts against demonstrations and meetings of the people, students, and other groups, etc.

3) The units and soldiers guarding warehouses must open the doors and let the people obtain weapons and attack the enemy, while also destroying all the enemy's ammo dumps and fortified posts.

4) You must resolutely punish the obstinate criminals and take their weapons, which are to be given to the people to fight the enemy.

5) All families of enemy soldiers must persuade their husbands and sons to defect and do meritorious deed to save the nation.

During these times, anyone who hesitates one day will have committed a crime against the Fatherland. All officers, NCO's and men should bravely arise and, together with the People's Forces Struggling for Peace and Sovereignty for Vietnam, overthrow the Thieu-Ky régime

*and demand the Americans not intervene in the internal affairs of Vietnam.*¹²⁰

The captured tapes laid it all out for the JGS officers. The Qui Nhon tapes truly were an intelligence windfall.

Thus it was that the South Vietnamese had in hand all of the key pieces in the enemy's Winter-Spring Offensive puzzle. The information available to them by 28 January—two days before the first attacks began—showed that a massive countrywide plan of operations, called the General Offensive-General Uprising, would be initiated by the Communists during the *Tết* holidays. The available information also gave them the targets of the attacks—all the major cities of South Vietnam, all the major GVN facilities, and all the RVNAF military headquarters and logistical bases and airbases.

Historical Antecedents

The journalist Don Oberdorfer notes that prior to the 1968 *Tết* Offensive, “very few Americans were aware of the numerous precedents for surprise holiday attacks in Vietnam.”¹²¹ In the recent past there was the January 1960 *Tết* attack by the *Viet Cong* on the government military headquarters at Tay Ninh. That action was the first large-scale action in the Second Indochina War. Much earlier, in December 1944, on Christmas Eve, Vo Nguyen Giap's newly formed *Viet Minh* forces attacked and annihilated the defenders of two French outposts near Hanoi.¹²²

¹²⁰. Oberdorfer, *TET!* pp. 145–46.

¹²¹. *Id.*, p. 88.

¹²². *Id.*

In terms of all of Vietnam's history, the finest example of a surprise holiday attack occurred in 1789. That was when the Emperor Quang Trung made a surprise attack on Hanoi during *Tết*. He had at his disposal an army of 100,000 men and hundreds of war elephants. Quang Trung camped his army outside Hanoi and had them celebrate the *Tết* early. Then, during the actual days of the Lunar New Year holiday, while the army of the invading Chinese were celebrating, his forces attacked and routed the army of the Chinese Emperor Ch'ien-lung.¹²³

On Thursday, 25 January, at Saigon University, the General Association of Students celebrated a remembrance of the deeds of Quang Trung—hailing his surprise attack and victory over the “foreign aggressors.” The student's dramatic presentation was speeches that evening had anti-American overtones.¹²⁴ If there were any South Vietnamese government or military officials in attendance, the event did not start them wondering whether Giap might try to save Vietnam from the Americans in such a dramatic fashion during the upcoming *Tết*.

Enemy Troops on the Move

On 28 January, at III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa, the ARVN G-2 learned through intelligence sources that the enemy had moved one artillery and two infantry regiments to an area north of the city. The next morning, on Monday, 29 January, the local populace of Ho Nai, a suburban district town near Bien Hoa, also reported the presence of a Communist unit—size unknown—in an area

123. *Id.* Nguyen Van Thai and Nguyen Van Mung, *A Short History of Vietnam* (Saigon: The Times Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 210–11. General Westmoreland had a statute of Quang Trung in his villa in Saigon in January 1968. It was a gift of one of his Vietnamese friends. Oberdorfer, *TET!*, p. 88. If General Westmoreland knew the details of how Quang Trung drove the Chinese out of Vietnam, seeing the statute during those crucial pre-*Tết* days of January 1968 did not stimulate him to think that there was at least a possibility that what had happened was about to happen again.

124. *Id.*, p. 89.

adjacent to the town.¹²⁵ If the enemy offensive was to be initiated during the *Tết* holidays, then the enemy could be expected to move its assault forces forward to final staging areas within a day or two before D-Day. Such movements now were being confirmed, but the ARVN forces were not reacting to this vital intelligence.

President Thieu's Tết Holiday

A few days before *Tết*, SVN's President Thieu, at General Westmoreland's urging, decided to reduce the length of the GVN truce to 36 hours at *Tết*. The U.S. Embassy, and particularly General Westmoreland, had informed Thieu that the situation in all four CTZ's bore several indications of an imminent enemy assault—one coming just before the start of the *Tết* holidays. Even so, nobody believed that Saigon and the other large cities would be the major objectives of the new offensive, or that the *Tết* truce would be violated by large-scale attacks.¹²⁶ No one doubted that major and minor incidents would occur—as they had in the past—but no attacks of battalion size or larger were expected.

President Thieu believed that the enemy would begin a new offensive campaign. Like Westmoreland, he anticipated that the attacks might begin before the *Tết* holidays. If they did not begin prior to *Tết*, then as the J-2 MACV predicted, they surely would begin just after the holidays. As the attacks had not come during the night of 28-29 January, Thieu felt certain that the enemy would use the holiday truce period to move his troops into their final assembly areas, and attack after the seven-day *Tết* truce that the Communists had proclaimed. Thus, once more there was time for all the people in South Vietnam to celebrate *Tết Mau Than*—the Lunar New Year beginning of the Year of the Monkey. President Thieu himself left Saigon for My Tho—the home of his wife's family—during the afternoon of 29 January to celebrate *Tết*. Thieu's last decision before departing

¹²⁵. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 37.

¹²⁶. *Id.*, p. 43.

Saigon was to concur with MACV's recommendation to cancel the holiday truce for the two northernmost provinces in I CTZ.¹²⁷

Cease-fire Announcement SNAFU

When they had met on 25 January, Thieu and Westmoreland had agreed that make an announcement on 29 January that there would be no cease-fire in I CTZ. The problem with the plan was that when it came time to make the announcement, the government's press office was closed! General Westmoreland's own words reflect the frustration that he faced from time to time when dealing with the GVN:

To afford the enemy little time to adjust to the cancellation [of the cease-fire in the northern two provinces], the South Vietnamese Government was to delay announcing it until the morning of Monday, January 29, twenty-four hours before it was to have gone into effect. Yet the morning passed with no notice of the cancellation. I telephoned the Embassy to find that the South Vietnamese Government had provided its press office with a [news] release but that the press office was shut tight, closed for Tết. President Thieu had departed to pass the holidays in My Tho, his wife's home town in the Mekong Delta.

