



# IMPACT OF THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE ON RE-SHAPING THE U.S. WAR STRATEGY: A VIEW FROM AMERICAN WAR GENERALS AND RESEARCHERS

Trinh Thi Dinh\*

University of Sciences, Hue University  
77 Nguyen Hue St., Hue, Vietnam

**Abstract.** Exactly half a century has passed since the 1968 Tet Offensive was undertaken, but its size, the implementation of its activities, and its impact on the course of Vietnam War still attract the attention of a great number of researchers. Based on papers published by Pentagon and also on publications by American researchers, this article explores why and how the American Administration re-shaped their war strategy in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive.

**Keywords.** Tet Offensive, impact, American Administration, war strategy, re-shaping

## 1. Introduction

The Mau Than General Offensive and Uprising began on the night of 30<sup>th</sup> January 1968, which coincided with the Lunar New Year's Eve. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and National Liberation Front (NLF) forces (hereafter Vietnamese revolutionary forces) launched a wave of simultaneous attacks on South Vietnamese and American military bases in major cities, towns and the countryside throughout South Vietnam. The American press reported that 5 of the 6 South Vietnamese autonomous cities, including Saigon and Hue; 36 of the 44 provincial capitals and 64 of the 245 district capitals were attacked, and Hue city was in the hands of the revolutionary forces for more than three weeks. The fighting, as assessed in The New York Times dated 31<sup>st</sup> January 1968, was the heaviest and most sustained of the Vietnam War. The Offensive, as acknowledged by the American press, despite its heavy casualties for the Vietnamese revolutionary forces and their failure to inspire widespread uprising among the

---

\* *Corresponding:* [trinhtidinh@yahoo.com](mailto:trinhtidinh@yahoo.com)

South Vietnamese people, proved to be a strategic success for the North Vietnamese and also “the watershed event of the U.S. war in Vietnam”.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of assessment appeared to be logically argued as it was based on the whole process of United States’ (US) intervention in Vietnam and the making of their strategic plans prior and after the Tet Offensive.

## 2. The US strategic plans for Vietnam prior Tet Offensive

One month after the first US combat forces landed in Da Nang on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1965, President Johnson had commissioned U.S. forces on the ground war. As the U.S. goal was to protect South Vietnam from the Communists and to secure the South Vietnamese regime, a “three-phase sustained campaign” was set from 1965.<sup>2</sup> Phase 1 visualized the commitment of the U.S. and allied forces “necessary to halt the losing trend by 1965”. Its tasks included securing allied military bases, defending major political and population centers, and strengthening the army of South Vietnam. In Phase 2, General Westmoreland – chief commander of the US forces in Vietnam – sought to resume the offensive to “destroy enemy forces” and reinstitute “rural construction activities.” In this phase, planned to begin in 1966, the American forces would “participate in clearing, securing, and reserving reaction and offensive operations as required to support and sustain the resumption of pacification.” Finally, in Phase 3, the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) would oversee the “defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas”. It is important to note that Westmoreland’s plan included the term “sustained campaign”. By setting this, Westmoreland was determined that US forces were engaged in a war of annihilation which would quickly destroy the Vietnamese revolutionary forces.

From the beginning of 1965, MACV began “Search and Destroy” operations in South Vietnam; simultaneously, from March 1965 the U.S. began the Rolling Thunder air strike at ammunition depots and naval bases in North Vietnam. Both “Search and Destroy” operations in the South and Rolling Thunder air strikes in the North were integral components of Westmoreland’s “War of Attrition”. Westmoreland even likened “search and destroy” operation to “meat grinder”. The MACV strategy apparently relied wholly on the U.S. superiority of firepower when they used helicopters and high-tech weapons to search and destroy more Vietnamese revolutionary forces and to halt the infiltration of manpower and ammunition from the North to the South, which meant to reinforce Vietnamese revolutionary

---

<sup>1</sup>Willbanks J.H. (2009), “Shock and Awe of Tet Offensive Shattered U.S. Illusions”, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/01/29/shock-and-awe-of-tet-offensive-shattered-us-illusions>.

