

1968: The year that shook the world

## Tet: Turning point in the Vietnam War

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**THIS IS the first in a series of articles about the remarkable year 1968, a year of conflict, class struggle, and revolutionary upheaval around the world. It was a year marked by the massive escalation of the student Vietnam antiwar movement around the world, the rebirth of mass working-class struggle, as well as of a new revolutionary Left. It was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam; the May 1968 general strike in France; the famous Black power salute at the 1968 Olympics; the student struggle in Mexico City and the terrible massacre in Tlatelolco Plaza; the Prague Spring and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia; the police riot at the 1968 Democratic Party convention; the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ghetto rebellions; the birth of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit; and many other key historical events.**

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IN THE early morning hours of January 30, 1968, the first day of Tet, the Vietnamese celebration of the lunar New Year, soldiers of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) breached the wall surrounding the American embassy in Saigon. They then raced across the compound where they tried but failed to enter the main building. The NLF soldiers (derisively known as the “Viet Cong” to the Americans and their Saigon allies) sprayed the embassy with rockets and fought a six-hour battle with American military police. All nineteen NLF soldiers were killed or badly wounded along with five Americans and one South Vietnamese employee of the embassy. One reporter at the scene of the battle described it as “a butcher shop in Eden.” This attack on the very citadel of American power in South Vietnam was brazen in and of itself, but it soon became clear that this was the opening battle of a nationwide military offensive by the NLF and the North Vietnamese that shook the foundations of the American military and political establishment.

The supporters of the American war in Vietnam never recovered from the humiliation from what has gone down in the history books as the Tet Offensive. But is Tet just for the history books? What can the Tet Offensive teach antiwar activists today about bringing an end to the American war in Iraq? To understand the lasting impact of Tet we need to look at the wider political context in which the offensive took place.

In late 1967, General William Westmoreland, the commanding officer of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, returned to the United States at the request of President Lyndon Johnson, who was planning on running for reelection the following year, to give an upbeat assessment of the American war in Vietnam. He toured the country talking about the “thinning of the ranks of the Viet Cong” and the coming end of the war. Typical of Westmoreland’s speeches was the one he gave before the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. “We have reached a point,” Westmoreland declared confidently, “when the end begins to come into view,” though “mopping up the enemy” could take another two years. The Washington Post ran a headline story about his press club appearance: “War’s end in

view—Westmoreland.” Simultaneously, however, Westmoreland was asking Washington for a few hundred thousand more troops over and above the 485,000 that were already there.

Westmoreland’s confident public predictions were significantly at odds with the war on the ground. More than a decade after the U.S. committed itself to creating a non-communist authoritarian government in Saigon, it was no more popular in late 1967 than it was ten years earlier. It was a corrupt, vicious dictatorship that was completely dependent on the U.S. military presence to keep it from collapsing. Westmoreland was also cooking the books in regard to the total number of “enemy” soldiers fighting against the U.S. and its allies in South Vietnam—to prove that he was winning the war. Westmoreland claimed a total of 285,000 NLF and North Vietnam soldiers were engaged in combat in South Vietnam, while the CIA estimated that there were at least 500,000 to 600,000 resistance fighters. When General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was informed of this enormous discrepancy he panicked. “If these figures should reach the public,” he wrote Westmoreland, “they would, literally, blow the lid off Washington. Please do whatever is necessary to insure that these figures are not, repeat not, released to the news media.”

Tet was the lunar New Year, a major holiday in Vietnam celebrated by relatives traveling long distances to visit one another. Since the American bombing campaign had driven many people into the cities, a large number traveled to the largest cities. Fireworks of various sorts marked the Tet holiday, and it was normal that many strangers would be around. This made it a perfect time for the NLF to smuggle soldiers and weapons into the cities. The Americans also believed that there would be a lull in military activity because of the Tet holiday. The plans for Tet were drawn up a year before in Hanoi with the personal approval of NLF leader, Ho Chi Minh. While there had been military offensives in the past around Tet, the one planned for 1968 was nothing less than an effort to shift the course of the war against the United States. In April 1967, the Thirteenth Plenum of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s central committee passed Resolution 13 calling for a “spontaneous uprising [in the South] in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time.”