Such a lackadaisical attitude on the part of the [Thieu] government was shocking and frustrating, yet indicative of the state of mind, the near euphoria, that envelops the Vietnamese at Tết. Seriously concerned, I telephoned General Vien several times during the day to gain his assurance that the armed forces would be on the alert. To Ambassador Bunker I explained that we had no choice but to announce the cancellation of the cease-fire in the north unilaterally. Barry Zorthian [at

127. *Id.*

*JUSPAO] finally did [announce] it at a mission press conference in late afternoon.*¹²⁸

What happened surely reflected the attitude of the people about not having their *Tết* holiday plans disturbed. It also confirms that none of the Vietnamese holding high office in the GVN, or in the military, were the least bit concerned about an offensive being initiated during the seven day's of the enemy's proclaimed truce period.

Divisions on Alert

The ARVN units which had been on alert for a pre-*Tết* attack were ordered to stand down. Orders were given to all RVNAF units to confine 50 percent of their troop strength to barracks. But, the special *Tết* leaves, which already had been granted to fifty percent of each unit's strength, were not cancelled. In some areas, special defensive measures were taken according to the whim of the division commanders, or the province chiefs' own estimate of the situation.¹²⁹

At Ban Me Thuot, the commander of the ARVN 23d Division cancelled all *Tết* leaves. Based on information in captured enemy documents, he expected an attack during *Tết*. To meet the threat, he consolidated the defense of the city and began aggressive patrolling in the countryside.¹³⁰

At Binh Duong, the commander of the ARVN 5th Division, and the Province Chief, took similar measures after they too received good indications of an imminent attack. That division called back one of its battalions from Song Be,

¹²⁸. Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, pp. 388–89; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 150.

¹²⁹. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 43; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 150 ("50 percent of the Vietnamese armed forces would be allowed to celebrate the holiday on leave.").

¹³⁰. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 43.

Phuoc Long Province, to reinforce the defense of Binh Duong.¹³¹ At Xuan Loc, the ARVN 18th Division's commander called two battalions back from outlying positions. In the latter case, the division commander wanted to use the two battalions as a reserve and reaction force.¹³²

More on the Qui Nhon Tapes

Late on 28 January, after listening to the captured enemy propaganda tapes from Qui Nhon, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Minh Tho, the Province Chief, placed all of the security forces in the city on alert. He also ordered that all of the checkpoints on the perimeter of the city should exercise the highest degree of care in screening the vehicles and people entering the city.¹³³

Colonel Le Trung Tuong, informed II Corps of the tapes, their contents and the circumstances of the capture. Colonel Le Trung Tuong, the II Corps Chief of Staff—and acting Corps commander while his superior was on holiday in Saigon—received word of the tapes on Monday morning, 29 January. He reacted to the danger that the tapes signaled was at hand. During the day he sent a warning to all of the provinces in II Corps. Tuong told each of the Province Chiefs that the *Viet Cong* might not honor their own declaration of a *Têt* truce. There were other intelligence signs pointing to the imminence of hostility in the Pleiku City area. Acting on the strength of all that he knew, Tuong ordered that four additional ARVN tanks should be stationed in the downtown area before sunset: “*Têt* or no *Têt*,” he was quoted as saying to the reluctant commander of the tank platoon.¹³⁴

131. *Id.*

132. *Id.*

133. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 146.

134. *Id.*; Son, *The Viet Cong “TET” Offensive*, p. 383, 386.

During the afternoon of 29 January, the contents of two taped messages seized from the *Viet Cong* cadres at Qui Nhon by the MSS were transmitted, via a telephone hot line, to the Joint Operations Center at JGS. General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, listened to the messages on the tapes. He then ordered his J-3 to call all of the ARVN corps commanders immediately to warn them of what appeared to be imminent country-wide enemy attacks. Each was ordered to take all appropriate defensive measures. Whether all of the recipients took the J-3's warning seriously, and how they implemented the instructions is not clear. In any event, many of the ARVN commanders later claimed that the JGS "warning message" failed to communicate the true sense of urgency in the perceived emergency.¹³⁵

The II Corps commander, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, had left Pleiku several days earlier. He was in Saigon where he planned to celebrate *Tết*. If any of his staff called him on the twenty-ninth to tell him of the Qui Nhon tapes, and about the JGS warning message, he did not return to his headquarters.¹³⁶

The JGS's orders to take defensive measures subsequently were relayed throughout the ARVN hierarchy, but apparently the message did not get passed on a timely basis to every level because of communications difficulties. The units commanders who did get the warning instructions hastily tried to call men back from *Tết* leave, but by that time those men who had long journeys to make had already left.¹³⁷

135. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 43–44.

136. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 148. General Loc did not return to Pleiku until after 0930 hours on 30 January—after the attack on Pleiku had been underway for several hours. He immediately devoted his attention to clearing enemy troops from the part of town nearest his personal mansion. Loc was removed as II Corps commander a month after *Tết*. *Id.*, p. 149.

137. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 44.

