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### Review of Tet Offensive sources

**Author's note:** Throughout this essay the terms "Tet" or "Tet 1968" will be used when referring to the Tet Offensive that was launched by North Vietnam in late January 1968. Occasionally it will simply be termed the "Offensive." Additionally, the terms "South" and the "North" will be used at times in place of South Vietnam and North Vietnam respectively. When referring to the North Vietnamese and/or the Viet Cong the word "Communists" will be used. The word "marine(s)" will be written in lower-case as its grammatical usage is the same as the word "soldier."

*"Even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it."* – General Davidson, Chief of U.S. Intelligence (Vietnam)<sup>1</sup>

*"It is now commonly understood that Tet was a U.S. military victory but a political defeat. Yet at the time the battle was widely considered an American defeat in both respects. The enemy attacks were seen as largely symbolic, in which success was measured not by seizing and holding square miles of territory but commanding column inches of newsprint and minutes of television air time."*<sup>2</sup> – James S. Robbins, author of *This Time We Win: Revisiting The Tet Offensive*

Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on November 21, 1967, General William Westmoreland, commanding officer of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), stated, "With 1968 a new phase is starting . . . we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view."<sup>3</sup> He could not have known at that time just how correct that statement would come to be; however, the end coming into view would not be for the Communists in North Vietnam (or Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV) but rather for American troop involvement in the South (the Republic of Vietnam, RVN). The general's attendance and comments that day were not necessarily of his own choosing as he had been

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins, 113.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.olive-drab.com/od\\_history\\_vietnam\\_westmoreland.php](http://www.olive-drab.com/od_history_vietnam_westmoreland.php)

asked by President Lyndon B. Johnson to take part in the “Success Offensive” that autumn in order to help restore confidence to the American people in the Vietnam War effort. Throughout 1967 Johnson had watched the poll numbers and in the late summer “for the first time in the polling history of the Vietnam conflict more people said the war was “a mistake” (46 percent) than said it was not (44 percent).”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the President was gradually losing support among members of the House of Representatives and Senate. General Westmoreland’s statements of confidence, Johnson thought, would help stem the tide of growing dissatisfaction and hopefully reverse its course.

Playing the role of the good soldier, the general agreed to do his part and on a few occasions spoke publicly on the war, stating that progress was being made. Upon his arrival at Andrews Air Force Base on November 15 he “. . . told waiting reporters that he was “very, very encouraged” by recent developments” and that the United States was “. . . making real progress. Everybody is very optimistic that I know of who it intimately associated with the effort there.”<sup>5</sup> He described as “absolutely inaccurate” a statement that recent battles indicated that the enemy had the initiative on the battlefield, declaring that “we have beat them to the punch every time.”<sup>6</sup> Basing his assessment on the course of the battles, the total count of enemy dead, and the ever-growing number of enemy defectors and increasing strength of the hamlet program, Westmoreland publicly stated that American troops could begin to withdraw “within two years or less.”<sup>7</sup> For

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<sup>4</sup> Oberdorfer, 83.

<sup>5</sup> Schmitz, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 65.

much of the nation Westmoreland “had finally and officially switched on the light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>8</sup> Away from the podium, however, he had doubts about the war:

“He had concluded in his own mind that the Communists would never be forced to a negotiated settlement of the war. Barring offensive operations against the North, a classic military victory seemed utterly improbable. Thus, the only practical strategy, it seemed to [him], was to grind the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese down, build up the friendly Vietnamese and prepare to turn over the ware to them.”<sup>9</sup>

Just days before Christmas he warned the President that North Vietnam appears to be on the brink of waging an all-out effort to win the war. In mid-January 1968, less than a month after his appearance in Washington, he announced to the Associated Press that he expected action in the northern section of South Vietnam, I Corps area of responsibility, as military intelligence had detected a significant buildup of Communist forces and military materiel.<sup>10</sup> An enemy attack was on the horizon; yet Westmoreland’s words of optimism carried more weight than did his warning. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler (U.S. Army) also held both optimism and concerns regarding the war in Vietnam:

“ . . . I am convinced of four things: (1) we are winning the war in Vietnam; (2) I cannot predict when the war will end; (3) although the tide of battle is running against Hanoi (capital of North Vietnam), they are not yet convinced that they cannot win; and (4) flowing from item (3), Hanoi is not yet ready to negotiate an end to the war.”<sup>11</sup>

Johnson’s Success Offensive to restore the public’s confidence in the U.S. war effort did in fact convince many that their fears and concerns were unfounded and as General Westmoreland

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<sup>8</sup> Oberdorfer, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Oberdorfer, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Braestrup, 260.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq\\_pubs/2417pgs.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/2417pgs.pdf)

stated, the end was in sight. However, as historian Don Oberdorfer noted, “The price was high. The government had purchased public support in the present with a promissory note on the future.”<sup>12</sup> The restoration of confidence would only serve as a setup for a huge fall on January 31, 1968 when Communist forces launched the Tet Offensive or in Vietnamese- *Tết Mậu Thân* (Tet, year of the monkey)- across South Vietnam. After being told that the war was being won by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops, the American public felt misled about the entire war effort in Southeast Asia. Much of the impact of the Offensive in the winter and spring of 1968 was due to the optimistic predictions in the fall of 1967.<sup>13</sup> This point cannot be overstated as much of the negative impact Tet caused on the American public was due to false reports from both the Pentagon and the White House on the progress in Southeast Asia. They essentially had the rug pulled out from under their feet.

### **I. Background to the offensive**

As 1968 opened the United States was about to enter its thirteenth year of involvement in South Vietnam. In January 1955 the United States began sending military aid to Saigon, capital of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and in May 1961 President John F. Kennedy ordered 400 Special Forces soldiers (“Green Berets”) to deploy there and serve as military advisors. Their mission was to train the soldiers and marines of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in their fight against the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN, also known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA) and the National Liberation Front or NLF, which was comprised of South Vietnamese who supported and fought for the Communist objectives in

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<sup>12</sup> Oberdorfer, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Willbanks, 68-69.

North Vietnam. The terms “Viet Cong” or “VC” were used more frequently by U.S. and ARVN than “NLF.” The Strategic Hamlet program was created whereby South Vietnamese villagers would be protected from Viet Cong intimidation; additionally, the ARVN were supplied with improved military equipment.

From 1959 through 1963 North Vietnam engaged in a strategy known as *Khoi Nghia*, or General Uprising:

“ . . . and featured broad-based political/military activity in the countryside and the cities, seeking to indoctrinate, agitate, and create conditions of chaos that would one day culminate in a general move toward revolution. It was geared toward creating a prerevolutionary state of consciousness in the peasants and other citizens and delegitimizing the (Ngo Dinh) Diem regime (of South Vietnam).”<sup>14</sup>

On November 1, 1963 President Diem was overthrown and murdered in a coup, while just three weeks later President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Choosing to seize upon the upheaval in Saigon and Washington, D.C., Communist leaders in Hanoi chose to embark on:

“a phase of Revolutionary Guerrilla War . . . North Vietnamese Regulars (PAVN) invaded the South and began to move against South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units, engaging and generally defeating them. Over the next year the crisis intensified, and South Vietnamese forces were on the verge of collapse. This was the context of the United States conventional military buildup in the South to stem the tide and give the Saigon forces a chance to regroup.”<sup>15</sup>

Events escalated in August 1964 when a U.S. Navy destroyer (*Maddox*) reported being fired upon by North Vietnamese patrol boats. Years later the veracity and intensity of that attack became highly questioned. Seeking retaliation, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the initiation of bombing raids against North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) and thereby put

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<sup>14</sup> Robbins, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Robbins, 63.

United States on a course of war in Southeast Asia. Despite the training from American Special Forces advisors, increased counterinsurgency measures and the supply of military hardware the tide of battle still resided with North Vietnam. In late January 1965 National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote to the president and stated that he and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara were “now pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat.”<sup>16</sup> Massive amounts of financial aid, military assistance and supplies had been directed toward South Vietnam to provide a platform where a stable government would form. That did not happen. America took responsibility for conducting the war and began to send combat troops to South Vietnam. For the United States, the war in Southeast Asia was to be a limited one as the nation sought to contain communism, deter aggression and demonstrate America’s resolve while avoiding a direct engagement with the Soviet Union and China that could intensify into a global conflict.<sup>17</sup> Both *Life* and *Time* magazines reflected what was at that time, popular American support for President Johnson’s decision to take the country to war and the latter called it, “The Right War at the Right Time,” and a “crucial test of American policy and will.”<sup>18</sup>

Troop levels of U.S. forces in South Vietnam rose rapidly- from 23,300 in 1964 to 184,300 in 1965 to more than double that, 385,300 (plus 60,000 sailors offshore) a year later.<sup>19</sup> After the surge of American soldiers and marines in 1965, North Vietnam did not win a significant military victory and by mid-1967 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units were feeling the effects of superior U.S. firepower. While they never suffered a decisive defeat, the costs of battling

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<sup>16</sup> Schmitz, *Politics, War, And Public Opinion*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Schmitz, *Politics, War, And Public Opinion*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, pp. 136-37.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.americanwarlibrary.com/vietnam/vwatl.htm>

American weaponry and troop numbers were beginning to take a toll; and as 1967 progressed, the war settled into a stalemate. Lack of progress toward victory had an adverse effect on morale, especially among the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) insurgents in the South.<sup>20</sup> Under General Westmoreland, MACV had adopted a three-pronged strategy as the American role in the war increased in 1965:

1. “Search-and-destroy” – U.S. and ARVN units would patrol the jungles and countryside to make contact with the VC and then call in massive American firepower from either artillery or air assets (or both). Commanders measured success through body counts- literally counting corpses found on the battlefield.<sup>21</sup>
2. Interdiction to stop the flow of men and material into South Vietnam from NV and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos & Cambodia.<sup>22</sup>
3. Bombing of selected targets in NV with the dual hope of hurting the ability of the NV to supply its troops and VC units in the south and coercing NV to the peace table for a free and independent Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

With the number of combat troops on the ground steadily increasing- some members of Congress and a small percentage of the American public were beginning to have concerns about the potential pitfalls of American involvement in such a small nation on the far side of the Pacific Ocean. The conflict continued on, however, and according to key figures in Washington, D.C., the United States was succeeding in its efforts to defeat the communists; yet, every few months it dispatched more troops to Vietnam- with the casualties and costs rising each time.<sup>24</sup> One historian noted, “LBJ (President Johnson) chose to “take the country to war ever so slowly, to slip in the needle an inch at a time so the patient would never jump. This came close to the nub

