

Fifty years since the Tet Offensive

Patrick Martin
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January 30–31 marks the 50th anniversary of the launching of the Tet Offensive, the military uprising by the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam that staggered the US administration of President Lyndon Johnson and proved a turning point in the protracted struggle against imperialism—Japanese, French and ultimately American—by the Vietnamese workers and peasants.

The offensive involved as many as 80,000 soldiers, some of them North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars, the bulk of them cadres of the National Liberation Front (NLF), dubbed “Viet Cong” by the US military and the Saigon puppet regime. They struck all across South Vietnam, with a first wave of attacks, limited to the Central Highlands, in the early morning hours of January 30, 1968, when the population was celebrating the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday, or Tet, and the general offensive unfolding 24 hours later.

The attack achieved both tactical and strategic surprise. The US military was unprepared for the scale and intensity of the attack, and most troops of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam, the official name of the South Vietnamese military), were on leave for the holiday, which had been observed as an unofficial period of truce during previous years of the war.

Large numbers of liberation fighters infiltrated urban areas without being reported to the ARVN or the Americans by either the peasants through whose villages they passed, or the urban residents whose neighborhoods suddenly became armed strongholds of a guerrilla movement that had been operating almost exclusively in the rural areas.

Simultaneous attacks struck Saigon, Hue, Da Nang and other major cities, including 33 of the 44 provincial capitals and 64 of the 242 district capitals. There were direct attacks on such centers of the US military as Bien Hoa, the principal airbase near Saigon, and the massive coastal fortress at Cam Ranh Bay. Even the headquarters of the US commander in South Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, came under attack, as well as the presidential palace of General Nguyen Thieu (who was not there, having gone to My Tho, home of his wife’s family, for holiday celebrations).

Unlike previous attacks by liberation forces, the NLF did not emerge, attack and then disappear. Its fighters seized military and government positions and fought to hold them, while summoning the local population to rise up and join in the revolutionary struggle against the American occupiers and their puppet forces.

The US military and its Saigon allies regrouped and counterattacked, eventually recapturing all the cities and towns seized in the initial onslaught and inflicting massive casualties on both the civilian population and the liberation fighters who continued to resist. Heavy fighting in urban districts continued for nearly a month—a sharp change in a war that had been largely confined to the jungles and mountains for the previous seven years.

The most spectacular Tet assault involved a unit of 19 soldiers who attacked the US Embassy in Saigon and held it for several hours against a massive force of US and South Vietnamese troops. Nearly all of the embassy attackers were killed.

More than 4,000 Vietcong guerrillas took part in small-unit attacks

throughout Saigon. The reprisals in the capital were brutal. One photograph circulated worldwide summed up the viciousness of the Thieu regime. South Vietnam’s National Police Chief Nguyen Loan executed a handcuffed Vietcong prisoner by shooting him in the head with his pistol, as soldiers, journalists and horrified bystanders looked on.

A force of 7,500 NLF and NVA troops captured the former imperial capital Hue, not far from the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam. They held the city for 27 days, fighting block-by-block in the face of saturation bombing and artillery strikes and a force of 30,000 Marines.

In one particularly notorious incident, in early February, the provincial capital of Ben Tre, in the Mekong Delta, was leveled by US bombing, with complete disregard for the resulting civilian casualties in a town of several tens of thousands of people. An American major engaged in the effort told journalist Peter Arnett, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”

The savagery of the US counterattack was fully revealed only some 18 months later, when journalist Seymour Hersh published his exposé of the US massacre in the village of My Lai, which took place on March 16, 1968 as part of the final mopping-up operations after the Tet Offensive.

The village was targeted by the US command for a search-and-destroy operation, with military intelligence declaring that Viet Cong forces involved in the Tet attacks had taken shelter there. US troops of Company C, 1st Battalion, of the Americal Division, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley Jr., killed more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mainly women, old men and children. The soldiers raped dozens of women before murdering them.

The bloodbath was typical of the US war in Vietnam, distinguished only by the fact that several US soldiers tried to stop it and their objections ultimately found their way to the media, with the result that the atrocity became public in November 1969.

Plans and miscalculations

The Tet Offensive was prepared and planned over many months, beginning with a decision by the political leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), taken at a Politburo meeting in Hanoi, that 1968 should be the year of a general uprising against the Saigon regime and its US backers.

Several factors entered into this decision, including a recognition that as a presidential election year, 1968 gave the greatest opportunity to make an impact on the Johnson administration, which had steadily escalated the US military intervention in Vietnam over the previous four years. From 17,000 trainers and “advisers” in 1964, the US forces swelled to more than 500,000 troops, many of them supplanting ARVN troops in combat operations, particularly in the northern provinces near the DMZ and in the Mekong Delta in the south, the two areas where the NLF forces were strongest.

