

North Vietnam's 1967 Planning for the 1968 TET Offensive

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“For us... 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.”

General Vo Nguyen Giap

Background

The year 1967 was a year of decision for the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi. Several developments during this year caused the communist regime to make the momentous decision to launch a nation-wide attack against the political, administrative and military centers of the South Vietnamese government in an effort to bring down that government and force the United States to negotiate a peace agreement favorable to Hanoi. There has been an ongoing debate in the West about the rationale used by the North Vietnamese to launch their TET “General Offensive – General Uprising” campaign, but as yet there has been no definitive evidence revealed as to the exact reasoning behind their decision. Until researchers have unfettered access to the archives in Hanoi and to those who participated in the decision-making, we will probably never know why the decision was made. However, the author will attempt to provide a plausible rationale for the decision to launch the TET Offensive, based upon recent research and his personal knowledge, obtained from interviews with several communist political cadres and the reporting of the highest level CIA penetration of COSVN during the war.

Recent research, using North Vietnamese documents, articles and interviews by Merle Pribbenow and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, has provided fresh insights into the official North Vietnamese reasoning for the TET Offensive, the key actors who made that decision, and the strategy

behind it.¹ However, like most official communist party sources, it is difficult to ascertain with any degree of accuracy whether or not these official documents represent the truth or simply a means of substantiating the official party line. Many of the contentions in these recently released documents, articles and books contain plausible arguments; but as stated earlier, until there is unfettered access to both the party archives and the people who did the planning for the offensive, it remains speculation as to the who, why, and how surrounding this pivotal event.

For the Americans and their South Vietnamese Allies, 1967 was the “Year of the Offense,” where the Americans executed several large, multi-division offensive operations designed to fix and destroy the main force units of the enemy while the Army of Vietnam (ARVN) was primarily engaged in pacification operations. There were 485,300 American troops in South Vietnam and they launched several significant operations in 1967, such as Operation Cedar Falls in January which was designed to clear the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon; and later in February-May, Operation Junction City, which cleared War Zone C in Tay Ninh Province and drove the Central Office South Vietnam (COSVN) out of the country into Cambodia. In addition to these major operations, numerous other sweep operations were conducted in other parts of South Vietnam, most notably in the northern five provinces of I Corps. In May, the new pacification program for South Vietnam, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program was formed and was largely in place by the end of the year. Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against North Vietnam,

¹ Pribbenow, Merle L., “General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 TET Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp. 1-33; and, Nguyen, Lien-Hang T., *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012, pp. 87-101.

continued to inflict substantial damage on the North Vietnamese, but failed to stop the infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam or force the North Vietnamese to curtail their aggression in the South.²

The Decision – Why?

The decision to launch the TET Offensive has been clouded in mystery ever since it was carried out. Who actually was behind the plan of attack is also subject to debate. For many years the names of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap were invoked as the masterminds behind the plan.³ More recent research has diminished the influence of Ho and Giap in the decision process and attributed the plan to Le Duan and his allies in the Party: Le Duc Tho, Truong Chinh, and Tran Quoc Hoan.⁴ The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough analysis of the key actors in the decision to launch the TET Offensive, but it appears to the author that the more recent research is more plausible as to who was really behind the decision. What is apparent is the plan for the TET Offensive in 1968 saw its origins in 1964 when the communists created Plan X. This plan called for the capture of the Saigon-Gia Dinh metropolitan area using VC commando units and five VC infantry battalions. The mission of the commando units was to infiltrate Saigon and attack key GVN facilities and foment a general uprising. The five VC battalions would be positioned outside the city in blocking positions to prevent ARVN units from reacting to the commando attacks and to reinforce the commando units, if needed. This plan was hastily developed to take advantage of the chaos created by the assassination of President Diem in November

² Bluhm, Raymond K. editor, The Vietnam War: A Chronology of War, (New York: Universe Publishing, 2010, p. 139.

³ Karnow, Stanley, Vietnam A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War. New York: The Viking Press, 1983, pp. 535-536; Also see, Davidson, Phillip B., Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988, pp. 440-450; and Giap: The General Who Defeated America in Vietnam. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, pp. 156-161.