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<sup>20</sup> Allison, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Allison, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Oberdorfer, 78.

of the American difficulty in a limited war: Johnson, the U.S. Government and the bulk of the U.S. public wanted to win the war in Vietnam, but they did not want it all that much.”<sup>25</sup>

As the casualties inflicted upon the North by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces grew increasingly large it seemed, at least to some, that progress was being made, and victory was close at hand. What the American public did not know, however, was that in the spring and summer of 1967, the North Vietnamese high command had laid out the plan for an operation that would shatter the confidence held by the U.S. military and government that the war was drawing to a close or at the very least would be settled within two years. In 1967 command personnel in the North were becoming concerned at the significant losses U.S. firepower was inflicting on Communist guerillas in the South and began to reexamine their long-standing strategy of waging a protracted war of attrition from rural base areas.<sup>26</sup> General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnamese Defense Minister, along with other political and military leaders, planned a major offensive that would have the element of surprise by taking advantage of the lull in combat readiness during the Tet holiday. In accordance with Communist doctrine and Vietnamese mythology, the operation was to be the historic “*Tong Cong Kich, Tong Khoi Nghia* (TCK, TKN)”<sup>27</sup> or “General Offensive”, which would cause the “General Uprising” among the South Vietnamese and bring a decisive and final victory.<sup>28</sup> Instead of continuing the large-unit operations, North Vietnamese leaders believed that it would be in their best interest to return to the guerilla tactics that had

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>26</sup> Braestrup, 216.

<sup>27</sup> Robbins, 67.

<sup>28</sup> Allison, 1.



served them well earlier in the war.<sup>29</sup> South Vietnamese cities such as Saigon, Da Nang and Hue (pronounced *weigh*) were selected as targets as the Communist leadership felt the need to gain influence in urban areas.<sup>30</sup> Giap's plan included three phases, the first of which would begin on in early morning hours of January 31 as a countrywide attack on South Vietnamese cities, ARVN units, American headquarters, communication centers and air bases. The Viet Cong would be responsible for most of this mission and along with it a large propaganda campaign aimed at coaxing the Southern troops to rally to the Communist side was launched.<sup>31</sup> Phase two would commence in May with the final stage coming in August. The decision “. . . to launch the Tet Offensive”, says historian Don Oberdorfer, “was among the most important ever made by the Vietnamese Communist leadership . . . .”<sup>32</sup>

For the Vietnamese, the lunar New Year, or Tet, is the most celebrated holiday and lasts for seven days. On New Year's Eve “A special ceremony called Le Tru is held at the midnight hour (Giao Thua) . . . and involves firecrackers and gongs and other festive items that make loud noises to usher out the old and welcome in the new.”<sup>33</sup> In previous years both North and South Vietnam had agreed to short-term cease-fires in order to allow troops on both sides a time to celebrate with their families.<sup>34</sup> In the days prior to Tet the countryside is on the move as many Vietnamese travel to spend time with relatives and visit their ancestral homes. Hanoi estimated

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<sup>29</sup> Wirtz, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Allison, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Willbanks, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Oberdorfer, 45.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.familyculture.com/holidays/tet.htm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.asian-nation.org/tet.shtml>

that half, if not more, of the ARVN troops as well as the national police force would be on leave when the holiday began.<sup>35</sup> The official ARVN history recorded that prior to Tet:

“A relative lull seemed to be prevailing all over South Vietnam . . . leaves were readily granted to the troops for the lunar New Year and measures were taken by the (Johnson) Administration to give the common people as normal a Tet as possible . . . The people had forgotten about the dying war. They wanted to celebrate Tet with as much as fervor as in the old days.”<sup>36</sup>

In a 48-hour period that started on January 29, 1968 (some insurgents began the attack prior to the planned date) Communist forces launched military attacks on five of South Vietnam’s six major cities, on thirty-six of its forty-four provincial capitals, on at least sixty-four district capitals, and on more than fifty villages.<sup>37</sup> The attacks were intentionally launched during the time when both North and South Vietnam were celebrating the New Year and supposedly enjoying the cease-fire. Shortly after midnight on January 31, the intended launch date of the operation, Viet Cong sappers broke through the wall surrounding the American embassy in Saigon and engaged U.S. marines in a fight that lasted into the latter part of the morning. Across South Vietnam the cities of Da Nang, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Bien Hoa, Nha Trang, and Quang Tri (and others) came under Communist attack.

Many ARVN officers and soldiers were on holiday leave and could not be recalled easily; additionally, U.S. troops had been placed on ‘alert’ but they had been warned of forthcoming attacks in the past that never materialized. As a result *some* U.S. troops and junior commanders did not believe an attack was imminent during Tet 1968. Further complicating matters was the

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<sup>35</sup> Willbanks, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Falk, 395.

fact that prior to Tet, as a gesture of confidence, the United States had transferred full responsibility for the defense of Saigon to the South Vietnamese authorities, whose notions of security were notoriously lax.<sup>38</sup> Communist guerrillas were able to establish weapons caches throughout the areas surrounding their objectives. When the offensive began there were 492,000 American soldiers, sailors and airmen stationed in South Vietnam to fight alongside 626,000 South Vietnamese troops.<sup>39</sup> For much of 1968 many of them would be engaged in combat with NVA regulars, the Viet Cong or both simultaneously, in ways that they had not seen prior to the dawn of 1968. Fighting in cities such as Hue was street-by-street, house-to-house and in some cases room-to-room. Casualty totals, especially for the Communists, were high.

Due to the significant television media presence in Saigon much of the fighting in the city was captured on film; and as Americans sat down to dinner that evening they were presented with the shocking images of the fighting at the embassy as well as in other parts of the city (the local time in Vietnam is twelve hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time). What they saw belied what they had been told by the Pentagon and their president. Serious questions arose as to whether the United States could truly state they were winning the war. Later that day the press received conflicting reports as General Westmoreland told reporters that the situation was under control while word trickled in of Viet Cong attacks throughout South Vietnam. As the war progressed in the mid-1960s the term “credibility gap” was used to describe the disconnect and disbelief that arose among the American public and press on one side and the White House and the Pentagon on the other. Tet 1968 caused many on the former to no longer believe the

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<sup>38</sup> Karnow, 538.

<sup>39</sup> Oberdorfer, 8.

statements coming from the latter. The credibility gap between MACV and the media was being stretched to a near break point.<sup>40</sup> This divergence would prove to be one of the larger issues in the war as the press now distrusted virtually everything they were told by the military.

When the first phase of the Tet Offensive ended in February 1968, nearly 5,000 U.S., ARVN, Australian and South Korean forces lay dead and almost 16,000 had been wounded.<sup>41</sup> Estimates indicated that 40-50,000 North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong guerillas had been killed and thousands wounded.<sup>42</sup> While common perception is that the offensive ended with the battle for Hue in February, the military leadership in Hanoi continued the second and third phases of the offensive, which took it into the early autumn of 1968. After the initial stage of the offensive, in late February 1968, General Westmoreland and General Wheeler agreed to submit a request for 206,000 additional troops in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> A member of President Johnson's staff leaked the request to the press and the story ran in the *New York Times* in March, causing many to question whether the U.S. was truly winning the war.<sup>44</sup> The press' scrutiny of the war would only intensify from this point to the conclusion of the war in April 1975.

It has been more than four decades since the final stage of the Tet Offensive and historians continue to debate why North Vietnam launched the offensive and what the Communists hoped to achieve. Additionally, the role of the mass media, especially television, has garnered intense scrutiny as to whether they helped turn a North Vietnamese defeat into a victory for those

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<sup>40</sup> Willbanks, 35-36.

<sup>41</sup> Allison, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/wheeler-says-westmoreland-will-need-more-troops>

Americans watching their reports at home. Author James S. Robbins stated, “It is generally believed that the Tet Offensive was the point at which the American people finally and irrevocably turned against the Johnson Administration and its conduct of the war.”<sup>45</sup> While there is some truth to that assumption, the fact is that, as Robbins and others point out, support for President Johnson’s conduct of the war had largely eroded *prior to* January 1968. Growing weary of a protracted war thousands of miles from their home, much of the American public had come to believe or was drawing nearer to a belief that it was to time either win it or withdraw. For that segment of the population they came to be disappointed and frustrated as the war continued for the United States chose to “conduct a limited war against an enemy with unlimited objectives”<sup>46</sup> and remained on that path until 1973 when combat forces were withdrawn. On April 30, 1975 Saigon fell to the Communists and South Vietnam no longer existed.

This paper will examine two main themes: the reasons behind the planning and implementation of the Tet Offensive, and secondly, the impact of the mass media on public perception of the war as a whole.

## **II. Analysis of the Causes**

In analyzing the reasons behind Hanoi’s decision to launch the Tet Offensive, there are essentially three opinions. One interpretation is that the Communists sought to win a military victory over South Vietnam, which would include a large number of the South Vietnamese population coming to the aid of the North, overthrowing the Saigon regime and forcing the nation to surrender. A second is that Hanoi planned the uprising with full intention to sway public

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<sup>45</sup> Robbins, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, 20.

and governmental opinion in the United States toward a position against the war thereby forcing America to withdrawal from Vietnam or seek a negotiated peace. Finally, the minority see Tet as planned to be nothing more than another conflict in a protracted war, of which Americans would eventually tire and leave. It is the first two of these theses that this paper will examine and support as the reason for the inception and launching of Tet 1968.

Support for the argument comes directly from the official history of the North Vietnamese Army as it delineates the goals of the Tet Offensive:

1. “cause the total disintegration of most of the ARVN, overthrow the regime in Saigon and place the government in the hands of the people.”<sup>47</sup>
2. “destroy a large portion of the United States military strength, including weaponry, in order to hinder the fulfillment of their mission.”<sup>48</sup>
3. “annihilate the will of the United States to continue the war and force them to accept defeat.”<sup>49</sup>

While Don Oberdorfer’s work, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (1971), contends that the first of those goals was highly optimistic and the third was the most attainable, there is much evidence to support the fact that Hanoi *was acting in accordance with Communist doctrine* and Vietnamese mythology when they planned Tet. Northern leadership saw Tet as the historic “General Offensive” and it would spark the “General Uprising” of the South Vietnamese people against the Saigon government which would in turn not only bring about a unified Vietnam but also force the United States to withdraw. Oberdorfer, Ronnie Ford (*Tet 1968 - Understanding the Surprise*, 1995) and to some degree James J. Wirtz (*The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure In*

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<sup>47</sup> Allison, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 25.

