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1968: Tet and the watershed in Vietnam and its implications back in the U.S

Thursday 1 February 2018, by [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2018).

Fifty years ago, the Vietnamese resistance turned the tide against the American war effort, with profound implications back in the U.S., writes Eric Ruder, in the next article in SocialistWorker.org's yearlong series marking the 50th anniversary of 1968.

THE TET Offensive first came to the attention of the U.S. military in spectacular fashion hours after it began on the night of January 30, 1968, when 19 Vietnamese resistance fighters blew a hole in the perimeter wall of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

They held the main embassy grounds for about six hours before U.S. military reinforcements arrived, and killed or captured the fighters. But this was only the brashest part of a massive and carefully planned uprising against the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam.

The U.S. first began sending thousands of military personnel to serve as “advisers” to the South Vietnamese Army (SVA) in the 1950s. The Pentagon understood its mission as buttressing the South Vietnamese dictatorship after French colonial control was broken in 1954 and Vietnam was partitioned between a pro-Western regime in the south and communist North Vietnam.

In the context of the Cold War rivalry with the USSR, fears of a “domino effect” that toppled U.S.-backed regimes throughout the region provided the Washington with all the justification it needed for the war effort.

With the French military in retreat, it fell to the U.S. to prop up the South Vietnamese regime.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson ordered 3,500 Marines to join 23,000 advisers already on the ground. Three years later, as Tet began, the U.S. had committed an extraordinary amount of resources to the war: Some 500,000 troops deployed in Vietnam, more than a million tons of bombs dropped, 200,000 Vietnamese killed and 20,000 U.S. troops dead.

By comparison, U.S. troop levels during the 2003 invasion of Iraq never reached more than 180,000.

IN 1967, the U.S. antiwar movement had organized one of its most militant actions yet. Roughly 100,000 predominantly young protesters marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the Pentagon on October 21. There, protesters scuffled with military police amassed outside [[1](#)], hundreds or perhaps thousands attempted to enter the Pentagon, hundreds more were beaten, and 700 arrests were made.

Yet after two years of protest, the antiwar movement had not been able to mount sufficient forces or sway public opinion enough to significantly dent Johnson's war effort.

On January 1, 1968, the London Times reported: “President Johnson is entering the New Year in fine

fettle. The Gallup Poll assessed that 46 percent of the people approved of the way he is handling his job and the Harris Polls showed surprising support for Vietnam policies.”

The White House and the Pentagon had mostly succeeded in portraying the war effort as achieving slow but steady progress, with the likelihood that it could be wrapped up within a year—though by early 1968, they had been saying the same thing for a few years.

The Tet Offensive changed all that.

In the weeks leading up to the uprising, the Vietnamese resistance forces started infiltrating thousands of fighters into the cities, which was easily done since it was customary for people to travel long distances to visit relatives for the Vietnamese New Year’s holiday, called Tet.

Perhaps more impressive was that no one tipped off the South Vietnamese military or U.S. forces about what was afoot.

In addition, the resistance movement showed tactical brilliance in conducting attacks on far-flung provinces, in particular Khe Sanh, to draw U.S. military forces away from the cities in the weeks leading up to the uprising.

WHILE A tiny resistance unit attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, a combined force of some 70,000 fighters—made up of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers as well as members of the National Liberation Front (NLF) based in South Vietnam—attacked 34 of 44 provincial capitals and 64 district capitals.

For three weeks, 1,000 NLF fighters held the capital city of Saigon in the face of a combined U.S.-SVA force of 11,000.

Similarly, the resistance held the ancient city of Hue for three weeks, and the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were only able to retake control by deploying the utmost brutality.

According to antiwar journalist Nick Turse’s book *Kill Anything That Moves*, the U.S. military deployed “an astonishing 600 tons of bombs, plus barrages from artillery and tank cannons” to regain Hue, destroying 80 percent of its built structures.

When it was all over, more than 14,000 civilians were dead, mainly due to U.S. firepower, and 627,000 were left homeless. “Nothing I saw during the Korean War, or in the Vietnam War so, has been as terrible, in terms of destruction and despair, as what I saw in Hue,” wrote Robert Shapen who toured Hue after it was retaken.

Six weeks into the counteroffensive against Tet, a company of U.S. soldiers massacred hundreds of unarmed villagers in the village of My Lai—which came to be the most infamous atrocity committed in a war of many atrocities.

The counteroffensive also became identified with the oxymoronic catchphrase that captured the barbarism of American vengeance. The commanding officer in charge of recapturing one small town explained the devastation to reporters by saying, “We had to destroy the town to save it.”

In the end, the U.S. dropped on South Vietnam alone more than double the tonnage of bombs dropped during all of the Second World War.

Summing up the meaning of Tet one year later in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger called it the “watershed of the American effort.

Henceforth, no matter how effective our actions the prevalent [American] strategy could no longer achieve its objective within a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people.”

THE TET Offensive also marked a turning point in terms of resistance within the U.S. military itself.

Before Tet, according to David Cortright’s *Soldiers in Revolt*, there had been a number of individual acts of conscience on the basis of the immorality of the war. The military typically responded with extremely harsh prison sentences on the order two to 10 years.

A few weeks after Tet, on February 13, the first group protest took place when “35 uncertain but determined soldiers gathered in front of the main post chapel [at Fort Jackson, South Carolina] for what had been advertised as a silent protest service against the war,” writes Cortright.