Early Celebrations in Hanoi

According to the lunar calendar, the Year of the Monkey was due to begin on 30 January. Nevertheless, the Hanoi government decreed that New Year's Day should be celebrated one day early. Thus, in North Vietnam the Lunar New Year's Eve celebration was held on Sunday evening, 28 January. The first day of *Tết* was celebrated on Monday, 29 January. To pacify the curious, the government informed the people that an unusual and favorable conjunction of the earth, moon and sun would occur one half-hour before the actual Lunar New Year. Because of these astrological signs, it was more auspicious to celebrate *Tết* a day earlier, the ministry told the people.¹³⁸

Prior to the *Tết* holiday, the Prime Minister's office in Hanoi issued a proclamation. In it, the people were urged to celebrate the *Tết* holidays with "enthusiasm, but thriftily, neatly, plainly, wholesomely, and in a manner appropriate with the wartime" conditions. The people were also informed that the *Tết* slogan for the Year of the Monkey was: "Everyone united for complete victory over the U.S. aggressors." The government took special care to make the celebration memorable. Dong leaves, a traditional wrapping for the sticky-rice *Tết* cakes, were brought to the markets of Hanoi. The flower stalls were supplied with fresh Chrysanthemums, peonies, and gladioli. Special "*Tết* food centers" were established and stocked with Chinese noodles, tea, rice wine, candy and cigarettes and other popular holiday items. The foreign diplomatic community noted that the mood in Hanoi was more cheerful than at anytime since the American bombings began in 1965.¹³⁹

In December 1967 the United States had put Hanoi off limits to U.S. bombers during the visit of two Rumanian diplomats—Macovescu and Iliescu—who were

¹³⁸. Oberdorfer, *TET!* pp. 90–91.

¹³⁹. *Id.*, p. 89.

carrying a message to Hanoi from President Johnson. No air raid sirens had been sounded in Hanoi since 19 December. Then, on Sunday afternoon, before the New Year's Eve festivities began in Hanoi, there was a practice alert.¹⁴⁰

Because the leaders in Hanoi felt that there was no real threat of air raids, many of the children and old people who had been evacuated to the countryside were brought back into the city. Thus, reunited families could celebrate *Tết* at home in Hanoi and worship at the family's altar. Then on 31 January, when the threat of air attack once more was real, the children and old people were trucked back to the countryside.¹⁴¹

These, and other things that made the celebration of the first three days of *Tết* in Hanoi in 1968 very special, were not noted outside North Vietnam. If the GVN had any agents in place in Hanoi, there is no evidence that the anomalies of the *Tết* celebration were reported in time to be of value to the GVN as they evaluated the indicators of the upcoming offensive.

Ho's Poem Re-broadcast

At midnight on 30 January—the actual Lunar New Year's Eve, and without any prior fanfare, the Hanoi Radio announcer reread the short poem authored by Ho Chi Minh which had been broadcast on 1 January. The announcer said the poem was his greetings to all Vietnamese, and especially to the people of South Vietnam. According to Ho, in what is the critical part: "This Springtime certainly will be ... joyous. And total victory will be ours."¹⁴² At the same time the poem was heard in every part of Hanoi over thousands of loudspeakers. Even the lights

¹⁴⁰. *Id.*; Theis, *When Governments Collide*, pp. 196–97.

¹⁴¹. *Id.*, pp. 89, 91. The children and old people of Hanoi were evacuated on Tuesday, 31 January, in anticipation that the United States would retaliate for the *Tết* Offensive with massive air attacks on the capital of North Vietnam.

of Hanoi were on, and as Ho's poem was read, a fireworks display added color to the sky above a brilliantly illuminated downtown Hanoi.¹⁴³

As noted earlier, in Ho Chi Minh's poem, "Springtime" was understood to mean "Tết." It was rebroadcast to stimulate the *Viet Cong* and NVA troops, and to exhort the South Vietnamese people to join the General Offensive-General Uprising. It was later learned that Ho's poem, and especially the last line, had been conceived as code words to confirm the launching of the attack.¹⁴⁴

The enemy was so certain of the success of the offensive endeavor that even Ho's poem was composed to sound as if victory already had been achieved. The implied present tense made it perfectly appropriate whether broadcast by Hanoi or Saigon Radio, before, during or after *Tết*. It was to be remembered as Ho's great prophesy after final victory was achieved.¹⁴⁵

Nhan Dan Editorial

On Monday, 30 January, an editorial headlined "Onward to Final Victory," appeared on the front page of *Nhan Dan*, the *Lao Dong* Party newspaper. It is described in detail by newsman Don Oberdorfer in his book *TÊT!* as follows:

[The editorial] spoke fervently of Uncle Ho's "combat order" and the moral and historic responsibility of the Vietnamese to defend the nation and build a revolution. "The Vietnamese people," it declared, "have destroyed aggressors of Asia," and the French, "the shrewdest colonialism of Europe," and are currently crushing "the cruel new

142. Son, *The Viet Cong "TET" Offensive*, p. 47.

143. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 90.

144. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 29.

145. *Id.*, p. 30.

colonialism of America, which is playing the role of an international gendarme.” The struggles of the Vietnamese people are bringing their nation to the rank of the most advanced nations in the world... “Onward to final victory!” Nhan Dan proclaimed. “Let the entire nation move forward to completely defeat the American aggressors!”¹⁴⁶

In hindsight, public pronouncements like this stand out. At the time they were not noticed, or were not appreciated by the GVN authorities in Saigon. In context their content is obvious. It is interesting—albeit paradoxical—to note that when there was the need for the greatest pre-offensive secrecy, the men in Hanoi found it necessary to publicly exhort the people to gain the objective of the *Têt* Offensive.

Attacks on the Morning of 30 January

At midnight on 29-30 January, *Têt Mau Than*—the Year of the Monkey began. In the households in the South, the family members gathered for the special *Giao Thua* ceremony. Sacrifices were offered in memory of deceased relatives, and the family’s dead were invited to come down from heaven to share the festive days with the living.¹⁴⁷ Less than an hour afterwards, the events of the General Offensive-General Uprising began to unfold.

In Nha Trang, at half past midnight, a young guard at the government radio station noticed some suspicious “soldiers” get out of two small trucks at a nearby pagoda. He alerted his headquarters. They informed the corporal that the men might be *Viet Cong* in disguise. The corporal on guard woke the other guards,

¹⁴⁶. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 90.