⁴ Nguyen, pp. 94-109; also, Pribbenow, et. al.

1963.⁵ The intervention of the United States in 1965 caused Plan X to be shelved before it could be executed. Like the plan of 1968, Plan X called for a mass uprising of the citizens in the capital area and the rapid formulation of a coalition government dominated by the Lao Dong Party. It was also intended to dissuade the Americans from intervening in the war with ground troops. In the planning for TET 1968, Plan X was used as a template, although some radical adjustments were made based upon the changed military and political situation in South Vietnam.

According to the official explanation for the decision to launch the TET Offensive, the Lao Dong Party's decision was based upon an analysis of what the communists refer to as the "correlation of forces," a strategic analysis of the political, economic and military forces at play and how to take advantage of these forces. This analysis was outlined in several articles, allegedly penned by General Giap in the spring of 1967. The "official" reasoning behind the decision, and one put forth by North Vietnamese historians today, is the party came to the conclusion that 'favorable conditions' inside South Vietnam were ripe for exploitation and 1968 would be the year to take advantage of these conditions and strike a decisive blow. The favorable conditions mentioned by the North Vietnamese were: The failure of the American attrition strategy to achieve a quick victory, the American and ARVN losses in battles that took place in 1966 and 1967, the failure of the American bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and the inability of the GVN to pacify the rural population.⁶ A quite different reason for the offensive has been given by the South Vietnamese military in their post-1968 analysis. They posited that the motivation behind the decision by Hanoi to launch the offensive was General Giap's concern over a possible expansion of the war beyond South Vietnam's borders by the Americans, and fears

⁵ Pribbenow, p. 4.

⁶ Nguyen, p. 89.

about the new GVN pacification program, called Phung Hoang by the South Vietnamese and Phoenix by the Americans.⁷

While we may never have a definitive answer to the question of why TET 1968 was chosen for the “General Offensive – General Uprising,” it is fairly obvious that the reasoning given by the North Vietnamese has several significant flaws in it, and may very well be false. Many of the assumptions made by the North Vietnamese in their analysis appear to be unrealistic and do not reflect an objective appraisal of the actual conditions in South Vietnam in 1967. Their official rationale seems to be more a justification for absolving the communist leadership for the failure of the offensive. There is compelling evidence, provided by defectors and spies that the reasoning given by the South Vietnamese military was more accurate than that provided in the official North Vietnamese histories. For instance, the People’s Army of Vietnam, the PAVN, lost all of their main engagements during 1967, suffering severe losses and causing them to abandon several key base areas inside South Vietnam. Furthermore, COSVN documents captured by the Americans, and interviews with Hoi Chanh (ralliers) and communist POWs indicated there were significant personnel shortfalls in most PAVN and VC main force and local units due to attrition and desertions and these shortfalls in manpower were weakening the PAVN’s ability to conduct mobile operations.⁸

Probably the most detrimental event that the communists suffered during 1967 was the abandonment of the COSVN headquarters in War Zone C and the movement of this vital command and control organization to new, dispersed locations in Cambodia. This development not only

⁷ The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam’s Generals, Edited by Lewis Sorley, Texas Tech University Press, 2010, p. 467.

⁸ CIA Intelligence Memorandum: Viet Cong Manpower Problems, March 1967.

increased the distance between COSVN and the key target of Saigon, but it also disrupted the political and logistical mechanisms needed to conduct large scale, mobile operations inside South Vietnam.

Furthermore, it complicated the work of the communications-liaison infrastructure COSVN had painstakingly developed for the transmission of directives and orders to their military and political organizations inside South Vietnam, a problem that would not be fully corrected before TET 1968 and would adversely affect the execution of their plans for the offensive. Far from the propitious situation described by Hanoi in their official histories, the trends were not favorable for Hanoi and getting worse in 1967. It is far more likely that the Lao Dong leadership recognized this and this caused them to adopt a “go for broke” military solution to the problem before the situation became worse.