<sup>2</sup>Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland (1969), “Report on the War in Vietnam”, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., p. 296.

forces in the South. By that way, the U.S. hoped to inflict more losses than what People's Army of Vietnam and NLF forces could sustain. As the war escalated and the American combat troops got engaged in ground war operations, more and more American combat troops were deployed in South Vietnam, bringing the number up to half a million in late 1967. According to the assessment by a U.S. military historian, the U.S. was able to achieve a strategic victory in South Vietnam since President Johnson decided to commit combat troops in the ground war in March 1965. The victory in an American researcher's words "... seized the initiative from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong (VC) main forces units and inflicted staggering losses upon them".<sup>3</sup> Robert McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defence, told President Johnson in April 1965 that their aim was to "break the will of DRV/VC [Democratic Republic of Vietnam/Viet Cong] by denying them a victory" and that "impotence would eventually lead to a political solution".<sup>4</sup>

Bearing that determination in mind, the Johnson Administration escalated the war in 1966 and 1967. In the South, the "Search and Destroy" operations with the support of helicopters, napalm, and chemical bombs were undertaken. The operations aiming at searching for VC ambush led to many atrocities when U.S. soldier forces and their allies burned down villages and committed massacres. At the same time, air strikes in the North escalated and hit not only strategic points as the U.S. administration announced but also schools, hospitals, camps, and other civil facilities. The consequence was that not only did the U.S. and Saigon regime fail to win the hearts of the population in the South and halt the infiltration from the North but the U.S. intervention in Vietnam faced with anti-Vietnam War movements in their home front and also in many western countries\*.

By early 1967, the U.S. was fully determined to win the war despite some pessimistic evaluation of their state of affairs in South Vietnam. For example, Robert McNamara in his memorandum for Johnson dated October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1966, after his trip to Saigon in August: "Full security exists nowhere, not even behind the U.S. Marines' lines and in Saigon and in the countryside; the enemy almost completely controls the night"<sup>5</sup>. The Rolling Thunder program of bombing the North was also negatively evaluated by McNamara as apparent in his report to Johnson: "Nor has the Rolling Thunder program of bombing the North either significantly

---

<sup>3</sup>Charles Browner (1990), *Strategic Reassessment in Vietnam: the Westmoreland's "Alternative Strategy" of 1967-1968*, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, U.S.A, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

\* Since late 1967, many protests against the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam took place in many cities of the USA and other countries like Paris, Bonn, Sydney, Melbourne etc.

<sup>5</sup> "McNamara Memo of October 14, 1966 Opposing Increase in War Effort", *Pentagon Papers*, Ibid, p. 543.

affected infiltration or cracked the morale of Hanoi”<sup>6</sup>. The same evaluation can be read in other materials like Central Intelligence Agency/Defence Intelligence Agency report entitled “An appraisal of the bombing of North Vietnam through 12 September 1966”<sup>7</sup>. From his observation, McNamara concluded: “In essence, we find ourselves – from the point of view of the important war (for the complicity of the people) – no better, and if anything worse off. This important war must be fought and won by the Vietnamese themselves”, but he himself conceded that the Americans have not found either the formula or the catalyst for training and inspiring the Vietnamese [*South Vietnamese regime*] into an effective action<sup>8</sup>.