*War*, 1991) purport that the *primary goal* of the offensive was *not* the overthrow of the Saigon regime through an uprising of the South Vietnamese partial to the North. Rather, in their view Tet's primary purpose was to bring the war to a head and force the United States to make a decision about their commitment in Vietnam- if not "annihilating" the nation's will, at least causing it severe damage.<sup>50</sup> Would a majority of Americans continue to support a war so far away and whose cost in lives and dollars continued to escalate? Would the White House determine that the cost was worth the global risk if Vietnam fell to the Communists?

Authors William Thomas Allison (*The Tet Offensive - A Brief History With Documents*, 2008), James S. Robbins (*This Time We Win - Revisiting The Tet Offensive*, 2010) and James H. Willbanks (*The Tet Offensive - A Concise History*, 2007) counter the notion that Tet was conceived primarily as a measure to show the United States that the war was unwinnable. Both support the thesis that Tet was conceived as a plan to break the battlefield stalemate that existed up through the end of 1967 and achieve three objectives: ". . . provoke a general uprising among the people in the south, shatter the South Vietnamese armed forces, and convince the Americans that the war was unwinnable."<sup>51</sup> The latter was of tertiary importance as the first and second were the *primary* objectives for the Offensive. Tet, as Allison definitively states, was not planned and set in motion by happen stance but rather it was done:

"In accordance with Communist doctrine and Vietnamese mythology and tradition, Tet was to be the historic General Offensive, which would in turn inspire the General Uprising among the South Vietnamese people and bring a decisive and final victory. For the NLF revolutionaries in South Vietnam, Tet was the great effort to mortally weaken, if not completely destroy, the corrupt and fragile South Vietnamese government (GVN)."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Oberdorfer, 52-54.

<sup>51</sup> Willbanks, 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> Allison, 1.

Historians choose sides over the issue of whether Tet 1968 was implemented to provoke the General Uprising and defeat South Vietnam or that it was primarily designed to demonstrate to the U.S. government and people that the war could not be won- at least not in the way that had hoped.

Allison postulates that in the mid-1960s American troop levels and commitment toward winning the war were higher than anticipated by Hanoi and the South Vietnamese Communists; additionally, U.S. and ARVN forces were inflicting heavy casualties and their efforts were hindering any chance for a future Communist victory. North Vietnam sought not only a withdrawal of American troops but also an overthrow of President Thieu's regime in South Vietnam, which would bring about a unified Vietnam. It would be through an uprising of the South Vietnamese people, along with the support of the NVA, that the Saigon government would be overthrown. The offensive launched in January 1968 was to be a fulfillment of the communist theory of the General Offensive and General Uprising that are required to overthrow an occupying force. Allison elaborates on this ideal:

“ . . . the idea of General Offensive and General Uprising is borrowed heavily from Maoist Communist theory. According to this concept, a war of liberation or revolution began with Resistance, wherein insurgent forces fought their enemy in the countryside, maintaining the initiative while building strength. Once strength was achieved, the General Offensive would begin the final phase of the war, in which the General Uprising would overthrow the government and install a new government dominated by the insurgent party.”<sup>53</sup>

From 1946 until 1954 the Viet Minh (a communist nationalist coalition) waged war against and defeated the French according to this doctrine (Mao) and it would become General Giap's model

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<sup>53</sup> Allison, 24.



for defeating the Americans.<sup>54</sup> It was the General Uprising in 1945 that began the movement to oust Vietnam's French occupiers and therefore Hanoi was able to "play upon tradition and history to move into this phase of its war to unify Vietnam."<sup>55</sup> The North had another card in its pocket in garnering support for the offensive as Tet 1968 would not be Vietnam's first attempt to force the withdrawal of an invader at the lunar New Year holiday. In what is now regarded as the "greatest military achievement in modern Vietnamese history"<sup>56</sup>, the Vietnamese launched an attack during the Tet holiday in 1789 and defeated the Chinese who had occupied the country for over a thousand years.

Robbins notes that Mao developed an insurgency model of three stages that began with political organization and small-scale opposition.<sup>57</sup> Historian John Garver more formally describes this first stage as the "strategic defensive by the revolutionary forces and strategic offensive by the counterrevolutionary forces."<sup>58</sup> As manpower levels increases and some areas are liberated, a phase of guerrilla warfare, Mao's "strategic stalemate", would ensue. A conventional armed conflict with the enemy and a decisive battle (the "strategic counter-offensive") would mark the third and final stage. However, as Robbins notes, this can only be initiated, "when the correlation of forces favors the insurgents . . . ."<sup>59</sup>; and throughout the prolonged Vietnam War "the balance of power shifted in different phases" of the conflict.

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<sup>54</sup> Robbins, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Allison, 24.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.historynet.com/the-first-tet-offensive-of-1789.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Robbins, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Garver, 47.

<sup>59</sup> Robbins, 62.

Garver's essay, "The Tet Offensive and Sino-Vietnamese Relations" brings light to Mao's objectives in the initial two stages- that the revolutionary forces would leave the cities to the superior enemy army and conduct widespread guerrilla warfare in the countryside against a dispersed, static enemy. The second stage (stalemate) would be long and grueling as the revolutionary forces controlled the countryside and the enemy retreated to control the cities.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, in the third stage, "Enemy strength would be progressively sapped by . . . continual attrition and by psychological exhaustion arising from such factors as homesickness and antiwar sentiments. . . . a crossover point would be reached when the strength of the revolutionary forces exceeded that of the enemy."<sup>61</sup> In retrospect, this seems prophetic as the U.S. antiwar movement did play a role in America's withdrawal from South Vietnam- not necessarily with the soldiers in-country but with Presidents Johnson and Nixon, as well as key members of the Cabinet. The continued protests against the war contributed to their realization that they did not have the overall support of the people and that in turn led to America's exit from South Vietnam.

It is of importance to understand Hanoi's deviation from Sino-Communist doctrine in their version of the people's war and Wirtz's *Intelligence Failure In War* provides an explanation:

"They [the Vietnamese] succeeded . . . in devising a strategy that eliminated the distinction between soldiers and civilians, uniting both in the *dau tranh* (struggle) against the enemy. Everyone was to participate in at least one of the two prongs of people's war: *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle, or "violence program") and *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle or "politics with guns"). Political action was directed against three specific targets. *Dich van* (action among the enemy) was intended to undermine support for the war among the population in enemy-controlled areas- to win the propaganda war for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese and for the sympathy of the American

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<sup>60</sup> Garver, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 47.

public. *Binh van* (action among the military) was at a minimum intended to undermine morale in the opponent's army, thereby by reducing its effectiveness in combat."<sup>62</sup>

Garver also draws attention to *Hanoi's* implementation and strategy in the creation and launching of Tet in 1968 as it differed from Mao's vision in four ways:

1. Tet 1968 shifted the focus of revolutionary military struggle from the countryside to the cities long before the third stage.<sup>63</sup>
2. A large-scale strategic offensive was implemented before a crossover point was reached.<sup>64</sup>
3. It committed the revolutionary forces to a positional war (forfeiting mobility).<sup>65</sup>
4. It exposed the revolutionary forces to an enemy with military superiority.<sup>66</sup>

When we examine the outcome of the Tet Offensive for the Communists, items 3 and 4 are strong reasons why they suffered a military defeat as their small to mid-size units tried to capture and hold objectives, which in turn then caused them to have to square-off against the militarily superior U.S.-ARVN force whose mission was to expel and/or destroy them.

Garver's sources for his essay are impressive as the list contains various Vietnamese and Chinese works such as *The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last Thirty Years* (1979), from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam; Mao Zedong's "On Protracted war," from *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (1967); and "Jishi gongchuang you shi chouxing" [Not Only an Affidavit but Also Evil Behavior] from the People's Daily, 1979. He

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<sup>62</sup> Wirtz, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Garver, 47-48.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 47-48.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 47-48.

<sup>66</sup> Garver, 47-48.

uses an NLF document from 1961 (found in Douglas Pike's *The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, 1968) that sheds light onto the background of

Tet:

“Due to the non-uniform development of the revolution in the rural areas, the balance of power between us and the enemy varies from area to area. Consequently farmers do not rise up everywhere at the same moment. Even in those areas where there is a partial uprising and enemy control is broken, this [control] is ended only at the hamlet and village levels. The enemy's higher administrative apparatus remains, and he still has strong armed units and he is still safe in the urban areas. . . . but in the struggle we have many strong points and advantages, . . . the movement toward the General Uprising under the leadership of the Party will grow more fierce and widespread until it finally takes place”<sup>67</sup>

Garver illuminates that the growing number of troops in the U.S.-ARVN alliance and the support network that the U.S. had created in South Vietnam allowed its forces to be mobile and have fire support at their call no matter where the location posed difficulties for North Vietnam and stemmed the tide of Communist infiltration. Interestingly, he adds that although the Government of Vietnam (GVN) control of the countryside it only served to create an illusion and hid the political failings of the Saigon regime. Hanoi saw the conditions there as being ripe for the offensive.<sup>68</sup> Allison, Robbins, and Willbanks also make mention of the point that the large-scale U.S. troop increases created the battlefield stalemate and inflicted heavy losses upon Communist forces. If the United States was ever going to be expelled from Vietnam, the current situation had to be moved forward. Hanoi decided to take action.