In the aftermath of the TET Offensive, intelligence was obtained that provided a very plausible set of reasons behind the TET Offensive. This intelligence was provided by the most valuable spy the American CIA recruited during the war, a spy controlled for ten years by the CIA who had access to the highest level plans of COSVN.⁹ This spy, known to only a handful of people, was codenamed “Hackle” but he was more commonly referred to as “The Tay Ninh Source” by those who were privy to his reporting. His real name was Vo Van Ba and he was a VC district-level political cadre who lived in Tay Ninh Province just a few miles north of the provincial capital on the southern border with War Zone C. Because provincial level Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) cadres were being neutralized by the Phoenix Program or forced to relocate to Cambodia in 1967, the Lao Dong Party relied on lower-level VCI in South Vietnam to carry out COSVN-directed tasks. This situation

⁹ Finlayson, Andrew Col., *Rice Paddy Recon: A Marine Officer's Second Tour in Vietnam, 1968-1970*. Jefferson NC: McFarland and Company, 2014, pp. 234-235. Also see, “The Fate of an Internal Spy”, *People's Army Newspaper*, 22 July, p. 7 for a North Vietnamese perspective on this CIA spy.

allowed Mr. Ba to travel to COSVN headquarters in Cambodia on a regular basis to receive briefings on major COSVN plans. From 1967 to 1975 he provided the CIA with all of the major COSVN directives and plans, often before they were disseminated to district and village party chapters. In early 1969, he provided the CIA with the rationale given by COSVN for the TET Offensive, one that differed greatly from that provided by Hanoi, then or now.¹⁰

Far from the “favorable conditions” in South Vietnam that the North Vietnamese have cited in their official histories for deciding to launch the TET Offensive, Mr. Ba provided a very different rationale behind that decision. When he was called to COSVN headquarters in Cambodia in December 1967 to be briefed on the upcoming offensive, he was told that Hanoi had three main reasons for the offensive and none of them had anything to do with “favorable conditions.”

First, he said the Lao Dong Party had come to the conclusion in the spring of 1967 that the military balance in South Vietnam was shifting in favor of the Americans and the South Vietnamese government. The party was especially worried about the loss of their key base areas in South Vietnam, forcing their main force units to move to areas where they were far removed from the populated areas of South Vietnam. Their PAVN units were spending more and more time in Laos and Cambodia or isolated base areas on the borders with those two countries, thus making it more difficult to supply these units from sources in South Vietnam or to mass and move into South Vietnam. This was especially true for the key areas of III and IV Corps. Mr. Ba also reported that his COSVN colleagues told him they were very concerned about the losses

¹⁰ The COSVN rationale for the TET Offensive was given to the author by Mr. Ba’s American CIA case officer in interviews in 1970 and 1972. The author has also relied on his personal interview with a high ranking COSVN political officer captured inside Cambodia in May 1970.

they had suffered in 1966 and 1967 due to B-52 raids and the effect these bombing raids were having on morale.

Second, the American spy said the new American/GVN pacification policy, The Phoenix Program, which was being implemented throughout the country in 1967, was viewed by COSVN as an existential threat to the Lao Dong Party's influence and control of the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam. The communist leadership was highly dependent upon the VCI in these villages and hamlets, and the Phoenix Program threatened to destroy the VCI and allow the GVN to establish a permanent political and security presence in the villages and hamlets for the first time. Lao Dong doctrine called for the mobilization of the rural population under the leadership of Lao Dong political cadres, but if these cadres were killed, captured, or forced to abandon their villages, the influence and control of the rural population would pass from the Lao Dong to the GVN. The primary mission of the VCI was to provide intelligence, recruits, and logistical support for the PAVN and VC main force units. Any reduction in the VCI's ability to provide this support threatened Hanoi's ability to carry out large-scale, sustained, mobile operations inside South Vietnam. The party had obtained a copy of the Phoenix pacification plan in early 1967 and they were fully aware of the danger this new program posed.