¹⁴⁷. Crawford, *Custom and Culture of Vietnam*, pp. 186–87, 191.

and when all were in position, he fired into the air in the direction of the pagoda. The “soldiers” fired back, and the battle was joined.¹⁴⁸

At virtually the same time—1235 hours—the *Viet Cong* fired several mortar rounds at the Vietnamese Naval Training Center in Nha Trang. The mortar rounds missed. One and one half hours later, after all of city’s defenders were on alert, 200 men from the 7th Battalion of the NVA 18-B Regiment, supported by several hundred local *Viet Cong* troops, attacked. They ran into the city’s defenders on the edge of town. Inside the city, several of the enemy infiltrators entered and occupied the province administrative headquarters. An air attack was called in, and the building—with the *Viet Cong* still inside —was set afire by the aerial rockets and bombs. By 1600 hours the government troops had control of the city, and at dawn on the following morning the city was declared clear of enemy troops.¹⁴⁹

As the night wore on, six other cities in I and II CTZ were attacked. The enemy attacked Ban Me Thuot at 0135 hours, Kontum at 0200 hours, and Pleiku at 0440 hours . All three of these three towns were in the Central Highlands. Along the coast, Hoi An was attacked at 0255, Da Nang was attacked at 0330 hours, and Qui Nhon came under enemy fire at 0410 hours. Except for Hoi An and Da Nang, all of the cities, including Nha Trang were in II CTZ, and were covered by the cease-fire that both sides were supposedly observing. Not long after the *Têt* attacks began, Hanoi Radio broadcast a statement to the South on its domestic service saying that Da Nang had been attacked “to punish the U.S. aggressors ...

¹⁴⁸. Oberdorfer, *TET!* pp. 139–40.

¹⁴⁹. *Id.*, p. 140; Son, *The Viet Cong “TET” Offensive*, pp. 359, 361, 366, 371–72, 377. In the fighting in the city the NVA lost 377 KIA, and another 77 who were taken prisoner. There we 88 ARVN KIA, and 220 WIA. The civilian population also suffered: 32 were killed and 187 were wounded. Six hundred homes were destroyed and nearly 3,500 people were left homeless. *Id.*, pp. 359, 377.

who insolently slighted the traditional Lunar New Year festival of the Vietnamese people.”¹⁵⁰

National Police Warnings

In Hué, on 30 January, the Chief of the National Police called several of his close friends to a secret meeting. He told them that he had reliable information that the city was going to be attacked by a strong enemy force on the next day. His advice to his friends was to gather up their families, get some water and provisions, and stay in hiding until the assault was over.¹⁵¹ Whether the Chief of Police was reacting to a JGS or II Corps warning message, the fact that ARVN 1st Infantry Division had gone on alert, or whether he had other sources is not known. The Police Chief reportedly disappeared during the fighting in Hué.¹⁵²

In Da Nang, the National Police counterintelligence service had several agents in place in the local *Viet Cong* organization. Just prior to the start of the offensive, one of these secret agents told his controller that the city of Da Nang was going to be attacked. No special alert was sounded in the city.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰. *Id.*, p. 142.

¹⁵¹. Robert B. Annenberg, “House 8,” unpublished monograph concerning the fighting at Hué, dtd. 23 February 1989 (writer has original manuscript), pp. 9–10. Annenberg was the commander of Company A, 149th MI Battalion (Collection), at Da Nang.

¹⁵². Robert Annenberg, conversation with writer, 4 March 1989. On the morning of 30th January, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, reacting to the news of the pre-dawn attacks at Da Nang, and elsewhere, put the ARVN 1st Infantry Division on alert. This included his own divisional headquarters in the Citadel at Hué. Son, *The Viet Cong “TET” Offensive*, p. 248.

¹⁵³. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 143.

GVN and MACV Cancel the Truce

On Tuesday, 30 January, at 0945 hours, the GVN and the RVNAF canceled the *Tết* cease-fire throughout South Vietnam. At the time, President Thieu, whose name was signed to the order that cancelled the truce, was still in My Tho at the home of his wife's family. President Thieu did not return to the capital, and he did not make any arrangements to do so. There was no special effort to announce the cancellation of the truce in Saigon.¹⁵⁴

Tan Son Nhut Airbase

At the Tan Son Nhut Airbase, in northwest Saigon, no real changes were made in the defensive arrangements. The security of the base was the responsibility of the 2d Service Battalion and the Air Force Security forces. For them it was business as usual. However, on that particular day, two ARVN airborne battalions—the 1st and the 8th—with all of their combat gear were at the airbase. They were the last two battalions in Saigon awaiting movement north to I and II Corps. They were awaiting the arrival of the transport aircraft that would take them to Da Nang the next morning.¹⁵⁵ Sometimes in battle, what happens by chance often is as important as what is done on purpose. This was one such instance. Over the next two days, the two airborne units would play critical roles in the defense of both Tan Son Nhut and the nearby JGS Compound.

Precautions in Saigon

News of the attacks in the north did not instill any grave sense of concern in the people of Saigon. They, like the people in the other cities in the South not attacked, were in a festive *Tết* holiday mood. At 0945 hours on 30 January,

¹⁵⁴. *Id.*, p. 151.

¹⁵⁵. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 44; Son, *The Viet Cong "TET" Offensive*, p. 74; Braestrup, *Big Story*, p. 69.

Saigon Radio interrupted its regularly scheduled programming to announce that President Thieu had given the order to cancel the cease-fire throughout the country. It was necessary to cancel the *Tết* cease-fire period, the announcer said, because of the blatant truce violations by the Communists.¹⁵⁶

In the Capital Military District (CMD), all the RVNAF units were ordered to confine their troops to their barracks, and to prepare for action. By mid-afternoon in the capital, all major access roads into Saigon and Cholon were being guarded, and the people and vehicles were being closely checked. To reinforce his defenses in the capital, the CMD commander asked for and received permission to utilize one of the two reserve battalions at Tan Son Nhut. He sent one company to the Chi Hoa Prison, and another to the National Radio Station in downtown Saigon. The third and fourth companies were held for use as a CMD reserve. To avoid arousing undue citizen curiosity or alarm in the minds of the local people, the commander of airborne company that was sent to protect the broadcast facility was told position his forces out of sight in the adjacent MSS compound.¹⁵⁷ Despite the fact that he was making plans to deal with enemy action in the capital, the commander of the CMD was expecting terroristtype attacks, and not the entry of *Viet Cong* battalions into the city.

Precautions at the Radio Station

Realizing the implication of the Qui Nhon tapes, and the threat to all the radio stations in South Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Vu Duc Vinh, the director-general of Saigon Radio, made arrangements to take the station off the air at a prearranged signal in case of an enemy attack on the downtown Saigon

¹⁵⁶. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 44; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 167.