Within the Communist camp disagreement erupted over whether a large-scale offensive was the best course of action. Le Duan, a onetime organizer of the resistance in South Vietnam, and

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<sup>67</sup> Garver, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 47.

by 1967 secretary-general of the Lao Dong Party, had become critical of the protracted war strategy. For North Vietnam, the war was not going as well as they had hoped and this was due in large part to the influx of American combat troops which had inhibited PAVN infiltration and imposed heavy casualties on Communist troop strength. Willbanks notes that:

“To Le Duan, the aggressive American tactics during the early part of 1967 did not bode well for the successful continuation of a protracted approach toward prosecuting the war. However, two areas of potential allied weakness had emerged. The ARVN still had significant problems, and U.S. public opinion had begun to waiver in its support of the American war effort. For these reasons, [he] advocated a more aggressive strategy to conclude the war by destroying U.S. confidence and spreading Communist control and influence in the countryside.”<sup>69</sup>

Willbanks and Allison each point out that General Nguyen Chi Thanh, head of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which had been established in 1951 as the Communist military headquarters in South Vietnam, supported Le Duan’s proposal. In July 1967 Thanh was killed in disputed events and General Vo Nguyen Giap was selected to replace him. Giap reluctantly accepted the position but was opposed to the proposed escalation of the fight as he thought that a major offensive in 1968 would be premature and was most likely destined to fail against an enemy with vastly superior mobility and firepower. He feared that if the offensive failed, the revolution would be retarded for many years.<sup>70</sup>

Allison’s *Tet Offensive - A Brief History With Documents* is a must for Vietnam War and most especially Tet Offensive historians- both amateur and professional. Running 251 pages in length, his personal analysis comprises only 76 pages of that total; while the remainder is, as the title states, documents relating to the war in general and the offensive specifically. Included are a

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<sup>69</sup> Willbanks, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

lengthy list of military and governmental abbreviations (and their full nomenclature), a chronology of the war beginning in January 1967, as well as several maps and charts as well as many photographs. Most worthwhile, however, are the inclusion of six “Historiographic point” sections which are shaded to stand out and dispersed throughout the work. In these Allison opens with a question, e.g., “What was the purpose of the Tet Offensive?”, “Did American intelligence fail in predicting the Tet Offensive?” or “Was Tet the turning point of the war?” Here Allison examines the question through the views and writings of other historians and key military leaders on both sides of the conflict. These prove most illuminating as the reader can discover the differing analyses of Tet. The author is not shy from including opinions that differ from his own as exemplified with this statement from the section relating to Tet’s purpose:

“James Arnold focuses on the political objective that could be achieved by a stunning military attack, namely convincing the American public that the war was unwinnable, which would in turn force the Johnson administration to change its Vietnam policy.”<sup>71</sup>

Verifying Allison’s premise that Tet was intended to defeat the South Vietnamese government was General Tran Do, the operational planner of the offensive in South Vietnam; he stated that “. . . the main objective had been to undermine the South Vietnamese military and government, but having an impact in the United States had been an unintended but fortunate consequence.”<sup>72</sup>

Contained in the documents section are telegrams between governmental and military leaders, presidential speeches, dispatches from the JUSPAO (Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office), notes from intelligence gatherings, official interrogation reports of North Vietnamese prisoners, and other similar items. Some of the specific titles include: “Memorandum from the Special

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<sup>71</sup> Allison, 26.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 25.

Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities to the Director, Joint Staff: September 8, 1967”; Interrogation of Nguyen Van Sau”; and “After action report, 716<sup>th</sup> Military Police Battalion: February 12, 1968”. Sources for his writing are quite vast although many appear to be secondary. The list includes many of the authors and/or titles for which this author is most familiar, including: James Arnold, Ronnie Ford, Marc Gilbert & William Head, Stanley Karnow, Oberdorfer, David F. Schmitz, James Wilbanks and James Wirtz. Several of those historians’ works have been mentioned, albeit briefly in this paper. Allison has referenced Vietnamese historian Ngo Vinh Long’s essay, “The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath” (1991) *and* from the Military Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*. The latter of those two, while obviously slanted toward the Communist cause, would most assuredly have provided some strong insight into the thought-processes, plans and objectives for the North Vietnamese government and military.

Placed next to the shelf alongside Allison’s discussion of Tet should be James Willbanks’ *The Tet Offensive - A Concise History*. Incorporating historian Edwin Moise’s view, Willbanks casts doubt on the validity of stating with the utmost authority that Tet was solely designed to crumble the will of the American war effort. In 2001 Moise authored the *Historical Dictionary of the Vietnam War* and he acknowledged that:

“It is not entirely clear to what extent this extraordinary gamble [Tet] was based on hopes it could achieve its maximum goals- causing a real collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, and drawing the population of the cities into a general uprising- and to what extent it was based on a reasonable assurance of achieving more modest disruptions of the U.S. and ARVN war effort and of U.S. public support for the war.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Willbanks, 89.

Willbanks reinforces his arguments regarding the reasons for Tet through the work of historians James Owens and Randy Roberts and their effort, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (1991). They refer to the statements from North Vietnamese strategist Nguyen Chi Thanh, head of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), who believed the entire end result of the war could be determined by the success of the offensive as it could undermine the Thieu regime, force Saigon to surrender, secure a military foothold in the Southern cities, and inflict heavy casualties on American forces.<sup>74</sup> A Saigon surrender would be a massive step in achieving a unified Vietnam as it is highly debatable whether the U.S. government would have chosen to remain in South Vietnam once the GVN had capitulated.

*Concise History* argues that Communist leaders in North Vietnam clearly hoped to ignite an uprising among sympathizers in South Vietnam and create a coalition government. General Giap's plan for the Tet Offensive was based upon four key assumptions:

1. The ARVN would not fight after being dealt a hard punch by the Communists.<sup>75</sup>
2. President Thieu and the Saigon government lacked support among the South Vietnamese people, who would rise up if given the opportunity.<sup>76</sup>
3. The people and the ARVN hated the United States and would turn on them if given the chance.<sup>77</sup>
4. The tactical situation at the Khe Sanh base in northern South Vietnam paralleled that of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Willbanks, 90.

<sup>75</sup> Willbanks, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Willbanks, 11.



What Giap, the NVA and the Hanoi government would find though was none of these were completely true. The ARVN did fight, President Thieu may not have been well liked but the people did not rise up to overthrow his regime, some may have hated the U.S. presence in South Vietnam but they were not willing to die for their ouster, and while there were *some* parallels between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, there were also *key* distinctions.

Lengthier than Allison's work, Willbanks' analysis of the war and the Tet Offensive spans 122 pages; *yet* it is the reference sections he includes that, coupled with his succinct writing, make this a most valuable resource. Though devoid of photographs, *A Concise History* provides the reader with six extremely helpful maps- "The Republic of Vietnam Tactical Zones"; "Khe Sanh", "The Tet Offensive, 1968" (showing both NVA attacks from September 1967 - January 1968 and the major points of conflict 30-31 January 1968); "The Assault on Saigon" (pinpointing from which direction and what units attacked the city); "The Attack on Bien Hoa-Long Binh"; and "The Attack Hue". Additionally, Willbanks includes a glossary of military and governmental acronyms, a *detailed* timeline of events from January 1967 – December 1968 that spans nineteen pages *and* a dictionary/index of key terminology, governmental/military personnel, cities and places, and military operations. Entitled, "The Tet Offensive A to Z", this section should be replicated into every work on the Vietnam War and/or the Tet Offensive as it provides *extremely* valuable information to "decoding" the war in general in the Tet Offensive specifically. Examples of the entries here include: I Corps; III Corps Tactical Zone; Operation Arc Light; B-52; William Calley; Iron Triangle; Montagnard; pacification; and "Wise Men" (referring to Johnson's group of advisors). The accompanying text for each entry is quite extensive.

In similar fashion to Allison, Willbanks includes a section entitled “Documents” though it is quite smaller in comparison. The former provides forty-one separate documents, spanning 173 pages; while Willbanks provides a much smaller sample- nine entries covering thirty-two pages. While lacking breadth, there are though some particularly unique document selections in *A Concise History*, including a revealing “Directive On Forthcoming Offensive And Uprisings – Provincial Party Standing Committee, 1 November 1967”<sup>79</sup> which explained the goals and strategy of the offensive and was distributed to local communist cadres. It provides primary source insight into the plan that North Vietnam created for the attack. Excerpts of this directive are included below:

“In the rural, delta and mountain areas, an uprising movement to gain full control of the rural areas has started. The rural people, together with town people are rising up to fight the U.S., overthrow the puppet government, and seize power. In the face of this situation, the enemy has shifted to the defensive and has been thrown into utmost confusion. A new era, a real revolutionary period, an offensive and uprising period has begun. The victorious day of the people and the trying hours are coming.”<sup>80</sup>

“Conduct meetings and give information of the current situation (about 10 to 15 minutes). Make use of the populace immediately in sabotage and support activities and in raid operations against the spies. The masses should be encouraged to go on strike. Dig trenches and make spikes all night long, and contribute to the transformation of the terrain. All people in each family, regardless of their ages, should be encouraged to take part. . . . We must alter the terrain features at night to secure positions to oppress and strike the enemy in the morning. The cadre, together with the population, will be required to swear that they will stay close to their rice fields, defend their villages, and do their utmost to wrest back control of the entire area.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Willbanks, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Willbanks, 193

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 195.

Sources for *A Concise History* run the gamut from encyclopedias; dictionaries; atlases; anthologies; biographies; memoirs- both American and Vietnamese; oral histories; and document collections. Vietnamese perspective is gained through the writings of Vo Nguyen Giap; Bui Diem (former South Vietnamese ambassador to the U.S.); Lam Quang Thi (ARVN general); Nguyen Cao Ky (former prime minister of South Vietnam); Tran Van Tra (PAVN general who led the attack on Saigon during Tet 1968) and others.

Willbanks' and Allison's treatises cover all of the major points of the offensive, including an examination of the media's impact in their reporting of North Vietnam's attack; however, they do lack though on a general overview the war, the Tet offensive in specific, combat operations during Tet, and the internal arguments and pressures among those in President Johnson's Administration. Both authors write directly to the point though and waste few words thus making them valuable resources on Tet 1968, most especially for their inclusion of primary source documents for the reader.

Writing only three years after the Tet Offensive completed, Don Oberdorfer's *Tet!* draws the conclusion that North Vietnam was well aware that 1968 was a presidential election year, and knew this would be a time when the American political system was susceptible to influence.<sup>82</sup>

According to the author:

“The Tet Offensive was to have powerful impact on the emotions, opinions and convictions of millions of Americans and the futures of their political leaders. Coming at a critical time- just before the first presidential primaries in a presidential election year- it caught the American political system at its moment of greatest irresolution and potential for change.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Oberdorfer, 52.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 20.