Finally, and most importantly, Mr. Ba contended that the North Vietnamese intelligence services had obtained the outline of an American plan to invade the Panhandle of Laos in late 1968, with the mission of cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the vicinity of Tchepone. The leadership in Hanoi feared that the Americans would establish a permanent presence of American ground troops there, thus preventing the movement of PAVN forces and war supplies moving south into

South Vietnam. There were two “choke points” on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos where geography caused the road and trail network to be funneled into relatively small areas, making it easy to block. One was in a 15 square mile area centered on Tchepone and the other 15 miles southeast of Tchepone in an area near the village of Muong Nong, an area referred to by the Americans as the “Four Corners.” If American ground forces occupied these two choke points on the trail, the North Vietnamese reasoned that it would no longer be possible to maintain the flow of men and supplies needed to wage mobile, conventional warfare in South Vietnam. The PAVM military required approximately 8,000 troops and 500 tons of ammunition each month to be transported via the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam just to make up for their losses and to maintain their operational tempo. If the Ho Chi Minh Trail was cut and US forces occupied permanent positions astride the choke points in Laos, the Lao Dong Party feared their entire strategy for the use of conventional military units inside South Vietnam would be in jeopardy. Consequently, the Lao Dong felt compelled to do everything possible to thwart this possible invasion of Laos. They came to the conclusion that the only way to do this was to launch the TET Offensive, causing the Americans to abandon their plans for the invasion of Laos and to force them to adopt a new strategy which concentrated their forces away from the border areas and focused on securing the coastal lowlands and urban areas. If the Americans were forced to adopt this new defensive strategy, the Lao Dong hoped it would allow them to continue to wage a war of attrition against the Americans indefinitely and erode the will of the American public for continuing the war.

One indication that this rationale had merit was the mysterious emphasis Hanoi placed on the US Marine Base at Khe Sanh. Some have contended that the sole purpose of the attacks on Khe Sanh in late 1967

and early 1968 was to draw American forces away from the populated areas of South Vietnam and tie them down far from Hanoi's targets for the offensive. The problem with this explanation is it does not make any military sense. The PAVN employed four of their most experienced and combat capable divisions against a small, regimental-size Marine unit at Khe Sanh. Any competent military planner knew that only a fraction of that force was needed to tie down the Marines at Khe Sanh. Since such a large PAVN force was used to lay siege to Khe Sanh, there had to be another reason for this excessive communist investment of combat power. Employing such a large PAVN force against such a small American force made little sense when one considers how much more useful these divisions would have been employed in the coastal lowlands of I Corps against two of Hanoi's three main targets of the offensive - Hue and Danang.

Some have contended that the Battle of Khe Sanh was an effort to replicate the strategic Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, where the loss of most of the French mobile forces in that battle led to the victory of the Viet Minh, the Geneva peace accords, and the removal of French forces from Indochina. However, North Vietnam has never suggested that their siege of Khe Sanh had this as their objective and Mr. Ba's reporting never mentioned such an objective when he was briefed by COSVN on the plan of attack.

This raises the question of why did the PAVN risk four of their best divisions against a target that was so militarily insignificant? And, why did they continue to take heavy losses by maintaining these elite divisions in the Khe Sanh area well after TET had passed and not use them to exploit their success in Hue City? The obvious answer, according to Mr. Ba, was the Hanoi leadership was determined to

prevent General Westmoreland from using Khe Sanh as both the forward headquarters and the logistical hub for the invasion of Laos. They knew this because they had the plan for that invasion and that plan clearly identified Khe Sanh as crucial to the success of the operation.

Furthermore, according to Mr. Ba, Hanoi knew that General Westmoreland intended to brief President Johnson in the fall of 1967 on the Laos invasion plan and to seek LBJ's permission to execute the plan in late 1968. They were also aware that Westmoreland would request an additional 200,000 American troops needed to carry out the plan. What they did not know was LBJ would refuse to approve both the Laos invasion plan and the increase in American troops.¹¹

The Preparations

While contingency plans for a "General Offensive-General Uprising" were probably worked on by PAVN planners for many years prior to 1967, it is safe to assume that specific planning and preparations for the TET offensive took place in earnest during the second half of 1967. From both North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese sources, we know the following:¹²

In April 1967, the Politburo and the Central Military Party Committee discussed the policy for achieving success in the war in the south and directed the PAVN General Staff to send cadre groups to Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam to assess the situation and to encourage

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the importance of Khe Sanh and the American plan to invade southern Laos, see the author's book, *Rice Paddy Recon: A Marine Officer's Second Tour in Vietnam, 1968-1970*, pp. 281-296.