¹⁵⁷. *Id.*

broadcast office and studio. The station's transmitter site was 22 km away. It would gain the enemy nothing to capture the downtown facility.¹⁵⁸

Saigon on the Eve of the Offensive

In downtown Saigon, the units of the Field Police Forces—the para-military troops of the National Police—took up their prepared defensive positions at all of the vital street intersections. Their presence was hardly noticed by the few people who ventured out of their home during the day. *Tết* was the grandest of holidays, and the virtually uninterrupted noise of firecrackers continued to echo throughout the city at all hours, and well into the night of 30-31 January 1968.¹⁵⁹

So it was that, when the first enemy rounds were fired in Saigon at 0200 hours on the morning of 31 January, the gunfire blended into the noisy holiday background. A few hours earlier, at around midnight, in many parts of the city's suburbs, some of Saigon's citizens people saw small groups of armed men—oddly dressed—silently moving through many of the darkened streets. Many who saw the *Viet Cong* in Saigon that morning thought that another military coup might be unfolding and paid no attention. If there were others who recognized the foe in their midst, they did not sound the alarm.¹⁶⁰

Going Home After Work

On Monday evening, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky was at his quarters on the Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The Vietnamese Air Force provided the guards for Ky's residence. That evening, neither Ky nor his guard force took any special measures to assure the safety of his person or residence from an enemy attack.

¹⁵⁸. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 162.

¹⁵⁹. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 45.

¹⁶⁰. *Id.*

The home of Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, was in Cholon. After he had finished the business of the day at the JGS compound, General Vien went home—much as he would on any other night.¹⁶¹

The actions of Ky and Vien, at the end of that day, were not those of men who were apprehensive of a full-scale invasion of the capital by the *Viet Cong*. At worst, they expected that any enemy initiated activity in Saigon—if any came—would be something along the line of a spectacular, headline-grabbing, sapper incident.

Signals at the Eleventh Hour

On the night of 30 January, ARVN soldiers on guard duty at the main gate of III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa detected an enemy reconnaissance unit that was moving nearby. The guards opened fire, killing in the exchange of fire one enemy soldier armed with an AK-47. Everyone there was now very much on the alert. To the south, at Can Tho City, seat of the IV Corps Headquarters, on the same night, enemy sappers—disguised as tourists—went into a hotel and rented a room for the night. This was immediately reported to the National Police, and all promptly were arrested.¹⁶²

At 2100 hours on 30 January, a Regional Force (RF) unit, at one ambush site on the Saigon defense perimeter, captured an enemy soldier who was carrying three AK-47's in a burlap sack. The prisoner was interrogated on the spot. He disclosed that Communist troops were going to attack Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Airbase, the JGS compound, and the radio station in downtown Saigon. The troops were to attack, he said, at 0300 hours on 31 January. The POW interrogation report was hurriedly sent up through the unit's command channel. This vital information was received at the JGS Headquarters a little after midnight

¹⁶¹. Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 167.

on the morning of 31 January.¹⁶³ No special follow-up alert was issued. No efforts were made to reinforce either the JGS Compound, or the Tan Son Nhut Airbase.

As it turned out, the attack on Saigon began a few minutes after 0200 hours on 31 January 1968. It was the second day of *Tết* holidays.¹⁶⁴ Despite the fact that there had been fighting in some parts of the county for twenty-four hours, the full fury of the 1968 *Tết* Offensive came as a *strategic surprise* to the GVN, the JGS, and the RVNAF forces.

PART III OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Capability or Intent

How did this surprise occur? How could it be that no one in the GVN or JGS recognized the warning signs. Was it really possible that no one in the ARVN intelligence establishment was adequately alarmed in the face of all the indications? In his monograph, Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, formerly a J-2 at the JGS, asked and answered these questions in this way:

From hindsight, it appears that our failure began with a wrong estimate of the enemy, and our intelligence methodology may have been to some extent responsible for it. Our intelligence theory taught us that in estimating the enemy's probable course of action we should be primarily concerned with his capabilities and not his intentions. Capabilities, it was maintained, differed from intentions in that they were real tangible facts, the conditions that made the execution of a

162. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 37.

163. *Id.*; Oberdorfer, *TET!* p. 156.

164. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 37.

*certain course of action possible, whereas intentions were often something vague, uncertain; hence they were unreliable. True to these teachings, our intelligence analysts dismissed those pieces of information they considered as just expressing an intention, such as the enemy's plan of attack against cities, for example. Understandably, they were primarily interested to know whether the enemy had the capabilities for it.*¹⁶⁵

If the 1968 *Têt* Offensive can teach us but one thing about the process of intelligence analysis, it is this: Never assume that the enemy will not make a mistake. The Communists' intentions exceeded their capabilities; nevertheless Hanoi planned and, in the end, executed the *Têt* Offensive.

Critical Components

The reader should recognize and fully understand all of the crucial components in the explanation of why it was that South Vietnamese—and Americans as well, but that's another story—were strategically surprised by the *Têt* Offensive. All of the officials of the government, the officers of the RVNAF, and the Southern military intelligence analysts recognized that the enemy was preparing a major offensive. Even so, they did not believe the information which indicated that *Viet Cong* units would attack the cities of the South in order to instigate a mass uprising among the urban population. The South Vietnamese possessed better information about the sympathies of the urban population of the South than their opponents. The leaders in Hanoi and many at COSVN mistakenly believed that the people of South Vietnam would revolt in support of the *Têt* offensive. Since the GVN, JGS, and RVNAF analysts did not think Communist attacks would provoke a popular revolt against the Thieu-Ky government, they dismissed everything that called for an uprising. The captured enemy documents which called for a *Khoi Nghia* (General Uprising) were dismissed as mere propaganda. These analysts were

¹⁶⁵. *Id.*

only partly correct in regard to their estimates of the situation. The *Viet Cong* attacked the cities during the *Tết* holidays, but the General Uprising never materialized.¹⁶⁶ *Viet Cong* and North Vietnamese intelligence failed in regard to the planning of the Battle of Tet; GVN and JGS intelligence also failed in that it did not properly appreciate what their adversary had planned on the basis of mistaken assumptions.¹⁶⁷

The Danger of Knowing Too Much

The information available to the GVN and the JGS was true in regard to the enemy's offensive capability. It was true that the *Viet Cong* and NVA forces did not have sufficient capability to mount the ambitious plans of attack which were essential to the opening of the General Offensive-General Uprising.