Oberdorfer and Ronnie Ford (*Understanding The Surprise*) are the some of the few to draw the conclusion that the timing to launch the offensive was at least partly influenced by the looming presidential election in November 1968. *Tet!* presents a thorough look at the entire event- both in Vietnam and how it was received in the United States- especially considering that it was made available to the public so quickly. The strength of his analysis comes not in the reasons for Tet but the net effects on the U.S. war effort afterward. Few today give much credence to the theory that Tet was planned and launched to coincide with the November 1968 Presidential election. Examining *Tet!* forty-three years after the event is most intriguing though since the author did not have the advantage of hindsight on the war as it would be another four years before the U.S. would withdraw from South Vietnam. Oberdorfer appears to ignore the statements from North Vietnamese political and military figures that have acknowledged their desire was to destroy the South Vietnamese government and/or military and that a disintegration of American support for the war was a welcomed, but unintentional benefit.

In similar fashion to Oberdorfer, Vietnamese historian Dr. Ngo Vinh Long believes Tet was designed to send shock waves throughout South Vietnam and deescalate the air war and initiate peace talks.<sup>84</sup> Born in South Vietnam, and currently a professor of history at the University of Maine, Long states that the Communists began planning the offensive as far back as 1960. “The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath”, Long’s 1980 essay argues that by 1967 it had become a reality to U.S. and ARVN forces that the war of attrition they were waging was failing and that the Viet Cong had control over most of the countryside. Forced to try to reverse the situation, the United States escalated its bombing campaign over North Vietnam to new levels in an effort to persuade

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<sup>84</sup> Gilbert, 98.

the NLF to cease their attacks on the countryside. Faced with continual bombardment, in October 1967 Communist leaders in Hanoi made the decision to carry out an offensive against urban areas in the South as by focusing on urban areas there it would force American commanders to pull back their troops and defend the cities, thereby lessening the pressure on the North.

Tackling the performance of the CIA; the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV); the Defense Intelligence Agency, U.S. (DIA); MACV's G-2 and S-2 sections (military intelligence); and all other intelligence gathering/analyzing units in South Vietnam and Washington, D.C., James Wirtz's *Intelligence Failure in War* criticizes some of the most common theories among historians regarding Tet's objectives. Two in particular are targets of his work- the belief that the shift of American public opinion against the war was an intended outcome and secondly, that the goal was to improve the military situation or even possibly win control of South Vietnam.<sup>85</sup> General Westmoreland and Leslie Gelb, director of Policy Planning and Arms Control for International Security Affairs at the Department of Defense from 1967 to 1969, are adherents of the first while supporters of the latter include historian Stanley Karnow, who will be discussed later. Wirtz dismisses both of these hypotheses. The first is misleading as it: 1) dismisses the possibility that Hanoi believed they could win a victory and 2) suggests that the North expected to sway the political tide by simply standing up to American firepower.<sup>86</sup> The second theory fails to account for the, "deteriorating situation faced by the North Vietnamese and VC forces on the eve of Tet."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Wirtz, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Wirtz, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

*Intelligence Failure* questions the logic in believing that Hanoi set out to win control of South Vietnam when their military had suffered such manpower losses prior to the offensive. Rather, the primary motivation to plan and implement the Tet Offensive was their recognition of the fact that their military prospects were slowly but surely deteriorating and by mid-1967 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong leaders could no longer escape the fact that troop morale was declining and combat units were suffering a significant decline in their effectiveness.<sup>88</sup> If this downward slide were not abated, they would lack the ability to mount any sort of offensive that could possibly impact the outcome of the war. Tet was launched to capitalize on the weaknesses in the U.S. - South Vietnam alliance, to break the military stalemate and win the war by instigating a military uprising that would destroy the ARVN and Saigon regime.<sup>89</sup> In this regard he is closer to the Allison/Willbanks camp than that of Oberdorfer, Long, and Ford. Swaying of American public opinion was probably not an objective of the offensive but it may have entered into North Vietnam's calculations about whether to escalate combat in the South.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, Wirtz alludes to what Ronnie Ford would discuss a year later- that Tet was a decision to placate the NLF in South Vietnam as the Viet Cong were seeking to escalate the war in order to bring about a unified Vietnam and the way to do that was through armed resistance and combat against the enemy.<sup>91</sup>

Lending his perspective as a United States Army intelligence officer, Ronnie Ford (CPT., Ret.) compiled *Tet 1968 - Understanding the Surprise* (1995) and examined not only the Tet

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>89</sup> Wirtz, 10, 60.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 23-27.

Offensive but also the political history of Vietnam and Communist doctrine. In order to understand the reasons for the launching of the Tet Offensive, according to the author, one must comprehend the political and military realities as seen through the lens of the North Vietnamese and “these realities did not suddenly appear with the advent of the 1968 Vietnamese lunar New Year, or even during 1967 as most Western accounts suggest.”<sup>92</sup> Ford believes that the decision to launch the offensive was the end product of years of internal struggle and debate over policy and military strategy between the leadership in Hanoi and the NLF. He summarizes his thesis:

“As leaders in Hanoi became convinced that the war against the US [sic] in the South, could not be won by military means alone, the Lao Dong Communist Party of North Vietnam directed the National Liberation Front in the South to accept temporarily the lesser goal of the establishment of a coalition government in South Vietnam, and the gradual withdrawal of American troops. The Tet Offensive was launched to demonstrate to the US the hopelessness of the war, and to convince it also that the time for negotiations had come. With the decision to attack the cities, tensions within and between both the North Vietnamese Communist Party and the Southern National Liberation Front were temporarily resolved as the strategy of ‘*Danh vua Dam*’ (Fighting while Negotiating) replaced the strategy of a three phased people’s war in South Vietnam.”<sup>93</sup>

Ford and Oberdorfer share the opinion that the Tet Offensive was implemented to demonstrate to America that the war in Vietnam had become hopeless and it was time to begin negotiating a settlement; yet Ford goes beyond that and sees Tet as Hanoi’s efforts to placate the NLF. Ford, Robert Brigham (discussed later) and to *some extent* Wirtz, are the only authors reviewed for this paper to assert (or even mention) that Hanoi sought to pacify NLF frustrations with the war

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<sup>92</sup> Ford, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 3.

effort. Others make mention of the tensions between Hanoi and their Communist brethren in the South but do not stand on it to the extent to which Ford and Brigham do.

Like Wirtz, Ford sees the U.S. intelligence failure prior to Tet not in a paucity of collected data but rather that the indicators were not believed and/or acted upon. His statement, “In short, intelligence knew all about the enemy, but failed to understand him. They knew the facts, but did not understand the meaning”<sup>94</sup> is pointed as it strikes upon a core problem in Vietnam- a failure to understand the enemy. A most apropos comparison is drawn between the problems encountered by the French during the Indochina War (1946-1954) and the American involvement in Vietnam. Too often the French loss at Dien Bien Phu is held as the reason for their withdrawal from Vietnam; when, as Ford states, the reality was that they “. . . had become convinced they could not win.”<sup>95</sup> In the end, this sentiment would permeate among the staff of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations and lead to the decision that the struggle would best be left to the South Vietnamese government and military. *Understanding the Surprise* is just under than 200 pages and contains ten short chapters- at the end of which is a bibliography for that particular chapter. Much of the research comes from Vietnamese sources, especially those above the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Willbanks, Robbins, and David F. Schmitz (*The Tet Offensive – Politics, War and Public Opinion*, 2005) each list *Understanding the Surprise* in their respective bibliographies- a testament to its analysis and breadth of content.

In 1996 Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head co-authored *Tet*- a compilation of thirteen separate essays on the Tet Offensive including analyses of intelligence failures, Sino-Vietnamese

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<sup>94</sup> Ford, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 11.



relations, President Johnson and the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign of the North and the Battle of Khe Sanh, also in 1968. Included is an essay by Robert Brigham entitled, “The NLF and the Tet Offensive” which concurs with Ford in that Tet was the culmination of long negotiations between members of the NLF and the Lao Dong Party (North Vietnamese Communist Party); and those deliberations resulted in an increased role for the South in the struggle against the Saigon regime and the United States.<sup>96</sup> Brigham purports that a split occurred in the alliance between the Communist leadership in Hanoi and the NLF as in the mid-1960s the former became more closely tied to the goals and ideology in Moscow; and Southern Communists (NLF) feared that the “doves” in the North were seeking a peaceful settlement of the war. As this was unacceptable to the more radical NLF, they began a slow, but steady course of affiliation with China.<sup>97</sup> Fearing a negotiated, unacceptable peace that would not bring about a fully united Vietnam, this newfound pseudo-alliance with China caused a faction of NLF leaders to consider developing their own strategy with help from Mao. Sensing unrest in the South, Communist leaders in Hanoi adopted a new plan that would force the United States to seek a negotiated settlement to the war and this included the continuation of attack on Southern urban centers and the war of attrition. The focal point of this new strategy was three-phase offensive against the South.<sup>98</sup> Faced with NVA and VC attacks on cities such as Saigon and Hue, the U.S. would be forced to pull back troops and weapons from the countryside, thus bringing relief to the north. Hanoi’s hope would be that the United States would have two options- dramatically escalate the war or push for a peace settlement. The former would be most difficult

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<sup>96</sup> Brigham, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 65-69.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 66-68.

in an election year.<sup>99</sup> In order for this plan to succeed, however, the Lao Dong and the Communists had to commit themselves to a protracted war.

Nearly forty years after Tet James Arnold concurred with Oberdorfer's analysis- the goal of the Tet Offensive was to conduct a dramatic military operation that would force the American public toward a view that the war was unwinnable. With a loss of support from his constituency President Johnson would be forced to change U.S. policy in Vietnam which would include the withdrawal of American troops and open the door for a unified, Communist, Vietnam.<sup>100</sup>

Arnold's *Tet Offensive 1968 – Turning Point In Vietnam* (2004), ascribes to theory that Tet was a multi-faceted effort that synthesized political, diplomatic and military efforts. On the political front, the Saigon government could be undermined if a large number of South Vietnamese were to join with Communist forces. North Vietnam would continue to engage U.S. and ARVN troops on the battlefield and inflict as many casualties as possible while diplomatic efforts would be made to garner international opposition to American intervention in Vietnam.

In 1983, historian and Pulitzer Prize-winner Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* was released and presents itself as a scholarly treatise on the political, military and social history of the nation beginning in the eighteenth century. Here the rise of Vietnamese nationalism as well as the history of the First and Second Indochina Wars is chronicled in strong detail. While only devoting a small portion of his analysis to the Tet Offensive, he does offer a counterpoint to other historians. Using the views of the opposing commanding generals, Westmoreland and Giap, Karnow shows the disparity in their post-Tet analysis. Westmoreland saw Tet as a desperate "go-

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<sup>99</sup> Brigham, 69.