¹² The author's sources for the North Vietnamese preparations for the TET Offensive were: Pribbenow, pp. 206-224; Nguyen, pp. 87-109; Sorley, pp. 464-467; and Davidson, 443-445, plus unpublished research papers by Merle Pribbenow on North Vietnamese logistics during the war.

commanders to ready their forces and stage supplies for a major, strategic offensive.

In June, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the commander of PAVN military forces in South Vietnam was recalled to Hanoi to brief the party leadership on the situation in South Vietnam and to advocate for the approval of his plans for the Great Offensive – Great Uprising. Other military and political cadres were also recalled to Hanoi to assist in the formulation of specific portions of the plan. As a result of General Thanh’s briefings and input from the leading cadres from South Vietnam, the Politburo approved the decision to achieve “a decisive victory” in 1968.

On 6 July, General Nguyen Chi Thanh died under mysterious circumstances in Hanoi, allegedly from a heart attack. His death allowed General Giap to call into question the plan devised by Thanh for the TET Offensive. According to some sources, Giap did not think it was necessary to launch a large-scale attack throughout South Vietnam. He feared that conditions in South Vietnam were not yet favorable for such a risky endeavor. He favored a more gradualist approach that did not risk the destruction of the PAVN main force units and relied more on traditional Maoist guerrilla warfare doctrine. He was not alone in his fears; many party members shared his views on the potential damage this high risk plan entailed. Additionally, the Chinese advisors with the North Vietnamese military were also opposed to the plan. The advocates for a more modest investment of men and resources urged caution about abandoning the current attrition-based strategy in favor of one of decisive engagement with the Americans and South Vietnamese. They questioned the contention that all of the conditions for such a dramatic change of strategy were met.

Despite the opposition to the plan, the Politburo approved the plan as briefed by the PAVN General Staff in July. The plan called for simultaneous surprise attacks throughout South Vietnam with major attacks carried out against the populated centers of Saigon, Hue and Danang. It also called for the use of PAVN units against American and ARVN units to severely damage these units and to draw them away from the main areas of attack. In late July, the Central Military Party Committee directed a number of preparatory measures be implemented to better prepare the PAVN to conduct “large-scale battles of annihilation aimed at destroying American forces.” These measures included increasing the movement of ammunition stocks from North Vietnam to base camps and supply depots inside South Vietnam; reinforcing PAVN infantry divisions with additional artillery, rockets, and light tanks; increasing signals security measures; initiating covert reconnaissance of urban targets; and conducting political and military training for VC and PAVN units with a focus on warfare in urban terrain and civil administration of urban areas.

During the summer of 1967 the PAVN organizational structure and equipment of their strategic mobile divisions were strengthened. Specifically, the 308th, 304th, 320th, and 312th PAVN Divisions, were upgraded with the latest Soviet and Chinese weapons systems so they would be better prepared to engage American ground forces in sustained, decisive battles. In addition, the PAVN expanded the Sapper Branch of the PAVN to 3,835 soldiers and accelerated their training in anticipation of the need for these elite specialists to attack key political and military targets inside South Vietnam. Fearing a possible invasion of North Vietnam in response to their offensive, actions were taken to strengthen

their reserve formations and to protect their coastal areas from an amphibious raid, in particular in the vicinity of the coastal city of Vinh.

Since the plan required an increase in PAVN troops and military supplies, the 559 Transportation Group, was directed to reorganize its forces to better support a surge along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In addition to increasing the capacity of the bivouac sites and maintenance facilities along the trail, a total of 2,959 kilometers of vehicle-capable roads were completed by the end of 1967 and the number of trucks devoted to the movement of supplies on the trail was increased from 3,570 to 5,372. Transportation Group 559 was directed to transport 61,000 tons of military supplies south over the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the 1967 dry season in Laos.

Because the transport of both men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam was essential to the success of the plan for the TET Offensive, the North Vietnamese took great pains to ensure that the transportation routes used for this movement of men and supplies were safe from interdiction. They strengthened their air defenses along these routes, both in North Vietnam and Laos, and moved anti-aircraft units into South Vietnam to protect important staging areas and bases, such as the A Shau Valley west of Hue City and the Cambodian border northwest of Saigon.