Most of the intelligence data collected prior to the start of the offensive indicated that both the *Viet Cong* and the NVA units were facing difficulties. It also showed that the morale of the enemy troops had declined markedly during early 1967. In addition, given the prevailing balance of forces, and the deployment and disposition of the enemy main force units in the pre-*Tết* period—they were confined to outlying areas, far removed from the urban centers—there appeared to be little possibility that the enemy could initiate a general offensive, regardless of his intentions. Furthermore, the government and military analysts could say, with reasonable certainty, that if the enemy was bold enough to successfully occupy part of a city or a district town, he had no capability to hold it for any long period. For those in the South, it simply was impossible to give credence to the idea that the Communist leadership would expose its forces to inevitable and heavy losses for something predictably ephemeral. Besides, the GVN believed

¹⁶⁶. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 121, paraphrasing James J. Wirtz, "Review of *Reckless Disregard*, by Renata Adler," Unpublished, 1987, pp. 6–7. See also, Westmoreland, *A Soldier's Report*, pp. 384–85, 387.

that it made no sense for the enemy to try to capture a city or town when they did not have the capability to establish quickly—much less control—a civil administration in place where they might temporarily exercise military control.¹⁶⁸

Contrary Expectations

In the post-September 1967 period, some of the GVN and JGS analysts argued that instead of planning to fight big battles, the Communists actually were reverting to Stage One—to the defensive phase—of the People's War strategy. They could point convincingly to the clear signs that this was so. COSVN Headquarters was being moved into Cambodia. The enemy also was being forced to carve out new bases in cross-border sanctuary areas. Such movement, and the need to rebuild supply bases, had been forced on the enemy by the destructive search-and-destroy operations. U.S. operations in the long-established *Viet Cong* base areas like War Zones C and D, and the Iron Triangle, made it impossible for the enemy to operate safely in close proximity to Saigon. These analysts also argued that to pass from Stage One to Stage Three—from the Defensive to the General Offensive—the enemy had to go through Stage Two, which was a period of contention or holding out. To revert to Stage One in the face of the American onslaught certainly seemed to conform to the Mao Tung's doctrinal rules of Peoples' War.¹⁶⁹

The *drawing-back thesis* seemed plausible enough. To be sure, it necessarily assumed that Hanoi and COSVN adhered to Mao's precepts. At the time, the intelligence data available to the analysts' confirmed that the rules of People's War, in fact, usually were followed. As was noted by Lung:

167. Cabbage, "Westmoreland v. CBS," p. 121.

168. Lung, "General Offensives," pp. 38–39.

169. *Id.*, p. 39.

Indeed, until shortly before the Têt Offensive [of 1968], all of our intelligence estimates had been based on the conviction that the enemy was pursuing Lin Piao's strategy, which prescribed "using the rural area to encircle and strangle the cities," implying insurgency or guerrilla warfare. Our analysts at that time had never visualized the proposition of "attacking the cities to liberate rural areas."¹⁷⁰

In intelligence analysis—indeed all information analysis—*preconceptions are a necessary, albeit dangerous part of the cognitive process.* All analysts, whether they be in the government or the military, always should remember the simple warning that Marshal Joseph Stalin gave to his intelligence chiefs during the Second World War: "An intelligence hypothesis may become your hobby-horse on which you will ride into a self-made trap."¹⁷¹

Vo Nguyen Giap's article, "Big Victory, Giant Task," also probably contributed to the serious error committed by the GVN and JGS analysts. Surely what influenced them the most were the statements by Giap that the war could last for many more years. From those remarks the South Vietnamese analysts concluded that the General Offensive-General Uprising—to which increasing reference was being made—was not something that would come in the immediate future.¹⁷²

170. *Id.*

171. Joseph Stalin's plain-talking advice is quoted in Angelo Cordevilla, "Comparative Historical Experience of Doctrine and Organization," in *Intelligence Requirements of the 1980's: Analysis and Estimates*, by Roy Godson, ed. (Washington: National Strategic Information Center (distributed by Transaction Books), 1980), p. 17. For more on preconception, see T. L. Cabbage II, "From Falaise to Nimegen With British Second Army — Chasing the Chimera: Preconception and Self-Deception in War," a paper presented at the Third USAWC International Conference on Intelligence and Military Operations, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA., 17–19 May 1988.

172. Lung, "General Offensives," p. 39.

Such an faulty assessment eventually became a conviction, a clear certainty that overshadowed information suggesting indications of an imminent general offensive. This certainty of belief persisted in spite of the reports that the enemy troops were training for urban combat, and actually were attacking built-up areas. The information concerning the enemy's actions, and the contradictory behavior of the enemy toward the urban population—you don't kill "the people" in People's War—was unlike any collected previously in the war.¹⁷³

The words of Richard Betts, at the Brookings Institution, written several years ago, are worth repeating at this point:

*The mental threshold at which evidence confirming assumptions is recognized comes well before the threshold for contradictory evidence; the firmer the assumption, the higher the threshold for awareness of inconsistent data. Information that challenges expectations or wishes "is often required, in effect, to meet higher standards of evidence and to pass stricter tests to gain acceptance than new information that supports [and reinforces] existing expectations and hypothesis."*¹⁷⁴

The problem is not new, nor is the phenomenon one which is hard to understand. Having focused on the trees, the men in the GVN and JGS could not see the forest.

¹⁷³. *Id.*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁴. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1982), p. 123, quoting Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 574.