<sup>100</sup> Arnold, 6-13.

for-broke” bid by Hanoi to halt the tide of an inevitable defeat and that the offensive was much like the late 1944 push by Adolf Hitler in the Ardennes forest at the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>101</sup> Contrasting that is General Giap who stated, “For us, you know there is no such thing as a single strategy. Ours is always a synthesis, simultaneously military, political and diplomatic- which is why, quite clearly, the Tet offensive had multiple objectives.”<sup>102</sup> Giap acknowledged the war on the battlefield had reached an impasse and the North lacked the firepower to match that of the United States; however, in his estimation U.S. forces were too dispersed in protecting their various firebases around South Vietnam to be able to effectively pursue the NVA and Viet Cong. The United States had overextended itself as what was once a little war had turned into something much larger.<sup>103</sup> Karnow’s inclusion of Giap’s assessment lends credence to the arguments posited by Oberdorfer, Arnold, Willbanks, and others- that by the end of 1967 the war had reached a stalemate.

In a position somewhat astride from other historians, both before and after the publication of *Vietnam*, Karnow believes that Tet was not intended to be a decisive operation, but rather a single event in a protracted war- a war that in 1968 could very well have been projected to continue for another five, ten or even twenty years. In the 1950s Ho Chi Minh had told the French, “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”<sup>104</sup> *Vietnam* presents the same message being repeated at Tet- but this time from Giap.

Karnow believes that one of the North Vietnamese goals in initiating the offensive was to drive a

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<sup>101</sup> Karnow, 548.

<sup>102</sup> Karnow, 548.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 548-49.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 549

wedge between South Vietnam and its army and that of the United States.<sup>105</sup> By attacking the American embassy in Saigon the Communist leadership in Hanoi sought to show Saigon and the people of South Vietnam that, in spite of their tremendous military ability, the U.S. could be exposed and attacked. Karnow posits that the Communists estimated that, confronted by the chaos created by Tet, President Johnson would declare a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and request to begin negotiations on terms favorable to the North. According to the author this was a prototypical Communist maneuver- push the war into a phase of simultaneous negotiating and fighting. Projecting the impression to the United States, South Vietnam and the rest of the world that they were willing to negotiate, North Vietnam intended to weaken the alliance between the United States and South Vietnam by stimulating fear in Saigon that the U.S. would withdraw its forces if Hanoi would agree to certain conciliations. In a perfect world Hanoi hoped to bring about the demise of the Saigon government and form a coalition government that would be dominated by members of the National Liberation Front as that would cause the withdrawal of American troops and begin the process of creating a unified, Communist Vietnam.

*Vietnam* offers a contrary thesis to the view that the Tet Offensive was created to influence American public opinion and that it was timed to coincide with the Presidential election in 1968. Karnow sees in Giap's plan that the desire to impact and or influence the American political scene was subordinate to the overall Tet strategy. While praising the anti-war movement in the United States for their desire to end the war, Giap emphasized that the focal point must be the events in Vietnam.<sup>106</sup> Karnow's analysis of the Tet Offensive incorporates Communist doctrine

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<sup>105</sup> Karnow, 549.

<sup>106</sup> Karnow, 550.

and mindset into his conclusions- an element not found in all efforts. *Vietnam* received critical acclaim for its exhaustive analysis of the history of Vietnam-prior to and including the involvement of the United States. In 1959 Mr. Karnow began covering Asia as the chief correspondent for *Time* and *Life* magazines and over the course of the next fifteen years he filed reports from Vietnam for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *London Observer*, the *Washington Post* and NBC News. For the thirteen-part PBS series “Vietnam: A Television History”, which premiered in 1983, he served as a chief correspondent; and in 1990 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in history for *In Our Image: America’s Empire in the Philippines*.<sup>107</sup> Covering nearly 700 pages, including a vast number of revealing black-and-white photographs, *Vietnam* provides a Western-oriented perspective on the history of the Southeast Asian nation that intermittently appears to gloss over the atrocities committed by North Vietnamese. For example, while not included in his book but contained within the television series, is an interview with a Communist spokesman, Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, to explain Hue massacres:

“The people so hated those who had tortured them in the past that when the revolution came to Hue they rooted out those despots to get rid of them, just as they would poisonous snakes, who if allowed to live would commit further crimes. And so even though our policy was to reeducate and never kill anyone who surrendered to us the people of the city took justice into their own hands and there was little our revolutionary commanders could do to control them while the fighting raged.”<sup>108</sup>

Countering that statement was Nguyen Ngoc Bich, who in 1968 was the Director of Information for the Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam in Washington, D.C. Bich appeared on the one-hour documentary entitled, “The Impact of Media” which examined the mass media’s coverage of the Tet Offensive. According to him, Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong “. . . was in fact the one running the

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<sup>107</sup> <http://www.charlierose.com/guest/view/3104>

<sup>108</sup> “The Impact of Media” documentary

so-called revolutionary government in Hue during the three weeks that the communists were there. He was probably the one to order the execution of these four thousand people that we discovered later in mass graves. Years later he is allowed to explain what happened in Hue. That is the equivalent of Himmler talking about a concentration camp.”<sup>109</sup> Disputations such as this do raise questions about the neutrality of “A Television History”. To what extent Karnow had input as to who was interviewed and whether their statements were completely accurate is not known.

Karnow’s *Vietnam* does provide an extensive chronology of events in Vietnamese history, beginning in 208 B.C. and continuing up through 1996. Also included here are events not directly related to Vietnam but serve as helpful reference points. The “Cast of Principal Characters”, positioned immediately after the timeline, contains 135 key military, political and cultural figures in Vietnam, Asia, Europe and the United States. Rather than a standard bibliography, the author devotes several highly-detailed paragraphs for *each* chapter that provide the sources and the background to his use of them. While tedious at points *Vietnam: A History* does provide a rich history of the nation that is extremely beneficial for anyone interested in America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Before undertaking a study of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign, the Tet Offensive, or any other part of the conflict that included France and/or the United States, one should try to comprehend the cultural and political history that existed long before American boots hit the ground.

### III. Role of the Media

*“At the dawn of the twenty-first century it is clear that the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the U.S. war in Vietnam, and thus a historic event of lasting importance. It was also a historical anomaly- a failure in military terms for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong assault*

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid

*forces, yet a resounding success for the attackers in political terms, leading eventually to U.S. withdrawal and defeat.”<sup>110</sup>*

*“Many in the press believed then, and continue to believe, that the government and the military lied and distorted the picture of what was happening in Vietnam and of what U.S. policy really was. On the converse, many government and military spokesmen (and a handful of press supporters) contend that for many reasons the press version was incomplete, confused, distorted, and inconsistent with reality.”<sup>111</sup>*

As a freshman undergraduate student at Temple University in 1982 this author chose the Tet Offensive as a topic for a research paper and came away with the conclusion that Tet was a military victory for the United States that was unfairly portrayed by the American media as a failure. With twenty-nine years passing and much more research completed, the conclusion is *somewhat* the same- the United States had achieved both a tactical military victory and a simultaneous political defeat through the Tet Offensive. While the media *did play a role* (consciously or not) in convincing some Americans that the war was being lost, *they did not cost* America a victory in Southeast Asia. That being said, not all of the reporting done in Vietnam, especially during Tet 1968, was fully accurate and the visual message (accompanied by the script) that was sent back to Main Street U.S.A was, at least to some degree, that the ‘sky was falling.’

Prior to Tet, American sentiment toward the war was beginning to sag as it had begun to look more and more like victory could be a while in coming- a long while. The question begs though- why was public favor over the war waning? Karnow helps us with an answer, as he believes the mood of the American people at that time is misunderstood:

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<sup>110</sup> Oberdorfer, xi. Contained in the Preface to the 2001 edition

<sup>111</sup> Salisbury, 83.

“By late 1967 a plurality of Americans had concluded that the United States had made a mistake in committing combat troops to Vietnam. This sentiment was often analyzed wrongly, however. A common assumption was that “antiwar” signified “pro-peace.” But that was not always the case. On the contrary, most Americans were dispirited because they felt that President Johnson was not prosecuting the war dynamically enough. Their attitude, summed up succinctly, seemed to say, ‘It was an error for us to have gotten involved in Vietnam in the first place. But now that we’re there, lets’ win- or get out.’”<sup>112</sup>

While the film of Viet Cong and U.S. marines exchanging gunfire on the grounds of the American embassy was disconcerting, television crews also captured the valiant efforts of soldiers and marines crouching behind walls, literally crawling forward in the face of hostile machine gun fire, working house-to-house, and showing that, in virtually all instances, U.S. forces responded well to the Communist uprising. These were “American boys” fighting, bleeding and dying for South Vietnam. Though still concerned about the war, especially after being told that the U.S. held the upper hand, Americans saw the might of American military hardware in response to the attacks. Immediately after the first phase of Tet, with U.S. troops pushing back the Communists at every attack point, there was a brief groundswell of American patriotism and “hawkishness” as a new threat was posed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>113</sup> General Westmoreland and other MACV senior commanders tried reassuring those back home that all was under control as U.S. troops had recovered from the initial assault and were now taking the fight to the enemy. A month after the start of the offensive, Westmoreland told the press, “This offensive has required us to react and modify our plans in order to take advantage of the opportunity to inflict heavy casualties upon him. Although the enemy has achieved some

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<sup>112</sup> Karnow, 559.

<sup>113</sup> Karnow, 558, Schmitz, 159.



temporary psychological advantage, he suffered a military defeat.”<sup>114</sup> The Communist offensive was just what the general had wanted- an open engagement on a grand-scale with the enemy.