The plan of attack was very complex and required a degree of nationwide coordination that was new to Hanoi. In 1967 Hanoi took several significant organizational steps that they felt were needed to ensure they had the command and control infrastructure in place to coordinate such a complex plan. For instance, COSVN dissolved the communist Military Region 7 and the Saigon-Gia Dinh Military Region and created six sub

regions in their place, assigning experienced military commanders and staff personnel to each sub region. These new sub regions near Saigon were reinforced with a number of sapper and commando units trained and equipped for urban warfare, along with 2 to 4 main force battalions and specialized communications personnel. The sub region battalions were termed “Spearhead Battalions” since they were given the mission of relieving the sapper and commando units within 48 hours and exploiting any local successes these specialized units achieved.

In one of these sub regions, Sub Region 6, which contained the precincts of Saigon City, COSVN assigned 11 sapper and commando teams to three distinct concentrations on the east, south and north sides of the city. These units were organized and equipped to conduct simultaneous attacks on Saigon from many different directions. This use of both sapper and conventional forces in each sub region was designed to provide both a “spearhead” and in-depth deployment of forces with the aim of complicating the defense of Saigon and ensuring effective command and control of these disparate units as they approached their targets inside Saigon proper. To reinforce the “Spearhead Battalions” attacking Saigon, several PAVN conventional units, such as the 88th Infantry Regiment from the Central Highlands and the 568th Infantry Regiment, along with several artillery, signal, sapper, and chemical defense units from North Vietnam were sent by COSVN to assist with the attack on Saigon. These regular PAVN units assigned to the Saigon sub region were given the mission of blocking American and ARVN divisions located north, northwest, and east of Saigon so they could not interfere with the sub region forces attacking the city. In addition, the 5th, 7th and 9th PAVN divisions in eastern Cambodia were assigned the mission of reinforcing the units fighting inside Saigon. By December, the plans for the movement of these divisions into South Vietnam and

their occupation of forward staging areas were completed. Finally, COSVN established the First Forward Command Headquarters to coordinate the eastern and northern wings of the PAVN forces and the local forces inside Saigon.

Since two of the three main targets of the offensive, Hue and Danang, were located in the communist Military Region 5, the Lao Dong made some major adjustments in July to both the command and control organizations in the areas surrounding these two cities and began moving PAVN reinforcements into base areas within striking distance of the cities. To provide enhanced command and control for the main attack against Danang, Hanoi formed Front 4 and positioned this organization in Base Area 116 southwest of Danang. They also reinforced Front 4 with an additional artillery (rocket) regiment, several PAVN sapper battalions, and three infantry regiments from North Vietnam. They disbanded several VC regional battalions and used the soldiers from these battalions to reinforce the 2nd PAVN Division, which had suffered heavy losses during the summer of 1967. The 2nd PAVN Division was given the mission of reinforcing the VC sapper units attacking Danang and to block any American or ARVN units from entering Danang once the attacks had been launched.

To better coordinate the attack on Hue City, the Party Central Committee approved several command and organizational changes. They dissolved the Thua Thien provincial party committee and military units, and placed all of the party district committees under the Region 5 Party Committee. This was done with the intention of streamlining the command and control of the attack on Hue. They also formed several subordinate “Groups” and gave these groups specific missions and areas of responsibility. For instance, Group 5 was given responsibility for the

control of the attack on Hue and its three surrounding districts, and provided with three infantry battalions, two sapper battalions and 14 commando teams. Other groups were assigned to key areas that either supported the main attack on Hue or isolated American and ARVN units from interfering with the attack. Large reinforcements from North Vietnam were also sent to western Quang Tri Province to cut the strategically important Route 9 and isolate the Khe Sanh Combat Base.

Concurrent with these organizational and command and control changes, conferences were held in Region 5 in August and October to review and strengthen the political activities of the main forces to be employed in the offensive and to study the tactics and training needed to prepare PAVN units for combat in lowland and urban terrain.