Not coincidentally, the first GI coffeehouse in the U.S. had opened a few weeks earlier [2], just miles away in Columbia, South Carolina, to give soldiers a place to gather and talk about the war away from the watchful eyes of the chain of command.

Six months later, the confidence and politicization of troops had grown dramatically. In August, more than 100 Black soldiers stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, gathered to discuss fighting racism in the military and their opposition to being deployed to Chicago to police planned protests of the Democratic National Convention.

The 43 who refused orders became known as the Fort Hood 43—most received only light jail terms because of the impressive support organized on behalf of their act of defiance.

In the years after Tet, the rebellion within the U.S. military began to undermine the reliability of the military’s effectiveness as a fighting force in Vietnam. With the growing realization that the war was unwinnable, soldiers became increasingly defiant when gung-ho officers ordered them to carry out missions they thought had little chance of success.

Outright refusals and de facto combat avoidance—when soldiers turned the military’s strategy of “search and destroy” into “search and avoid” efforts in the field to stay away from engaging the enemy—grew markedly after Tet.

Officers who failed to understand this dynamic and forced troops to carry out tactically stupid missions anyway were threatened and even murdered. The word “fragging”—rolling a fragmentation grenade under the bunk of a gung-ho officer who failed to respect the troops’ veto—entered the U.S. military lexicon.

By June 1971, the Armed Forces Journal was reporting with alarm: “Our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinous...[C]onditions [exist] among American forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by...the collapse of the Tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917.”

As Joel Geier documented in an *International Socialist Review* article titled “Vietnam: The Soldiers’ Revolt,” [3] the radicalization of the troops reached dramatic levels:

“In a remarkable letter, 40 combat officers wrote to President Nixon in July 1970 to advise him that”the military, the leadership of this country—are perceived by many soldiers to be almost as much our enemy as the VC [Viet Cong] and the NVA”...

Fort Ord's [antiwar GI newspaper] Right-On-Post proclaimed that GIs had to free themselves and all exploited people from the oppression of the military, that "we recognize our true enemy...It is the capitalists who see only profit...They control the military which sends us off to die. They control the police who occupy the black and brown ghettos."

NOT LONG before the Tet Offensive, two of the best-known African Americans figures in the world—Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali—had come out against the U.S. war in Vietnam.

King delivered his "Beyond Vietnam" speech on April 4, 1967, at New York's Riverside Church. The speech shocked his friends and allies, as well as top Democrats, including Johnson, who had considered King an ally.

King insisted the war wasn't a mistake, but "a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit." He fused the issues of civil rights, poverty and the U.S. war in Vietnam in a way that terrified the political establishment.

When "profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered," he said.

Ali put the point more directly: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong." When confronted by white students justifying the war as a defense of democracy, one newsreel shows him replying [4], "I'm not going to help nobody get something Negroes don't have. If I'm going to die, I'll die now right here fighting you...My enemy is the white people, not Viet Congs or Chinese or Japanese...You won't even stand up for me in America for my religious beliefs!"

So when Tet happened, the groundwork had already been laid. As Joe Allen wrote in his book *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost*:

"Activists who had begun with a moral revulsion against U.S. atrocities in Vietnam became by 1968 staunch opponents of American imperialism..."

Many who had begun with illusions in the Democratic Party became disillusioned with liberals' support for the war, and moved toward find a politics independent of the two-party system. Many who hoped at first only to "stop the war" became critical of the entire economic, political and social system.

Inspired by the Vietnamese national struggle and various other anti-imperialist struggles in the "Third World," they became anticapitalist revolutionaries searching for answers to how the United States could be fundamentally transformed."

The Tet Offensive was an essential catalyst of this process—though a crucial question remained: If Johnson and then Nixon refused to bring the troops home and continued expanding the war, what social force was capable of compelling the U.S. military to stop its genocidal war against the people of Vietnam?

In early 1968, the Yippie wing of the antiwar movement and those sections of the left guided by Maoism dismissed the U.S. working class as entirely bought off, too interested in color television, beer and automobiles to fight the system. Instead, they looked to the guerrilla struggles and peasant insurgencies that had succeeded in waging anti-colonial struggles around the world.

At the same time, many in those same circles looked to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party as the most practical and surest way to stop the war.

In the coming years, the rebellion in the U.S. working class would expose such disdain as shortsighted. But even by the close of 1968, this worldview was coming under pressure.

At the Democratic national convention in Chicago in August, the party establishment showed no remorse in using anti-democratic measures inside and naked repression outside to ensure that delegates “chose” the right candidate.

Still, in May, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit formed to fuse anti-racist demands of Black workers with class demands in the world’s largest auto factories. And the revolt in the U.S. military showed the growing consciousness of Black and white “workers in uniform.”

But it was the antiwar movement, the revolt inside the U.S. military and, most of all, the Vietnamese resistance that ended the Vietnam War—and it was the Tet Offensive that showed the way.

Eric Ruder

P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2018/01/30/1968-tet-and-the-watershed-in-vietnam>

Footnotes

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/19/the-day-anti-vietnam-war-protesters-tried-to-levitate-the-pentagon/?utm_term=.bddf04112bb4

[2] https://socialistworker.org/2007-2/656/656_10_Coffeehouses.shtml

[3] http://www.isreview.org/issues/09/soldiers_revolt.shtml

[4] http://www.isreview.org/issues/09/soldiers_revolt.shtml