But there were divisions among the North Vietnamese concerning the upcoming offensive. The most senior North Vietnamese military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the architect of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954—a defeat which signaled the end of France’s occupation of Vietnam—disagreed over the conception of Tet. He argued that it risked too much in a direct confrontation with the American military, something the North Vietnamese and NLF had successfully avoided in the previous two years. Giap’s concerns were overridden and he was ordered to draw up plans for the coming offensive. Giap carefully planned the coming offensive, code-named “Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Ngia” or “General Offensive-General Uprising.”

The Tet Offensive actually began in late 1967—during the dry season in Vietnam—when the North Vietnamese and the NLF launched military feints to draw American military forces away from the major cities. Up until Tet, the war had been primarily confined to the countryside. The French newspaper *Le Monde* reported in January 1968 that a “sustained and general offensive” had the Americans pinned back in defensive positions. The American press by and large reported uncritically on Westmoreland’s upbeat accounts of the war and seemed to ignore what the French press and others saw happening around them. On January 20, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began a siege of the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh near the Laotian border. Westmoreland was convinced that the Vietnamese wanted to repeat at Khe Sanh the victory they had achieved at Dien Bien Phu fourteen years earlier. Johnson was so nervous about the situation that he had a model of Khe Sanh in the White House and made his generals pledge that Khe Sanh could be held no matter what. He reportedly barked at his generals: “I don’t want any damn Dinbinphoo!”

Westmoreland and Johnson’s obsession with Khe Sanh, a base of little strategic value, revealed how much they were misreading the battlefield. While the NVA was laying siege at Khe Sanh and

Westmoreland correspondingly rushed reinforcements to his besieged troops, the NLF moved into place elsewhere. In January, tens of thousands of NLF troops moved into the larger provincial towns and cities. They smuggled weapons and explosives in coffins, burying them in cemeteries for future use. As one American journalist observed, once in the cities "the Viet Cong were absorbed into the population by the urban underground like out of town relatives attending a family reunion."

It is a testament to the deep roots and widespread sympathy for the Vietnamese nationalist movement that no one tipped off the Saigon government or the Americans that such a large military build-up was taking place. But it is also a testament to the bureaucratic complacency of American planners, who had in their possession an appeal to the People's Army [the official name of the North Vietnamese Army] that recommended "strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities."

In his 1971 book, *TET! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War*, investigative reporter Dan Oberdorfer explained the reasons behind the failure of U.S. forces to anticipate the scale and character of the coming attack, in spite of their possessing information indicating a major attack was immanent:

*"The inertial force of habit and of bureaucracy overpowered the evidence at hand. Belief in a tremendous impending attack would have required tremendous counter-efforts. Personal plans would have to be altered; holidays and furloughs canceled; daily habits of comfort and convenience in previously safe cities abandoned. If an official reported "progress" last month and the months before that and had been praised for his tidings of success, how did he justify reporting an impending crisis now? Official assessments of Communist weakness would have to be discarded or explained away; public predictions would have to be eaten. It could not be done."*

American arrogance and racism also played its part in the Tet fiasco. Americans, whether in uniform or civilian garb, referred to the Vietnamese people as "dinks" and "gooks," while boasting that Americans had never lost a war. This lethal mix of inertia, arrogance, and racism was about to blow up in their faces.

On the night of January 29-30, the main part of the offensive began, when 70,000 NVA/NLF soldiers attacked thirty-four of forty-four provincial capitals, sixty-four district capitals, and many military installations. More than 100 targets were hit all over South Vietnam, including the American embassy in Saigon. Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam, fell to the combined forces of the NVA and the NLF. "The feat stunned U.S. and world opinion," according to liberal anticommunist historian Stanley Karnow. The NLF flag flew over the citadel in Hue for the next three weeks. "Joking and laughing, the soldiers walk in the streets and gardens without showing any fear.... Numerous civilians brought them great quantities of food. It didn't seem that these residents were being coerced in any way," according to a dispatch by Agence France-Presse correspondent Francois Mazure. Mazure was soon expelled from South Vietnam by the Saigon government for spreading "procommunist" propaganda.

In Saigon, 1,000 NLF troops took the city and managed to hold it for three weeks against a combined force of more than 11,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) troops. Westmoreland tried to portray the offensive as the death rattle of the NLF, similar to the Battle of the Bulge by the Germans in the final phase of the Second World War. Michigan governor George Romney told a group of New York reporters, "If what we have seen in the past week is a Viet Cong failure, then I hope they never have a victory."