Following the sudden death of General Nguyen Chi Thanh, many changes were made in July to the leadership of COSVN and Region 5 with senior Lao Dong Party officials placed in key leadership positions inside South Vietnam. Gen. Tran Van Tra was appointed to replace General Thanh as the commander of all communist forces under COSVN in South Vietnam and he was directed to make sure all the preparations for the offensive were taken by the southern cadres and military commanders.

In October, the Politburo worked on the final details of the plan for the TET Offensive. They also decided to achieve strategic surprise by launching their offensive during TET, not before or after the holiday as American and GVN analysts believed would be the case. They took this decision with the understanding that this would probably generate a public relations backlash since it would violate the TET cease fire they had agreed to and anger the population of South Vietnam who would

view such a violent and wide-spread attack during the most important family holiday for the Vietnamese as a serious violation of a cultural taboo. However, they were willing to risk a public relations backlash in order to achieve surprise.

On December 6, the Central Party Committee established a new command and control entity for the strategically important province of Quang Tri, the province just below the DMZ. This new organization was called “The Route 9 – Quang Tri Front Party Committee.” The name of this new front is indicative of the importance Hanoi placed on the only potential invasion route into southern Laos, Route 9. This strategically important road, which ran from Dong Ha in South Vietnam west to the town of Savannakhet on the Mekong River in Laos, was the only road that would enable the Americans to launch an invasion of southern Laos. In December, Hanoi reinforced this new front committee with four modern PAVN infantry divisions, five artillery regiments, three anti-aircraft regiments, an engineer regiment, a signal battalion, and four tank companies, making this the strongest concentration of PAVN combat power devoted to the offensive. In addition, Hanoi’s Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and one of Hanoi’s most able military commanders, Major General Tran Quy Hai, was placed in command of the military forces assigned to the Route 9-Quang Tri Front Party Committee.

Fatal Flaws in the Preparation Process

As 1967 came to a close, Hanoi had 278,000 personnel assigned to their combat forces in South Vietnam, organized into 190 maneuver battalions. Additionally, Unit 559 had transported, staged and distributed the latest infantry weapons to all of Hanoi’s main force units.

Such modern weapons as the AK-47 assault rifle, the RPD light machine gun, the 12.7mm and 37mm anti-aircraft weapons, the B-40 anti-tank rocket launcher, the PT-76 tank, and other modern Chinese and Soviet weapons were in the hands of the PAVN and VC units by the end of 1967. These weapons gave the communist units a distinct advantage in firepower over their ARVN adversaries who were equipped with largely obsolete World War II vintage American weapons.

While the planning and preparations for the TET Offensive were both meticulous and detailed, there were several fatal flaws, some of which must have been known to the planners in Hanoi and COSVN.

The first fatal flaw stemmed from the need to achieve strategic and tactical surprise. By December, all of the new Lao Dong military and political leaders were in place in South Vietnam and the planning for the offensive was complete. These activities had been done in strict secrecy, often at the expense of adequate time for the planning and coordination needed by subordinate military units and political cadres below regional level. Hanoi was willing to sacrifice coordination for secrecy, relying on the element of surprise to compensate for any planning or coordination shortfalls. Despite the extraordinary effort to keep the plan for the General Offensive-General Uprising a secret, at least three CIA spies reported the plan in some detail during the month of December, allowing American and ARVN commanders to take defensive actions that resulted in significant losses when the offensive was launched.

The attack on Danang failed completely due to intelligence provided by a CIA spy inside the Danang Central Committee.¹³ In Saigon, many PAVN units were unable to exploit the initial successes of VC sapper

¹³ Unpublished memoir of CIA officer Rudy Enders.

and commando units due to intelligence provided by signal and HUMINT sources. This intelligence allowed the American commander of III Corps, General Fred Weyand, to reposition American forces around Saigon and along PAVN approach routes into the city. His moves just a few days before TET prevented the PAVN divisions in Cambodia from reaching Saigon to take advantage of local VC successes in the city by VC sapper and commando units.¹⁴

Another result of the North Vietnamese penchant for secrecy at the expense of coordination was the premature initiation of the offensive by 24 hours in I and II Corps. The North Vietnamese ascribed these premature attacks to “calendar discrepancies” between North and South Vietnam for the start of the Lunar New Year.¹⁵ American sources have contended that General Giap delayed the timing of the attack 24 hours but did not give enough time for several regional commands to inform their units of this time change for D-day.¹⁶ In any event, these premature attacks alerted MACV and the GVN that the North Vietnamese had begun their offensive, thus reducing the element of surprise which was a major component of their plan.

