

Chapter 8

The Tet Offensive

For over 20 years, government officials told the American people that they were winning the war in Indochina. Americans heard encouraging words about the war as far back as 1950, when General MacArthur predicted that 150,000 top French troops should end this war in 4 months." In 1951 President Harry Truman assured Americans that "the Communist attacks in Indochina have been stopped." Similar statements came from President Eisenhower, Attorney-General Robert Kennedy Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and of course, President Lyndon Johnson. Perhaps the most famous optimistic statement was made by U.S. commander, General Westmoreland, who assured Americans, "there is light in the end of the tunnel."

The Success Offensive

By 1967, many people both in and out of the government, had started to wonder how long the U.S. would be fighting in Vietnam. They saw too little progress over too many years. To make sure they would have a winning attitude, President Johnson started his 'Success Offensive'. Its purpose was to maintain popular support for the war. The President had computerized printouts published in the newspapers to prove that the U.S. was winning. These printouts showed that:

- there was a decrease in attacks by the Vietcong.
- more of the enemy were being killed in battle.
- more hamlets were 'pacified'.
- fewer soldiers from North Vietnam were coming into South Vietnam.

Officers were told to produce numbers to be processed into data by computers to show that we were winning the war. If they did not do that, they could be criticized for 'failing to have a winning attitude.'

All of this good news, as we shall see, came much closer to fooling the American people than the Vietcong.

North Vietnamese Strategy

As you remember, the Vietminh won the First Indochina War against France in 1954 with a surprise attack on Dienbienphu. The loss of Dienbienphu after eight years of fighting convinced the French that it was time to stop the war. As a result they made the best deal they could at the Geneva Conference in 1954 and pulled all of their forces out of Indochina.

In the summer of 1967, military planners in Hanoi led by General Giap were preparing a dramatic attack which they hoped would persuade the American people to end the war. The North Vietnamese were wise enough to realize that they could not win a battle against American forces similar to their victory over the French in Dienbienphu. Instead, they planned a

simultaneous attack on Saigon and nearly all of the major cities and towns in South Vietnam. They anticipated that this coordinated attack would lead to a sudden mass uprising against the Government of South Vietnam. Failing a mass uprising, such an attack might, at the very least, cause Americans to oppose the war. For tactical as well as political reasons the attack was planned for the Tet (lunar New Year) celebrations, the longest and most important Vietnamese holiday.

During previous Tet holidays both sides had stopped fighting for three days. During those holidays, one half of the South Vietnamese army often returned to their homes to celebrate with friends and family. In this year the Tet holiday came six weeks before the voters of New Hampshire would decide who would represent their state in the Democratic and Republican Presidential Convention later that year. Not entirely by accident the Tet Offensive was timed for the moment the American political system was most open to change.

Preparations for the Tet Offensive

The planned Tet offensive involved about a combined 67,000 Vietcong and Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam, about one-third of their entire armed forces. It required a massive movement of men and supplies over hundreds of miles of jungle trails coupled with careful coordination of separate units in widely scattered parts of the country. The Vietminh and Vietcong had no planes, tanks, trucks, helicopters, or sophisticated communications equipment. Yet they planned an attack against an army of nearly 1,000,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and civil defense units and over 500,000 U.S. servicemen. The U.S. forces commanded the most modern and sophisticated military equipment and communications gear ever produced and included 2,600 airplanes, 3,000 helicopters, and 3,500 armed vehicles.

The planning and preparations for the Tet attack were made right under the noses of the American forces and the ARVN [Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam]. Thousands of people must have known about it, but gave no warning either to the U.S. or to the South Vietnamese.

The Tet Offensive in Saigon

The attacks were launched on January 30, 1968, striking some one-hundred towns and cities. The most dramatic success of the Tet offensive was the attack on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. Imagine the impact on American citizens who had been led to believe that the enemy was on the verge of defeat. Now the evidence was as clear as the picture on the TV screen; that not even the American embassy in Saigon, headquarters for U.S. diplomats, was safe. A suicide squad of some 19 Vietcong had blasted its way through the high walls surrounding the embassy compound. The squad held out for six hours until finally silenced by helicopter gunships who left their bullet riddled corpses strewn all over the lawns and walks outside of the embassy.

The Vietcong who invaded Saigon itself were not so easily removed. Some five battalions had infiltrated into the city along with several weeks' supply of food and ammunition. It took weeks to end their determined resistance. In the process, American planes and artillery destroyed whole sections of Saigon, including the captured radio station and the only low-income housing project in the nation. Although they were completely unsuccessful in starting a revolution against the GVN, the Vietcong had started to organize their own governments in some sections of the city.