After the first reports of the attacks on Saigon and other cities, Westmoreland still thought them diversionary to what he considered the main enemy effort at Khe Sanh!

The U.S. responded with what one reporter called "the most hysterical use of American firepower

ever seen," particularly air power. "The Viet Cong had the government by the throat in those provincial towns," explained one U.S. military adviser. "Ordinary methods would have never gotten them out, and the government did not have enough troops to do the job, so firepower was substituted."

But firepower alone in some cases wasn't enough. The North Vietnamese Army and the NLF held Hue for twenty-five days, and it was only retaken in vicious house-to-house fighting by Marines and ARVN forces. Superior firepower (in the air and on the ground), however, tipped the balance. "Nothing I saw during the Korean War, or in the Vietnam War so far," wrote Robert Shaplen of the New Yorker, who toured Hue after its destruction, "has been as terrible, in terms of destruction and despair, as what I saw in Hue." One report after the battle found that 80 percent of the city's buildings had been destroyed.

The American and South Vietnamese response to Tet forever altered the American public's perception of the war in Vietnam. It is now reminiscent of one of those "dirty colonial wars" fought by one of the declining European imperial powers (like the French in Algeria or the British in Kenya) trying to hold on at all cost against the wishes of the subjugated population. It was clear from the scope of the Tet Offensive that the mass of the South Vietnamese people were opposed to the Americans and in support of the NLF, the complete opposite of what the American public had been told for years. The destruction U.S. forces wreaked on South Vietnam shocked many back home and the Orwellian thinking to justify the violence made it even worse. Ben Tre in Kien Hoa Province was obliterated by U.S. firepower. "We had to destroy the town to save it," the commanding officer in charge of recapturing Ben Tre told reporters—"coining one of the most notorious phrases of the war and a fitting motto for the U.S. counterattack against the Tet offensive," writes Hunt.

The war literally came into American homes every night, with film footage of besieged American soldiers huddled behind tanks fighting for their lives, not in the remote countryside, but in the "secure" cities. Then came the film footage, broadcast all over the world, of Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, South Vietnam's police chief, summarily executing a suspected NLF officer by shooting him in the head with a pistol, a scene that looked to many as straight out of film clips of Nazi-occupied countries during the Second World War.

Another Nazi-like incident took place at a village called My Lai in March 1968, when American soldiers led by Lt. William Calley executed more than 300 unarmed men, women, and children in ditches. It would be a year and a half before the My Lai massacre became public.

While American firepower pushed back the Tet Offensive, the costs were high. During the offensive South Vietnamese forces were severely mauled at the hands of the NVA and the NLF. The Americans suffered nearly 4,000 casualties between January 30 and March 31, 1968. American military forces were clearly demoralized after Tet, beginning the process of decay and rebellion that would reach crisis proportions in the remaining years of the war. A March 3 State Department report dismally concluded:

*"We know that despite a massive influx of 500,000 U.S. troops, 1.2 million tons of bombs, 400,000 sorties per year, 200,000 KIA [killed in action] in three years, 20,000 U.S. KIA, etc., our control of the countryside and the defense of the urban levels is now essentially at pre-August 1965 levels. We have achieved a stalemate at a high commitment."*

Yet it should be noted that Tet was also extremely costly for the Vietnamese nationalist forces, especially for the NLF. The anticipated urban uprisings that the attacks were meant to inspire did not happen. Moreover, in addition to the tremendous casualties they suffered in the attempt to take and hold cities (around 40,000, according to one estimate), the absence of NLF fighters in the

villages exposed their rural bases to attack. According to historian Marilyn Young, "In Long An province, for example, local guerrillas taking part in the May-June offensive had been divided into several sections. Only 775 out of 2,018 in one section survived; another lost all but 640 out of 1,430. The province itself was subjected to what one historian has called a 'My Lai from the Sky'—non-stop B-52 bombing."

The effect of Tet on domestic U.S. politics was swift and dramatic. Walter Cronkite, the anchor of "CBS Evening News" and considered the most respected figure in television journalism, was apparently furious when he heard about the Tet Offensive. "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war!" he is reported to have said. Cronkite went to Vietnam in late February and then in front of millions of American viewers said: "It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out, then, will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people...[who] did the best they could."