Due to secrecy, VC district and village political cadres, the VCI, were not able to fulfill many of their tasks on time. They were given instructions to prepare bunkers and fighting positions for transiting PAVN and VC forces and to stage caches of food and ammunition along planned attack routes, but only given less than a month to do so. VC sapper and commando units, along with weapons and ammunition, were able to infiltrate into Saigon, Hue and Danang in the days leading up to

¹⁴ Sorley, Lewis, Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011. P.179

¹⁵ Nguyen, p. 108.

¹⁶ Davidson, p. 474.

TET, but not all of the VC units were able to be in place at other locations. PAVN units moved into forward base areas so they could rapidly move to reinforce these specialized units and take and hold district and provincial capitals, but in many cases these PAVN units found that the preparations for their movement were poorly supported by the VCI. PAVN units had to rely on local VCI to provide guides for the PAVN units as they moved into the populated areas and to stage adequate supplies of food and ammunition along the attack routes. Due to the plan's complexity, scope, and limited time devoted to informing subordinate units and VCI, many of the preparations needed were either delayed or not provided. Some PAVN units showed up at liaison points where they were to pick up their local guides and found there was no one to guide them. Other PAVN units had to wait for hours for guides to arrive, thus causing them to arrive late in their attack positions or to arrive too late to execute their missions. This was particularly true for the PAVN divisions moving from Cambodia into South Vietnam's III Corp and the PAVN divisions who were to support the attacks on Hue and Danang.

Keeping the distribution of the plan at the regional and above level until late December 1967 did not allow the VCI or many of the VC sapper and commando units to have enough time to adequately prepare their attacks. Since Hanoi wanted to maintain the fiction that the war in South Vietnam was an insurgency led by the National Liberation Front and not a civil war directed by North Vietnam, the Lao Dong did not use PAVN main force units from North Vietnam in the initial attacks, relying instead on southern guerrillas and combat units. This greatly diminished the combat power of the initial attacks and resulted in very high casualty rates for these VC units.

Compounding the problem of the lack of time for proper planning and preparation, was the unforeseen outcome of exposing the VCI to the American and GVN security services by using them to foment the uprising of the South Vietnamese population. When they surfaced during TET they lost their veil of secrecy, making it easy for the security services to begin the process of identifying them and arresting them. The Phoenix Program was quick to take advantage of this, resulting in the neutralization of many experienced communist political operatives and the destruction of many VC units. This expenditure of so many VCI and VC fighters during the offensive resulted in a greatly reduced role of the southern cadres and military units for the rest of the war.

Another serious flaw in the communist plan was the unexplained lack of any attempt to attack the billets of the senior American and ARVN leaders. The communists had very good intelligence where these billets were located and how they were protected, but for some unknown reason they avoided attacking them. This allowed the senior allied leadership to escape unharmed and to quickly implement effective counterattacks.¹⁷

On a very basic level, Hanoi's assumption that the political and social environment in South Vietnam was such that the population was ready to rise up and support the communists proved fatal. This clearly did not happen. The population of South Vietnam did not rally to the communists and no ARVN units defected. The North Vietnamese failed to achieve a single one of their stated goals for the TET Offensive. With the exception of the attacks on Hue and Saigon, every target for the TET Offensive was retaken by allied forces within one week. The communists failed to take and hold a single provincial capital or district

¹⁷ Davidson, p. 482.

town.¹⁸ If the “favorable conditions” used as a pretext for the offensive were accurate, surely the people of South Vietnam would have risen up against the GVN and the TET Offensive would have been a success. In reality, it was a military disaster. However, it did achieve a political goal not foreseen by the planners in Hanoi – the erosion of the will of the Americans to continue the war.

¹⁸ Sorley, p. 469.