Despite all these pessimistic points of view expressed by the Secretary of Defence on the U.S. state of affairs in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, in his cablegram to Pacific Command dated March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1967, advocated the increase in forces in South Vietnam for the financial year of 1968. He asked for 200,000 more troops, bringing the total number of the U.S. forces in South Vietnam to more than 671,000.<sup>9</sup> Based on Westmoreland’s suggestion, in April 1967, the Joint Chiefs of Staff called for the mobilization of reserves and proposed “an extension of the war” into Laos, Cambodia and possibly North Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> The escalation of air strikes in the North could be seen in the report made by Admiral Grant Sharp, who served at the time as Commander-in-chief of Pacific forces, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In his report, Admiral Sharp estimated that the number of air attacks in the North reached 9,740 sorties attacks,<sup>11</sup> and a number of vital industrial plants like Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel Plant, Hai Phong Cement Plant had been damaged badly. For that reason, by early 1968 General Westmoreland was rather optimistic about the situation in Vietnam. He wrote in *Time Magazine* in January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1968: “the Communists seem to have run temporarily out of steam”<sup>12</sup>, and two days later in his annual report dated January 28<sup>th</sup>, he said: “In many areas, the enemy [Vietnamese Revolutionary Forces] has been driven away from the population centers; in others, he has been compelled to disperse and evade contact thus nullifying much of his potential. The year ended with the enemy increasingly resorting to desperation tactics in attempting to achieve military/psychological victory; and he has experienced only failure in those attempts”<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See: “An Appraisal of the bombing of North Vietnam through 12 September 1966” Appendix, Extract from C.I.A/D.I.A, *Pentagon Papers*, p. 550.

<sup>8</sup> “McNamara Memo of October 14, 1966 Opposing Increase in War Effort”, *Pentagon Papers*, Ibid, p. 543.

<sup>9</sup> “Westmoreland’s March 18 Memo on Increase in Forces”, *Pentagon Papers*, p. 556.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 513.

<sup>11</sup> . “Admiral Sharp’s Progress Report on War at End of 1967”, *ibid*, p. 614.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Robert Asprey (1994), *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, New York, p. 896

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.p. 872.

In short, Westmoreland's view by early 1968 was very optimistic as if the victorious end for the United States in Vietnam was in the horizon.

However, the makers of "War of Attrition" failed to see the skills of irregular warfare and they particularly underestimated the nationalist zeal that motivated the Vietnamese in the war to defend their national independence and reunification. Although the Vietnamese revolutionary forces were at a disadvantage in terms of high-tech weapons, they succeeded in mobilizing nationwide mass support thanks to the righteousness of their struggle. At any time in their history, the Vietnamese were always ready to fight whatever foreign forces who intended to violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their homeland. Ironically, by the time General Westmoreland assured the audience at National Press Club that the ranks of the Vietcong were thinning steadily and that "we have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view"<sup>14</sup>, Vietcong's elaborate plans for major offensive were being prepared and Vietnamese revolutionary forces were ready to launch a series of simultaneous attacks. Synchronized assaults fired by the Vietnamese revolutionary forces on 30<sup>th</sup> January night shook not only South Vietnamese Government but also the whole US military and political system.

### 3. The U.S.A. re-shaping war strategy upon the impact of Tet Offensive

The General Offensive and Uprising during Tet 1968 "achieved maximum surprise"<sup>15</sup> and astonished American media and the American people as they had just been reassured by military generals that the positive progress had been made and that "the end begins to come into view". Such kind of report gave the U.S. Government and the American people the illusion that PAVN/NLF forces were unable to launch such a large-scale offensive because they were badly damaged by Search and Destroy operations and Rolling Thunder air strikes. By early 1968, it was clear that the commanders of MACV, especially General Westmoreland, had underestimated the capacity of the North Vietnamese Army and National Liberation Front capacity. Studies by American researchers show that even when the MACV commanders and the Saigon Regime had intelligence information in their hands that the North was preparing General Offensive and Uprising, they were under the impression that the Vietnamese revolutionary forces were unable to launch large-scale attacks<sup>16</sup>. From Westmoreland's

---

<sup>14</sup> Karnow S. (1983), *Vietnam – A History of the First Complete Account of Vietnam War*, The Viking Press, New York, p. 514.