Summing Up

Overconfidence probably is the single most frequent cause of surprise.¹⁷⁵ It certainly breeds vulnerability.¹⁷⁶ Hubris is the zenith state of overconfidence. Understanding this truth brings with it the realization that when men like President Thieu or General Vien are being swept along in a hubristic state of mind, the Chimera—this writer’s shorthand for self-deception (any illusion or fabrication of the mind)—can become the reality that shapes action. In regard to the *Têt* Offensive, the South Vietnamese leadership simply lost sight of the *real* strength of the *Viet Cong* and the NVA—a determination to win at any cost. The Southerners were the victims of surprise at *Têt*—the *Têt* Offensive failed, but the South Vietnamese and their self-deception came face to face with reality.

President Thieu, and General Vien, and many other officers of the RVNAF had concluded that the enemy was beaten in regard to their effort to isolate the cities. Thus, there was a tendency on their part either to ignore or to misinterpret the key indicators relating to any real Communist capabilities other than withdrawal. All the indicators pointing to massive attacks were ignored by them. All the indicators that signaled the enemy’s intent to assault the cities also were ignored. Since the then current expectation seemed logically sound, the preconception also carried with it a self-proving persuasiveness.

Time and again experiments have demonstrated the extent to which the information accepted and acted on by those in charge—including military commanders—depends on the person’s own expectations, assumptions and

¹⁷⁵. Roy Godson, “General Discussion: Avoiding Political and Technological Surprise in the 1980’s,” in *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980’s: Analysis and Estimates*, ed. Roy Godson (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980), 118.

¹⁷⁶. Klaus Knorr, “Lessons in Statecraft,” in *Strategic Military Surprise: Incentives and Opportunities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984), p. 249.

preconceptions.¹⁷⁷ The cognitive phenomenon which this writer calls the *current expectations factor* “is one of the most fundamental principles concerning perception: we tend to perceive what we expect to perceive,” and “a corollary of this principle is that it takes more information, and more unambiguous information, to recognize an unexpected phenomenon than an expected one.”¹⁷⁸ Michael Handel, at the U.S. Army War College, summarized the phenomenon thusly:

I'll believe it when I see it.

*I'll see it when I believe it.*¹⁷⁹

If a military commander is not expecting immediate trouble, or trouble of a particular kind, or trouble in a particular place, then his negative expectations determine how he will read an intelligence report.¹⁸⁰

Richard Heuer, at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, tells how preconception influences the way all people perceive information, and how the thought process also is effected:

Patterns of expectation, rooted in past experience and training, tell us subconsciously, what to look for, what is important, and how to interpret what we see. These patterns form a “mind-set” that predisposes us to think in

177. Richard J. Heuer, “Cognitive Factors in Deception and Counterdeception,” in Donald C. Daniel and Katherine L. Herbig (eds.), *Strategic Military Deception* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 34.

178. Heuer, “Cognitive Factors,” p. 34.

179. Handel, “Strategic Surprise (First Draft),” p. 28, paraphrasing Charles Perrow, “Normal Accident at Three Mile Island,” *Transaction (Social Sciences and Modern Society)* 18 (July/August 1981), p. 21.

180. See Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 390.

certain ways. A mind-set is akin to a screen or lens through which we perceive the world.¹⁸¹

The application of this concept to the military situation is vital to an understanding of the combat decision-making process. Even as military commanders and intelligence officers sort the reports before them, they always will tend to select what is in accord with their expectations.¹⁸² However, “objective analysis is not achieved by attempting to avoid preconceptions” (and it would be self-deluding even to try), but by always attempting to recognize the very tentative nature of all knowledge and by devising means to test every perception and assumption against some objective reality.¹⁸³

Against the backdrop of current expectation problems, Richard Heuer observes and advises:

As a general rule, we are more often on the side of being too wedded to our established views and thus too quick to reject information that does not fit these views, than on the side of being too quick to reverse

181. Heuer, “Cognitive Factors,” pp. 35–6. Heuer states that “mind-sets are neither good nor bad: they are unavoidable. There is no conceivable way of coping with the volume of stimuli that impinge upon our senses, or with the volume and complexity of the information that we have to analyze without [a] . . . simplifying preconception about what to expect, what is important, and what is related to what.” *Id.*, p. 36.

182. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 393.

183. Heuer, “Cognitive Factors,” p. 36. He also notes that “when evidence is ambiguous, as is commonly the case in intelligence analysis, this predisposition increases the likelihood the indicators [of potential conflict] will be perceived accurately when they in fact exist . . . but it also increases the chances they will be perceived erroneously when they are not really there.” *Id.*, p. 35. Over my desk in the Pentagon where I served as a Middle East current intelligence analyst, my colleagues hung a sign: “*He was on the alert constantly for every signal, shrewdly sensitive to relationships and situations that did not exist.*”

*our beliefs. Thus, most of us would do well to be more open to evidence and ideas that are at variance with our preconceptions.*¹⁸⁴

The problem with this advice, as noted by Michael Handel, is that, at times, “open-ended ideas do not provide enough basis for action or longer planning, as continuous change [and conflicting information] can bring about confusion and paralysis.”¹⁸⁵

When the adversary’s actions do not correspond with the analysts current expectations, behavioral surprise results.¹⁸⁶ Thus, according to Klaus Knorr, President Emeritus of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University, when an analyst forms expectations about the enemy he must be sure that *his* current expectations correspond with the adversary’s *attitudes* or *predispositions*, for both affect the enemy’s behavior:¹⁸⁷

The crucial point to note is that attitudes, though they are powerful in shaping behavior, do not by themselves determine it ... [i.e.,] behavior

184. Richard J. Heuer, Jr., “Strategic Deception: A Psychological Perspective,” a paper presented at the 21st Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, California, March 1980, p. 45.

185. Handel, “Strategic Surprise (First Draft),” p. 30.

186. It is well to distinguish here two categories of strategic surprise noted by Klaus Knorr. “Technical” surprise is compatible with the prevalent set of expectations and occurs when the enemy is successful in concealing a particular capability or in keeping a particular course of action secret; in contrast, “behavioral” surprise results when the enemy’s behavior is incompatible, or seems incompatible, with the analyst’s set of expectations. Klaus Knorr, “Failure in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *World Politics* 16 (April 1964): p. 462. In other words, Technical surprise makes one say: “I didn’t know they *would* do that.” Behavioral surprise make ones say: “I didn’t know they *could* do that.”

187. *Id.*, p. 464.