The Tet Offensive and Counterattacks in Hue and Elsewhere

Other cities in South Vietnam were also hit hard and in some cases with more success than in Saigon. In the ancient Vietnamese capital city of Hue, the Vietcong and DRV forces scored their greatest triumph. Despite the 500 and 700 pound bombs dropped on the city, the communist forces remained in Hue for most of the month. By the time they were driven out, some 10,000 soldiers and civilians in Hue were killed. The city was reduced to rubble and rotting corpses.

When the last of the communists were finally out of Hue a horrible sight awaited returning citizens. The Vietcong had arrested some 3,000 noncombatants (supposedly 'enemy agents') and brutally murdered them by bashing in their heads with clubs and sticks or shooting them from close range. This inexcusable mass murder served to support the argument of those who believed the United States must remain in Vietnam to prevent a 'blood bath' which would be directed primarily against South Vietnamese who had cooperated with the United States and served in the South Vietnamese army and/or government.

In another battle, in the fertile, southern Mekong delta section of Vietnam, allied forces completely destroyed a town in order to drive out the communist forces. An American official explained this event to a questioning reporter with the often-quoted words:

*We had to destroy it [the town] in order to save it.*¹⁷

*Some one-hundred towns were 'saved' from the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops at the cost of 165,000 Vietnamese civilians killed and the loss of homes for some 2,000,000 people. Commenting on Tet and its aftermath, one American official complained, "[I]n six weeks here, we have seen that the [South Vietnamese] Government cannot protect the people, or control them, or administer them, or help them recover."*¹⁸

The enemy suffered such heavy casualties it took them more than a year to rebuild their forces. Their losses caused a loss of morale among the usually highly motivated and committed communist combatants. General Westmoreland, however, remained optimistic. "The Tet offensive," he wrote, "had the effect of a 'Pearl Harbor'; the South Vietnamese government was intact and stronger; the armed forces, particularly those of the Vietcong were much weaker."¹⁹ The General was so "confident" that he asked for 206,000 more American soldiers. Westmoreland wanted to bring troop strength in Vietnam up to 700,000.

The 1968 Election Campaign

As far as the anti-war movement in the U.S. was concerned the Tet Offensive could not have come at a better time. Its immediate effect in the U.S. was quickly felt in New Hampshire. When the anti-Vietnam war Democrat, Senator Eugene McCarthy, filed his candidate papers for the New Hampshire primary on January 3, 1968, few thought he had any chance of winning. The Tet Offensive started 27 days later and suddenly there were hundreds of college and even high school students in New Hampshire ringing doorbells, mailing literature, and making phone calls to support the Senator. Despite an increase in enthusiasm most experts did not think McCarthy would win more than 25% of the New Hampshire

¹⁷ Quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake, The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company), 1972, p. 93.

¹⁸ Quoted in Francis Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 398.

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vote. When the votes were counted on March 12, 1968, candidate McCarthy was only 230 votes shy of an outright victory over President Johnson. The anti-war movement had scored its first significant victory.

Four days after the primary, one of President Johnson's worst nightmares came true when Robert F. Kennedy announced that he would seek the Democratic presidential nomination. With the popular brother of the former president a serious and dangerous candidate, Johnson suffered another shock. Members of his own cabinet now announced opposition to his Vietnam policies. His new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford unexpectedly advised President Johnson to stop bombing North Vietnam and to seek a political settlement. Three years of nearly continuous bombing in both North and South Vietnam, Clifford informed the President, had completely failed to halt the flow of enemy troops and supplies. Continued bombing would prevent meaningful peace talks. Johnson received similar advice from a specially gathered panel of 'wise men' who had served in high offices under previous Presidents. Meanwhile, he was bracing for what he had been warned would be a defeat in the Wisconsin primary by Eugene McCarthy.