Johnson's personal popularity had been declining for two years. Tet decimated his credibility with the American public. Six weeks after the Tet Offensive began, "public approval of [Johnson's] overall performance dropped from 48 percent to 36 percent—and, more dramatically, endorsement for his handling of the war fell from 40 percent to 26 percent." Eugene McCarthy, a relatively obscure first-term U.S. senator from Minnesota who was for American withdrawal from Vietnam, nearly defeated Johnson in the February New Hampshire Democratic primary. Soon after McCarthy's new victory, Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.), a much more substantial threat for Johnson's renomination by the Democratic Party, announced that he too would be running for president on an antiwar platform. Robert McNamara, secretary of defense and an architect of the war in Vietnam, was replaced by Clark Clifford. Clifford, a longtime Washington lawyer and adviser to Democratic presidents, began a massive review of U.S. war policies in Vietnam that would quickly convince him of the need for the U.S. to get out.

The final blow to Johnson came from the very same people who had just recently endorsed his war policies, the U.S. State Department's Senior Informal Advisory Group—popularly known as the "wise men." The wise men were a group of the most senior advisers on foreign policy in the United States, many of whom were architects of the postwar world, including Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state, John J. McCloy, former American high commissioner for occupied Germany, and many others. They met with Johnson on March 18 and told him that his policies were in shambles and that U.S. interests demanded that the troops begin withdrawing from Vietnam. Johnson was stunned. He addressed the nation on March 31 and announced that he would not seek reelection as president. The presidential race was now wide open. The antiwar movement began to surge in the U.S. and American politics was dominated by the question of withdrawal from Vietnam. In November 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidency over Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president, by almost the same margin he had lost eight years earlier against Kennedy. Nixon won largely due to the impression given by his campaign that he had a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive was only the opening shot of a year in which the U.S. ruling class and its allies around the world faced the greatest challenges to its rule in a generation. In April, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and 100 cities rose in rebellion. In May, a student rebellion in Paris ignited a general strike by French workers, the largest in that country's history, putting back on the agenda the possibility of a workers' revolution in an advanced industrial country. Robert Kennedy was assassinated after winning the California primary in June. Mayor Daley's cops' brutal attack on antiwar demonstrators at the Democratic convention in Chicago drew the world's attention to political repression in America, while the Democrats, ignoring the wishes of their primary voters, nominated Johnson's prowar vice president Hubert Humphrey as the presidential nominee of their party. These brutal and treacherous events (all related in some way to the war in Vietnam) convinced a substantial number of political activists to embrace one form or another of revolutionary

politics in order to change the world. Meanwhile in Vietnam, the U.S. military started to report major disciplinary problems with its troops that marked the beginning of a soldiers' rebellion. Within a few years, the U.S. Army was no longer capable of waging a war on the ground and had to be withdrawn from Vietnam.

What do the events of four decades ago mean for antiwar activists today? The greatest lesson of Tet is the importance of the resistance of the victims of U.S. imperialism in bringing about the end of the war. The Vietnamese have a long and proud tradition of resistance to foreign domination from a thousand-year resistance to the Chinese to the defeat of the Japanese and the French during and after the Second World War. This tradition enabled them to withstand the American military onslaught, while the Tet Offensive broke the will of the United States government to continue the war.

The Vietnamese resistance also inspired many in the American antiwar movement, who drew a direct connection between the Vietnamese national struggle and the radical tradition in the United States. Dave Dellinger, a long time radical pacifist and a leading Vietnam antiwar activist, when brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in December 1968 told them:

*"I make a comparison between the Vietnamese people, who feel that there is no other way to defend the independence and the sanctity of their homeland than by the use of violence, I compare them to the American patriots under George Washington who also used violence. The word "terror" is a tough one, you know, what constitutes "terror." [Our patriots] applied methods similar to those of the NLF against the British and, also, by the way, against American Tories."*

Tet continues to haunt America's military planners to this day. In July of 2007, Major General Rick Lynch told reporters in the Green Zone in Baghdad, "We're concerned about some kind of Tet offensive that's going to affect the debate in Washington." We can only hope that it comes sooner than later.

**Joe Allen**

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\* From International Socialist Review, ISR Issue 57, January-February 2008:

<http://www.isreview.org/issues/57/feat-TET.shtml>

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