*depends upon the information on which the [adversary] ... acts and the value it places on the outcome of alternative courses of action.*¹⁸⁸

Knorr also points out that intelligence estimates and decisions by commanders often are wrong, not because the analyst or the decisionmaker does not know the information or basic values on which the enemy acts, but because he assumes the adversary will act on the basis of the very same information or values that the commander and the intelligence officer possess.¹⁸⁹

Three psychological factors play an important part in turning innocent preconceptions into serious self-deceptions. They are (1) unconscious suppression, (2) stubborn attachment, and (3) psychological investment—each of which is easily explained.

When a military commander, or an analyst, or anyone having decision-making responsibility, is processing new intelligence information they necessarily will approach it with a fixed set of assumptions and expectations about the motivation of the enemy and the process of the adversary's decisionmaking. All observed events consistent with such current expectations are perceived and processed easily. Those that contradict the preconception tend to be ignored or to be distorted in a subconscious—or preconscious—process of perception.¹⁹⁰ This means that decisionmakers tend not to be aware of this mental process—hence the *unconscious suppression*. Thus, from time to time, all old information should be re-examined—for a decisionmaker's current expectations may change—to see if any vital signal was overlooked unknowingly during an earlier analysis.

188. *Id.*

189. *Id.*

190. Heuer, "Cognitive Factors," p. 35.

Sometimes the decisionmaker's problem is not one of mental suppression; instead, it is one of not being able to mentally let go of an expectation. In her seminal book on surprise, Roberta Wholstetter noted: "Human beings have a *stubborn attachment* to old beliefs."¹⁹¹ Sometimes "the pattern of expectation becomes so deeply imbedded that they continue to influence preconceptions even when we are alerted to and try [hard] to take account of the existence of data that does not fit our preconception."¹⁹²

At some point decisionmakers move from having a tentative hypothesis to the point of having a reasoned opinion. It is at that point that they subconsciously will make a *psychological investment* in their work product. The harder anyone has had to work to get to that point, the bigger will be the psychological investment. As the analysis continues, the decisionmaker will find that the information—or the preconception—*first* used to reach a decision will be more and more supportive of the *initial* theory. They also will begin to find more facts to support their view. Once the decisionmaker's orders or estimates become the basis for action—their psychological investment in the product (and it may all be unconscious)—will make a change of mind virtually impossible.¹⁹³ This heuristic factor works equally well when applied to the intelligence product of a group or an organization, or to the decisions made by anyone in authority. In fact, when senior military commanders become convinced of the correctness of *their* decisions, then their psychological investment usually manifests itself in the form of what

¹⁹¹. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 393 (emphasis added).

¹⁹². Heuer, "Cognitive Factors," pp. 34–35, citing Jerome S. Bruner and Leo Postman, "On the Perception of Incongruity: A Paradigm," in *Perception and Personality: A Symposium*, ed. Jerome S. Bruner and David Krech (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

¹⁹³. See I. Nelson Rose, "Litigator's Fallacy," *Litigation: The Journal of the Section of Litigation, American Bar Association* 3 (Spring 1985): p. 61. Rose discusses this

can only be described as “sturdy optimism.” The leave orders that were approved by Thieu and Vien in January 1968 reflected their firm belief that the enemy would not mount a major offensive during *Tết*.

All things now considered, there really was nothing so very extraordinary about the failure of the intelligence officers of South Vietnam to predict what was happening in the enemy camp. No credible evidence exists which would support the proposition that the failure of the GVN and JGS staffs to anticipate the *Tết* Offensive was the result of any specific instance of negligence or stupidity, or lack of intelligence acumen. Rather, the root of the problem lies in the circumstances which naturally tend to affect even the most “honest, dedicated and intelligent” of men.¹⁹⁴ The self-deception of Thieu, Ky, Vien, and others came to pass quite naturally because of the preconception that the “offensive war” had been “lost” by the Communists and that the *Viet Cong* and NVA battalion-sized and larger units had ceased to be a military force to be feared. Actually, from Hanoi’s viewpoint, the “war” was being “lost,” but that did not mean that either the will or the capacity of the Communist military to wage war, or to wage successful battles, had been destroyed. Indeed, Hanoi’s clear recognition of what was happening prompted the search for a new strategy.

Despite the fact that the end of the war was not near—this we know with the hindsight of history—there was still a good deal of fight left in the Communists. To borrow and adapt an old idea from the military historian Ronald Lewin:

[A]s one thinks of the determined zeal of the Communist forces thrusting against their adversary, the image comes to mind of a proud gladiator in the arena of a Roman circus, vainly seeking to destroy his opponent, the retiarius,

problem in relation to trial attorneys. “It is a normal human reaction to look for factual capital to support one’s psychological investment.” *Id.*

¹⁹⁴. Roberta Wohlstetter noted in regard to the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor, “we have found the roots of this surprise in circumstances that affected honest, dedicated, and intelligent men.” Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 397.

who in the end foils and finally entraps the gladiator with the toss of the net before finishing him off with the three pronged spear. 195

Such was the fate of General Giap's daring plan to end the war in one great offensive and general uprising.

The real problem with the South Vietnamese is put in focus by Daniel Goleman who recently wrote, in *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception*, that "[w]e live at a particularly perilous moment, one in which self-deception is a subject of increasing urgency,"¹⁹⁶ for "[i]n the face of our individual 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."¹⁹⁷ The "something" that the South Vietnamese were relying on was the presence of the American units that were conducting offensive operations against the enemy in the border areas. Knowing what the Americans were doing, and apparently doing well, made it all but impossible for the South Vietnamese government and military leadership to appreciate what their adversary intended to do.

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195. Ronald Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (New York: Quandrangle, 1977), p. 34. In Lewin's usage the *Afrika Korps* was defeated by the British.

196. Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1985), pp. 11.

197. *Id.*, p. 12. Goleman characterizes self-deception as a natural psychological device to relieve anxiety on a personal level, with social group implications. At the heart of this doublethink is the classic self-deception. Indeed this was noted thousands of years ago in the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharatta*, in which the sage poses the riddle, "What is the greatest wonder of the world?" *The answer: "That no one, though he sees others dying all around, believes he himself will die."*