Shaken by this lack of support, the President sought more advice but did not share his plans with his advisors. Thus the entire nation was shocked and many were pleasantly surprised only three weeks after the New Hampshire primary when President Lyndon Johnson announced that he had ordered a partial bombing halt of North Vietnam and had decided that:

**JOHNSON SAYS HE WON'T RUN;
HALTS NORTH VIETNAM RAIDS;
BIDS HANOI JOIN PEACE MOVES**

**New York Times headline announcing
President Johnson won't run for re-
election.**

*I shall not seek and I will not accept the
nomination of my Party for another term as your President.*

As April and May followed March, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy continued to campaign for the anti-war vote. The former President's brother dramatically won the Indiana primary (about the same day Martin Luther King was assassinated by a white supremacist in Memphis, Tennessee) only to lose to McCarthy in Oregon. The show down between the two peace candidates came with the California primary in the first week of June. Robert Kennedy had proved himself popular with all kinds of voters from 'hard-hats' to racial minorities, rich and poor, well educated and working class. His popularity was proved by the rousing reception he received in Watts, the African-American sector of Los Angeles that had been the scene of a harrowing race riot. Robert Kennedy went on to win the California primary, which almost insured him the Democratic nomination. But then tragedy once again struck the Kennedy family and the country. On his way from the podium after delivering his victory statement on June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was shot and killed by Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab nationalist. The American people were stunned by the loss of the man who so many thought would become President and end the war in Vietnam.



**A mortally
wounded
RFK**

The anti-War Movement at Its Apex

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Stung by the loss of the one who might have been able to win the election and end the war, extremists in the anti-war movement decided they would express their rage at the Democratic Convention in Chicago later that summer. Abbie Hoffman formed an organization known as the Youth International Party (Yippies) and called for its followers to stage guerrilla theatre in Chicago. He wanted them to expose what he and others saw as the depravity and bigotry of the police and to express their hostility for the system which drove the U.S. into the Indochina war. Thousands of students stormed into Chicago where Mayor Richard Daley prepared 12,000 policemen to keep order in his city at any cost. The result was a massive confrontation that served to divide the nation even further.

On August 28, 1968, at the convention hall in Chicago, the Democrats were about to nominate Hubert Horatio Humphrey to run for President. Not far away, an embittered crowd was chanting:

'Hey, Hey, LBJ

How many kids did you

Kill today?'

'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh

The NLF is going to win'

But peace was not going to come either to Vietnam or the streets of Chicago. Armed with billy clubs, the Chicago police force waited for the demonstrators on Michigan Avenue. As the front line of marchers tried to stop, those in the rear pushed them forward. From his third floor window in the Blackstone Hotel, reporter Theodore White could hear, see, and almost feel the surging crowd and the heavy contact of bodies below as the demonstrators crashed into the firm line of policemen. "Stop the War, Stop the War," the crowd yelled while their red flags of Revolution and North Vietnam banners waved defiantly. No U.S. flags could be seen among the demonstrators, except for those sewn on the seats of pants. Rolls of toilet paper, ripe fruit, and glass bottles came flying out of hotel windows and crashed among the blue helmets on the street below.

More screams and swear words followed, and then a flying wedge of policemen cracked its way into the crowd to break it up. Demonstrators ran with policemen following in hot pursuit smashing hard clubs on young skulls. As blood spilled over the streets youngsters were dragged by their legs with their heads bumping along the sidewalk and pushed into waiting police vans. Both sides paused, regrouped, and another wedge of policemen charged into the crowd – and then more sickening cracks on skulls and more blood on the streets.²⁰

20 Account based on Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1968*, Atheneum Press, 1969, pp. 346-49.



A picture taken of the Chicago confrontation with demonstrators which was called a 'police riot' in a prestigious government commission

Nixon Elected President

Although the majority of the American people probably still supported the war, a very large part of the general public had stopped believing their government. This 'credibility gap' was the result of the years of official optimism about the war was continually contradicted by the news coming from Vietnam. As a result of this loss of trust, increasingly larger numbers of Americans believed that the war, even if it could be won, was not worth fighting, supporting, or continuing. The brutal repression by the Chicago police only served to upset the anti-Johnson Democrats and further polarize the nation.

Public opinion, however, turned against the anti-war movement. Many Americans saw the badly dressed and foul-mouthed demonstrators on their TV screens and sympathized with the police. They were happy to see the police bash the heads of the young protesters, who they thought were rude and unpatriotic.

In the general elections that fall, Richard Nixon became the candidate to beat. Calling for 'peace with honor', and claiming to have a 'secret plan to end the war' in Vietnam, Nixon won the votes of those who continued to support it. He defeated the Democratic candidate, Vice-President Hubert Horatio Humphrey by a very small margin. The comparatively large vote for third party anti-integrationist and pro war George Wallace, however, showed the majority of the American people supported the war. The 'silent majority', to which Nixon appealed, was more numerous than the noisy, anti-war minority.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe the timing, success, and effect of the Tet Offensive.
2. How and why was the anti-war movement energized and eventually frustrated?
3. Did the events preceding the Convention (including the lies told the American people and the death of American leaders) justify the rage expressed by the demonstrators or the tactics they used to protest the war.