Douglas Pike was a U.S. Information Agency officer stationed in South Vietnam who submitted reports for the *Washington Post* throughout the war. His lengthy and highly-detailed article, “Giap Offensive Aims At War’s End By Midyear”, provides us at least a small glimpse into how Tet was seen when it was still fresh in the public consciousness-

“If intentions in the offensive were limited, then the failure was a limited one; if more ambitious, then the failure was a major one. And if the enemy intention was a knockout punch then quite obviously, the failure was monumental.”<sup>115</sup>

Pike’s statement may have spoken for how a percentage of America saw Tet- at least once the shock of the embassy attack wore off. His thoughts are useful in trying to gauge the various impacts Tet had on the nation as the winter of 1967-68 faded and it serves as a reminder that not everyone in the first months of 1968 viewed the Tet Offensive as having disastrous consequences for American involvement in the war. The groundswell of patriotism was short-lived, however, and while Americans watching television reports could not help but witness the bravery of U.S. (and ARVN) troops, they also recognized that the war was not nearly as close to being over as they had been told. As James Arnold notes, by the end of March 1968, one in every five Americans switched from pro- to anti-war and President Johnson’s popularity among “hawks” and “doves” plummeted.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Braestrup, 155.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>116</sup> Arnold, 88.

Arguments and discussions over the “scorecard” of the offensive have been raging since 1968 and most likely will not cease anytime soon. It was, and to some extent still is, a difficult pill for Americans to swallow that with an attack that was eventually beaten back at every turn and the loss of tens of thousands of Communist troops, Tet initiated the fall of dominoes that brought about peace negotiations, the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, and the fall of Saigon. How could Tet be scored as a “loss?” As Arnold and others saw it, Tet was:

“ . . . an enormous Allied success. At a cost of some 4,000 Americans killed and wounded and between 4,000 and 8,000 ARVN soldiers killed, the Communists suffered 40,000 to 50,000 battlefield deaths. Most importantly, large number of irreplaceable local Viet Cong fighters and cadres had died. Simply put, the enemy had concentrated, and his masses had been consumed by American firepower.”<sup>117</sup>

Beyond the overwhelming casualties for North Vietnam (and some question the high Communist total), what historians see is the fact that Tet signaled the end of the lie that we were winning the war and that it would only be a matter of time before victory was secured. President Johnson’s administration was discredited, especially when word was leaked concerning a request for an increase in troop strength; and two months to the day that Americans had learned of the Offensive, he told a national audience that he would not seek, and would not accept the nomination of the Democratic Party for another term.<sup>118</sup>

There are three works that will be examined, and each posits a varying degree of blame on the media for the post-Tet fallout among the American public, the Johnson Administration and the Pentagon. At the one extreme is British-American author and journalist Robert Elegant who covered both the wars in Korea and Vietnam and holds an undergraduate degree from the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>118</sup> Wirtz, 2.

University of Pennsylvania and Master's degrees from Columbia University in Far Eastern Studies (MA) and journalism (MS). Printed in the London magazine, *Encounter* (August 1981), his essay, "How to Lose A War: The Press and Viet Nam [sic]" was hailed by those who saw the media's reporting during Tet as being irresponsible, while for others it is seen as mistakenly directing blame onto those who did their best to relay the events of 1968 (and throughout the war) to the people around the globe. In Vietnam, according to Elegant, during the latter half of the United States involvement there, the media became the battlefield as foreign correspondents sought to win not only the approval of their readers but more importantly their colleagues.<sup>119</sup>

Elegant saw that the "American press . . . somehow felt obliged to be less objective than partisan, to take sides . . ." and they were, ". . . instinctively "agin [sic] the government" and at least reflexively, for Saigon's enemies."<sup>120</sup> He discloses his thesis more thoroughly:

"Illusory events reported by the press as well as real events within the press corps were more decisive than the clash of arms or the contention of ideologies. For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined *not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen* [emphasis added] . . . I believe it can be said . . . that the South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle. They virtually crushed the Viet Cong in the South . . . and thereafter they threw back the invasion by regular North Vietnamese divisions. Nonetheless, the war was finally lost to the invaders after the U.S. disengagement because the political pressures built up by the media had made it quite impossible for Washington to maintain even the minimal material and moral support that would have enabled the Saigon regime to continue the effective resistance."<sup>121</sup>

While the author most certainly has an axe to grind against the media's work in South Vietnam he does illuminate certain key points, including the same made by Peter Braestrup in his two-part

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<sup>119</sup> Elegant, 73.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 73.

volume *Big Story* (discussed later). Correspondents stationed in Vietnam were “isolated from the Vietnamese by ignorance of their language and culture, as well as by a measure of race estrangement. Most were isolated from the quixotic American Army establishment . . . by their own moralistic attitudes, their political prejudices.”<sup>122</sup> Likewise, the view of television’s impact was shared by the two who were at one time in Vietnam together. For Elegant, “Television, its thrusting and simplistic character shaping its message, was most shocking because it was most immediate. . . . TV crews naturally preferred the most dramatic. That, after all was their business-show business.”<sup>123</sup>

Elegant posits several reasons for the media bias:

1. Correspondents lack of familiarity with war prior to landing in Vietnam.<sup>124</sup>
2. Confusing the horrors of all wars with that of Vietnam and concluding that the tragedy they were witnessing was unique.<sup>125</sup>
3. Animosity toward the military establishment due to lack of full disclosure from briefing officers.<sup>126</sup>
4. Paucity of knowledge relating to Vietnamese history and culture in particular and guerrilla warfare in general.<sup>127</sup>

Each of those points has their own level of validity and the author does not dodge his own pointed finger of blame as he felt that he “tended to emphasize the positive aspects [of the

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<sup>122</sup> Elegant, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 85-88.

<sup>125</sup> Elegant, 85-88

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 85-88.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 85-88.

struggle], sometimes excessively.”<sup>128</sup> While providing strong support for his argument (covering 18 pages), Elegant chooses a thesis that is too simple- that the outcome of the war was essentially wholly determined by the mass media. War, especially in Vietnam, is not that simple. To give full [dis]credit to the journalists removes culpability on the part of the GVN and the United States as well as denying credit to the effectiveness of North Vietnamese forces. Renowned for its hard-line stance, many Vietnam War historians cite “How to Lose A War” in their bibliographies- even those who take a more liberal posture toward the media’s credibility during the war.

Whenever an argument erupts over the role that the mass media played in turning Tet from a military victory for the U.S. – ARVN alliance into a political defeat, one work that will always come to the forefront is Braestrup’s *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. Originally published in 1977, it has been reprinted thrice more- the last being in 1994. Spanning more than 1200 pages (Volumes I & II), 41 appendixes, 23 large tables, 14 indexes, and a thousand footnotes *Big Story* examines in *great detail* the reporting done by U.S. members of the press corps during Tet and pulls no punches in directing blame toward the media- most notably the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines, the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) as well as the field reports and news broadcasts of CBS, NBC and to a lesser extent ABC.

No stranger to war himself, Peter Braestrup served as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps from 1951-53 and saw combat action in Korean War where he was wounded during the defense of Outpost Reno in 1952. Discharged from active duty and armed with a B.A.

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<sup>128</sup> Elegant, 89.

from Yale University (1951) he found employment with *Time* magazine in Chicago. He would later work for the Washington bureau of the New York *Times* where he served in Algeria (1962-65), Paris (1965), and finally Bangkok (1966-68), where he began covering the Vietnam War. Just prior to Tet 1968 Braestrup garnered the position of Saigon bureau chief for the Washington *Post* which gave him a first-hand in-country vantage point from which to examine and reflect upon the work being done by fellow journalists.

Simply getting from cover to cover of the primary volume is a Herculean task as it is filled with so many facts, notes, excerpts from magazine, newspaper, wire service and television reports, as well as government press releases. As Paul Weaver noted in his 1977 review, *Big Story*:

“is a fascinating and important account of our national press in action, and one hopes (probably in vain) that the book will receive the attentive reception which its meandering structure and long-winded exposition seem intended to discourage. It presents a comprehensive reconstruction of the facts and ideas the press conveyed to the American people about this turning point in the Vietnam war [sic] and U.S. politics. It is the first systematic, book-length analysis ever made of the content, accuracy, and political animus of a major body of national press coverage. Not least, it is a sort of confession.”<sup>129</sup>

Weaver’s comment regarding *Big Story* being somewhat of a confession relates to the fact that Braestrup periodically points the finger at himself in regard to mistakes made in analyzing and reporting on the enemy’s activities during Tet 1968. It is this willingness to admit to some of the same faults and errors as those targeted by his writing that lend credibility to the argument that the mass media’s reporting during the offensive was highly inaccurate. Braestrup’s military and

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<sup>129</sup> Weaver

foreign service background served him well and separated him from his fellow press colleagues during his tour in Vietnam and he admits to such in the Introduction:

“My own experience in and out of Vietnam inevitably shaped my perceptions of Tet and of press performance. Like most of my colleagues in Saigon, I was more interested in *how* [emphasis in original] the war was going than in the more general questions, so fiercely debated at home, of whether the United States should have committed itself to Vietnam or whether Administration war policy made sense. . . . As a Marine [sic] veteran of Korea, I was perhaps less shocked by war’s random death and destruction than were some of my colleagues witnessing these for the first time; I was probably also more interested in such military matters as field intelligence, logistics, “foxhole strength,” enemy tactics, and allied deployments than they were. Like my Western colleagues I spoke no Vietnamese, and my insights into Vietnamese culture were few.”<sup>130</sup>

It is important to note the lack of fluency in the Vietnamese language but also, even more vital to recognize the lack of understanding of Vietnamese history and culture for the war was greatly shaped by those components. A year to eighteen months was the average tour in Vietnam for newsmen (newspaper and magazine)<sup>131</sup> and that was not sufficient time to gain the necessary knowledge of the land, the people *and* the war itself.

The press corps in Vietnam suffered from several key issues that relegated their coverage of the war to be quite narrow:

1. The approximately 60 “fact finders” in-country at the time of Tet 1968 did not collectively work for a central fact-collection agency and therefore information was not pooled.<sup>132</sup>
2. Each bureau competed with the others and for the most part matched coverage.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Braestrup, xv.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 11-13.

<sup>133</sup> Braestrup, 11-13.

3. Virtually their entire focus was on the American perspective and even by 1968 no American reporter spoke Vietnamese.<sup>134</sup>

4. Newly arrived newsmen did not speak the “language” of the military. They did not understand the differences between a division and a regiment, a mortar and a howitzer, logistics and tactics.<sup>135</sup>

A major logistical problem challenged news media outlets in Vietnam on a daily basis- the pressure to get to the story (truck, jeep, helicopter), analyze the situation, film the event, edit it, write the copy and get it on a plane to Tokyo for a satellite uplink all the while trying to meet morning and evening news cycles across four U.S. time zones.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, “in swift-moving events, first bulletins were sometimes in error. The wire services were also sometimes wrong on late-breaking Saigon stories, when even rudimentary checking was difficult. AP and UPI could not wait until the fog of war cleared and this was to be the case in the early hours of the Tet attacks on Saigon.”<sup>137</sup>

The lack of military knowledge should not be weighed lightly as in order to understand the war *and* the information given in formal press briefings or more especially during informal, sometimes under fire, field reports, reporters should (must?) have a working understanding of the military structure. Obviously this is not always practicable; however, due diligence should be have been taken when reporting on an event with such magnitude as the Tet Offensive. Braestrup elaborates on the issues with reporting on the war:

“In intellectual terms, understanding the war in Vietnam demanded a great deal more than had prior U.S. overseas conflicts. In military terms

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 11-13.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 11-13.