There were significant divisions within the Vietnamese leadership, not so much over the necessity for the offensive or its timing, as over the exact tactics to be pursued. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the military commander during the war against the French and the victor at Dien Bien Phu, was reportedly opposed to the move to abandon guerrilla tactics in favor of standing and fighting to hold fixed positions, a decision that contributed to severe NLF casualties when American firepower, particularly bombing, was unleashed on South Vietnamese cities.

More fundamentally, it is clear in hindsight that the Vietnamese leaders grossly misunderstood the political situation in the cities. When NLF fighters seized government buildings and called on the population to rise up, there was relatively little response. ARVN units fled the initial attacks, but were then regrouped by their officers, under American direction, and joined in the counterattacks. There were mass desertions, but no significant mutinies.

This political miscalculation was bound up with the Stalinist orientation of the VCP under Ho Chi Minh and his successor Le Duan, who was already in effective control of the party at the time of Tet, two years before Ho's death. Following the example of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong, the Viet Minh movement built by Ho had its base in the peasantry, in the rural areas, not in the urban working class. Its perspective was not proletarian revolution, but a protracted peasant war combined with negotiations with the imperialists.

The Viet Minh was particularly weak among workers in the south, where Saigon was by far the country's largest city. The Viet Minh had alienated the most politically conscious sections of the working class in 1945–46 with its savage repression of the Vietnamese Trotskyists, who had a strong base in Saigon, because they opposed Ho's attempts at the time to maneuver with the French and British colonial powers. This culminated in the murder of the Trotskyist leader Ta Thu Tau.

As we have previously explained:

The repression of the Vietnamese Trotskyists and the murder of Ta Thu Tau was an abominable crime committed by the Vietminh leadership. It dealt a powerful blow against the working class, especially in the Saigon region where the Vietminh was much weaker than in Hanoi, and undermined the struggle in the South against French imperialism... Saigon was to be controlled by imperialism and its stooges for nearly thirty years (*Vietnam and the World Revolution*, 1985, p. 16).

If the Stalinist-led NLF overestimated the likely response in the cities to its call to revolt, the American occupiers and their puppet regime were completely blind to the danger of a nationwide offensive. By late 1967, Westmoreland, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Johnson administration were reassuring the American public that the war was largely won and the Viet Cong nearly defeated (by one account, half of all the NLF units that took part in Tet were classified by US military reports during the previous year as "destroyed"). There was, in a phrase that became infamous, "light at the end of the tunnel."

The American military command was so convinced of its success in the war of attrition against the NLF that it ignored clear signs of the impending offensive. One critic of the US military in Vietnam wrote:

Captured documents indicating that a national attack was forthcoming were dismissed as unbelievable. As one US Army intelligence officer said, "If we'd gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn't have been credible to us. A major booklet issued to Vietcong political and military cadre was entitled, "For the

Understanding of the New Situation and the New Tasks." It outlined a threefold mission of hitting important US military facilities, trying to cause ARVN to collapse, and generating popular support for the general uprising. United States intelligence received this pamphlet on November 25, 1967 (*The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, 1986, by James William Gibson).

The Vietnamese leadership maximized the surprise effect of the Tet offensive with a deliberate military maneuver, the siege of Khe Sanh, a Marine Corps base in the most isolated, northwest corner of South Vietnam, a mountainous region that could be supplied only by air.

The siege began on January 21, 1968, ten days before Tet, and it was immediately perceived by Westmoreland as an attempt by the Vietnamese to re-stage the historic victory at Dien Bien Phu, when Viet Minh fighters surrounded an isolated French military base in the mountains and trapped thousands of French troops, forcing a humiliating surrender in 1954.

Westmoreland and Lyndon Johnson were preoccupied with the siege of Khe Sanh, which lasted for 77 days, with nearly 6,000 Marines defending three small hills from an NVA force of as many as 40,000. Westmoreland even dismissed the Tet Offensive itself as an effort to draw US forces away from Khe Sanh, although the military logic was actually the reverse—the Vietnamese successfully drew the US combat reserve away from Saigon, Hue and other cities, contributing to the initial successes of the uprising.

Ultimately, the futility of the US intervention in Vietnam was further underscored by the fate of Khe Sanh. After the siege of nearly three months was lifted, and the NVA troops retreated back into the mountains and across the DMZ, the Marines held the position for another two months without incident, then evacuated the remote area for which so much blood had been shed.

The political consequences of Tet

Even before the opening of the offensive, the Johnson administration was in deepening political crisis. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, having concluded that the war was hopeless and could not be won, submitted his resignation to Johnson, who accepted it in November 1967, naming a longtime Washington lawyer and Democratic power broker, Clark Clifford, to take McNamara's place. As a result, when the Tet Offensive was launched, the Pentagon was under a lame duck civilian leader, while his replacement, publicly announced a few weeks before, would not officially take office until March 1, 1968.

Also in November 1967, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota announced he would challenge Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination, appealing to antiwar voters and seeking to prevent the emergence of a political movement to the left of the Democratic Party. He said in his announcement speech that he would oppose any effort "to make threat of support for third parties or fourth parties or other irregular political movements."

The Tet Offensive (as well as the ongoing siege of Khe Sanh) had an enormous impact on public opinion in the United States. Throughout the month of February, US television screens were filled with images of house-to-house combat in cities and towns in Vietnam that were supposedly secure. US casualties mounted (1968 became by far the bloodiest year of the war, with nearly 15,000 American deaths).

The month of March 1968 brought the political consequences of the Vietnam disaster to a head. Initially more hawkish than McNamara, Clifford found that the generals could not supply a reasonable estimate of

the resources required to win the war. On March 4, he reported to Johnson that “there is no reason to believe” that the NLF could be defeated by “an additional two hundred thousand American troops, or double or triple that quantity.”

On March 12 came the New Hampshire primary. McCarthy came within a few hundred votes of defeating an incumbent president. Four days later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced he would challenge Johnson as well, making an appeal both to antiwar voters and to former supporters of his brother, assassinated in 1963.

Perhaps the most crucial episode came in a “vote” by a much smaller constituency: a group of former top national security officials, headed by former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and dubbed the “wise men” in contemporary accounts. This group had been assembled the previous fall and generally backed Johnson’s policies in Vietnam. Clifford convened them for a second time on March 25, and they listened to reports from top Pentagon officials.

The next day, they met with Johnson and his two top generals, Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Creighton Abrams, who was about to replace Westmoreland as the commander in Vietnam. The “wise men” voted 6–4 in favor of disengagement from Vietnam, beginning with a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam to induce Hanoi to enter into negotiations. Johnson wrote later that “the establishment bastards have bailed out.”

On March 31, Johnson gave a nationally televised speech on Vietnam announcing a partial bombing halt of the north—everything north of the 20th Parallel would now be spared—as a gesture to demonstrate US interest in a negotiated settlement. He concluded with the shock announcement that he would not be a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination and would devote his remaining months in office to seeking an end to the war.

Johnson rejected the advice to escalate further, provided by some of his more hawkish aides, including the Strangelovian Walt Rostow, who called for the invasion of Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam and the use of nuclear weapons, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Westmoreland, who lobbied for the dispatch of another 200,000 US troops. Westmoreland also called for the use of tactical nuclear weapons around Khe Sanh.

The US president was forced to change course in large measure because the Vietnam War had intensified the internal conflicts within American capitalism, which were at the breaking point. The year 1967 was marked by the greatest urban riots in American history, including an upheaval in Detroit, which compelled Johnson to send in elements of the 82nd Airborne and 101st Airborne divisions, fresh from the Vietnam killing fields, to shoot down American workers and youth.

The financial cost of the war had already compelled the Johnson administration to sharply curtail the social reform efforts associated with his “Great Society” anti-poverty programs. Significantly, the internal administration reviews of Vietnam policy now included the secretary of the treasury, Henry Fowler, who maintained that a tax increase would be needed to pay for the war and stabilize the finances of the US government.

The Treasury was concerned because of the mounting international financial crisis, first triggered by the devaluation of the British pound in November 1967, which led to increasing pressure on the dollar, which the US Treasury was committed to exchanging for gold at the fixed rate of \$35 to an ounce.

The deteriorating US balance of payments finally touched off a full-scale run on the dollar in March 1968, in the wake of the Tet Offensive. On March 15, the British government closed banks and financial markets for a day, at US request, and the Treasury introduced a two-tier system, in which only other governments were allowed to exchange their dollars for gold at the official rate, while all private holders of the greenback had to buy gold in the open market. In this “partial float,” the value of the dollar in such private transactions quickly plunged.

On March 1, when Clifford replaced McNamara as secretary of defense, a memo drafted for his review summed up the crisis by warning that the cost of the war, in both lives and dollars, “runs great risks of provoking a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.”

The confluence of these events—war, financial turmoil, and political upheaval—early in 1968 was a harbinger of a year that would become one of profound crisis for world capitalism as a whole. Tet was only the first in a series of great shocks in 1968, to be followed by the assassination of Martin Luther King, touching off widespread urban rioting, the May–June general strike in France, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, the Prague spring and subsequent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the police rampage in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention.



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