<sup>136</sup> Braestrup, 30.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 30.



alone, it was a complicated, shifting war, without a front line to signal progress. . . . To many newsmen, the outcome of a skirmish or even a major action seemed irrelevant amid the shock of seeing Americans die or Vietnamese peasants huddled beside their ruined huts. To many, the difference between braving a dozen noisy rounds of enemy mortar fire and seeing a 200-round barrage accompanied by a 300-man assault was imperceptible: it was all equally important, impressive, and terrifying especially on television. . . . To those who had not undergone (or read about) far heavier bombardments in Korea or World War II, the amount of “incoming” (enemy mortar, rocket, and artillery shells), unprecedented in Vietnam, seemed awesome. Fewer than 100 Marines [sic], by Marine count, died at Con Thien under this bombardment. . . . But Con Thien, with its life-and-death drama, was spotlighted.”<sup>138</sup>

*Big Story* focuses on and analyzes the reasons behind the media’s slanted and erroneous coverage of the enemy’s offensive and the U.S. –ARVN responses to those advances. Purporting that Tet was a significant gamble by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong that was similar to the U.S.-backed invasion of the Bay of Pigs (Cuba) in 1961 as Hanoi surfaced a large portion of their total force in the attack on South Vietnamese cities, Braestrup, like many others, calls Tet a military victory for the U.S.-ARVN alliance and a disaster for the North. While the Communist effort resulted in utter failure, Braestrup believed that *many* journalists viewed the operation quite the reverse and turned military defeat into political victory for the Communist cause. For those watching and reading back in the United States Tet was portrayed as an:

“ . . . unmitigated disaster (for the U.S.) that demonstrated the failure of U.S. policy and the futility of persisting in it. In the eyes of the press, the fact that the North Vietnamese and NLF could make their challenge was evidence that they had in fact won or at least could not fail over the long run, and that our side had already lost or eventually would. Thus, in contrast to the real Tet, there was no development in the journalistic Tet, which began as a disaster for the U.S. and two months later remained a disaster.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 21-25.

<sup>139</sup> Weaver

Perhaps no one incident more represented the inaccuracy of the media's reporting during the Tet Offensive than did the attack on the United States embassy in Saigon on January 31, 1968.

Braestrup noted that:

“The embassy story, as we have seen, dominated the wire-service leads, got the big headlines, and later was featured on network TV shows- all in accordance with standard U.S. press traditions. . . . The “terrorist-proof” embassy was “symbolic” (of what, take your choice), the battle was dramatic, and, most important, the newsmen were around to watch the action. . . .The wires, forced to file, let the drama run away with them, and TV was to follow suit. The embassy fight became the *whole* [emphasis in original] Tet offensive on TV and in the newspapers during the offensive's second day- and with the exception of the [NY] *Times*, newsmen did not warn their audiences that it was, in reality, only one, inconclusive part of the whole.”

Taking their cue (and part of their story) from the confused and frantic military policemen who were either involved in repulsing the attack or were nearby, the AP ran with a story that Vietcong sappers had breached not only the outer wall of the grounds but had gotten inside the embassy itself (the chancery).<sup>140</sup> Two of the Associated Press leads on January 31, 1968 were as follows:

Saigon (AP)-The Vietcong seized part of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon early Wednesday and battled American military police who tried to recapture it. Communist commandos penetrated the supposedly attack-proof building in the climax of a combined artillery and guerrilla assault that brought limited warfare to Saigon itself.”<sup>141</sup>

Saigon (AP)-American military police supported by paratroopers moved into the U.S. Embassy compound near the heart of Saigon after daybreak Wednesday to wipe out Vietcong suicide guerrillas *holed up inside* [Braestrup emphasis] the embassy building. . . .”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Braestrup, 82.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 83.

UPI even went further and described a *six-hour* battle in through the “carpeted offices of the chancery.”<sup>143</sup> They were both wrong. Not *one member* of the Communist attacking force ever penetrated the chancery. There was *no fighting inside the embassy*; although to be fair that story at least partially originated with some U.S. MPs. Facts should have been checked more thoroughly before submitting the aforementioned stories as for at least some portion of the American population, their first introduction to the Tet Offensive was an inaccurate news brief. There would be *many more* to come in the weeks ahead.

The effort of six years of research and writing, *Big Story* presents countless examples from newspapers, magazines, wire services and most especially television reports that in retrospect do appear to speak from either an uninformed stance or one of a intended bias against the military mission in South Vietnam. John Laurence, who served in Vietnam as a CBS correspondent from 1965-70, praised the research behind Braestrup’s prose; however, he believed that “the evidence” presented, “does not necessarily support the conclusions.”<sup>144</sup> That criticism is most curious as the voluminous *primary source* evidence (albeit selected to match the author’s thesis) would seem to lend strong credence to the argument that the mass media’s coverage of Tet was at times quite misleading. Weaver’s assessment of *Big Story* is succinct and on target: “. . . what Braestrup describes is a press that in effect declared its opposition to Johnson and his war and proceeded to express that opposition in the only language available to it: the language of news—of the dramatized presentation of actual events.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Braestrup, 89.

<sup>144</sup> Laurence, 175.

<sup>145</sup> Weaver

Finally, incorporating lessons from Tet into twenty-first century issues and crises is James S. Robbins' effort with a title that suggests a "what if" examination of Tet 1968 - *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive* (2010). Currently an editorial writer on defense policy for the *Washington Times*, Robbins was a former Special Assistant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and is a commentator for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Review* on national security issues. Robbins too places himself among the camp who views Tet as a push by Hanoi to generate an uprising among the South Vietnamese that would help overthrow the Saigon regime and oust the American military. While this attempt failed markedly, the U.S. anti-war movement, aided by the media's off-the-mark reporting, seized this opportunity to make Tet a rallying point.<sup>146</sup> Where Robbins deviates, however, from Elegant most especially, and Braestrup to a lesser degree, is in the discussion of whether Tet turned Americans against the war. When asked to speak about his own work, Robbins offered these thoughts:

". . . rather than engendering a sense of futility and swelling the ranks of the peace movement, the Tet Offensive made Americans more bellicose. The communists [sic] had deliberately violated a truce to mount a large-scale attack which had been decisively thwarted. The time was ripe for a massive counter-stroke that would destroy what remained of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces and end the war in allied victory."<sup>147</sup>

And regarding the media's work during Tet, Robbins does not lay blame at their feet in the manner of Elegant and Braestrup. In his view:

"The press did misrepresent or dramatize key aspects of the attacks, but the press never had had the ability to influence the public to the degree attributed to it. The media are easily influenced and geared toward the sensational . . . . But public opinion through the course of the Vietnam War demonstrated that at base the people had a sounder understanding of

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<sup>146</sup> Larson

<sup>147</sup> Johnson

the use of force than did the press or policymakers in Washington. The majority of the public wanted to win in Vietnam and use the means necessary to do so.”<sup>148</sup>

Of all the works reviewed, Robbins is the sole author to draw parallels from the Korean War (1950-53) into the war in Vietnam and saw the lessons learned from the former influencing military strategy and policy in the latter. In both conflicts the United States was faced with an Asian state divided along a parallel, a northern Communist enemy that bordered China and was supported by the Soviet Union. Likewise, the war in the south was against a Western-oriented, developing nation. While the Korean conflict proved to be costly and inconclusive, McArthur’s venture into North Korea provoked the mobilization of Chinese troops across the Yalu River and exacerbated the problems faced by U.S. troops as they had to contend with both a Korean and Chinese enemy. Robbins contends that in the 1960s the Pentagon became most concerned about engendering Soviet military support for North Vietnam if American and ARVN forces ventured across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>149</sup>

With the benefit of writing in the twenty-first century, Robbins is able to examine recent events and draw links between the events of Tet 1968 and those such as in the Middle East. He notes that:

“Tet is kept alive by the pervasive use of analogy in public discourse, not as an analytical framework to better understand or contextualize events but as a form of shorthand used to brand those events for media consumption. . . . Tet has become the standard an enemy has to meet in order to achieve victory, not actually winning, not prevailing on the battlefield, but seeming to, or in some cases simply trying to. . . . America’s humiliation in the Vietnam War has inspired contemporary terrorists and insurgents of many stripes. The current crop of terrorists

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<sup>148</sup> Robbins, 298.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

well understands the Tet dynamic. Osama bin Laden has long known that the United States cannot be defeated in a stand-up, symmetrical conventional struggle. . . . Bin Laden and other terrorists have routinely mentioned Vietnam as a model for the type of victory they are seeking, a debilitating blow to the American will that results in demoralization at home and withdrawal of the troops abroad.”<sup>150</sup>

*Revisiting* is a most-worthwhile narrative of the events leading up to and obviously including those of the offensive itself not due to its uncovering of any particularly noteworthy new evidence relating to the reasons behind its inception or any specific failures within the U.S. – ARVN military structure but rather for its pointed prose concerning how Tet shaped people’s perceptions of the war- both in the 1970s and today. The definition of victory in war has forever been altered by Tet as it revealed that an enemy does not need to achieve victory on the battlefield through inflicting heavy casualties or capturing significant territory. Victory can be achieved through the altering of the truth and thereby influencing the public’s willingness to support the fight. Perception can become reality. Robbins is correct in declaring that *Revisiting* is not intended to “be a comprehensive history of every aspect of the Tet Offensive, but it does explore key themes in light of the evolution of the Tet narrative in the decades since the events took place in 1968.” It does not provide as many details of the history of the war, Communist ideology or military intelligence issues as other authors covering the same topic; yet, for its effort in relating the events of 1968 to current global political and military issues it deserves to be not only recognized but valued.

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<sup>150</sup> Robbins, 3-4.



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