<sup>15</sup> Willbanks J.H. (2009), "Shock and Awe of Tet Offensive Shattered U.S. Illusions", <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/01/29/shock-and-awe-of-tet-offensive-shattered-us-illusions>

<sup>16</sup> For more detail on intelligence information about VC preparation see: Willbanks J.H. (1990), *Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, Columbia University Press, U.S.A, Chapter 9: Military Intelligence and Surprise at TET, pp. 93-98; see also: Arnold, James (1990), *Tet Offensive: A Turning Point in Vietnam*, Osprey Military, Campaign Series 4, London, p. 36.

statement that “I hope they try something because we are looking for a fight”<sup>17</sup>, it could be said that MACV had not anticipated a series of synchronized attacks from the Vietnamese revolutionary forces and had been too confident about their firepower superiority. It is also clear that General Westmoreland saw this as their opportunity to perform their superiority of firepower over the communists. For that reason, not only were the American people at home completely stunned to see on television fighting which took place in major cities of South Vietnam, even on the ground of the US Embassy in Saigon, but they were also questioning why the MACV forces were off guard. Synchronized attacks on Tet’s Eve have even been compared with German’s Ardennes Offensive during World War II<sup>18</sup>

The impact of the Tet Offensive on American society has been assessed as “the decisive action of the war because of its impact on the American public”<sup>19</sup>. The Tet Offensive led to a new wave of war protests with demonstrations taking place in many American big cities. In fact, these demonstrations had been organized since Johnson involved U.S. military troops in the ground war in 1965, but they had increased in number and in the intensity after the Tet Offensive. Psychologically, the American people were less patient with a long war. With the superiority of high-tech weapons they expected a quick victory over the communist forces in Vietnam and thus they would fulfill the mission to save South Vietnam from “the communist evil”. The Tet Offensive made clear that the US got stuck in a stalemate in Vietnam despite the increase of troops with the support of heavy firepower and high-tech weapons. The situation in South Vietnam and at home in the U.S. accelerated the growing disenchantment with President Johnson's conduct of the war. As indicated in Pentagon Papers, after the Tet Offensive, President Johnson faced with “great domestic dissent, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment about both the purpose and the conduct of the war”.<sup>20</sup> The Tet Offensive convinced the Johnson Administration that a quick military victory in Vietnam would not easily be attained, and the superiority of firepower and high-tech weapons was not the decisive factor affecting the course of the war in Vietnam. It also forced the US Government to re-evaluate their war strategy.

From the U.S. Government point of view, at first, right after the Tet Offensive, President L.B. Johnson and the MACV commanders were rather optimistic about the results of their counterattacks. Two days after the Tet Offensive, Johnson said that it had been “a disaster for the communist forces”. They had drafted a speech in which they explained Offensive attacks as

---

<sup>17</sup> Karnow, *Ibid*, p.514

<sup>18</sup> Anold, J., *Ibid*, p. 85

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, p. 589.

a desperate move of the communists that failed.<sup>21</sup> Expressing that view, Johnson and his subordinates failed to recognize the psychological effects of the Offensive. The Tet Offensive, during which the PAVN/NLF forces were able to launch attacks throughout Southern Vietnam simultaneously, proved they could withstand a war of attrition regardless of U.S. troops increases and up-to-date high-tech weapons. The Johnson Administration had to begin to shape their after-Tet-Offensive strategy. General Wheeler, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, had a three-day trip to South Vietnam in late February to assess the situation and to discuss with General Westmoreland to determine the needs for Vietnam after the Offensive.<sup>22</sup> Although Wheeler's report indicated the request of more than 206,700 troops<sup>23</sup> (nearly 50% of American forces in South Vietnam at that time), there was no evidence whether this request was granted. Some decisions made by the Johnson Administration after the Tet Offensive showed some signs of de-escalation of the war efforts in Vietnam. General Westmoreland was recalled from Vietnam to be Army Chief of Staff on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1968. This event, according to Pentagon Study is "a signal that President would rule out major escalation"<sup>24</sup>.

The U.S. re-shaping war strategy was apparent in President Johnson's speech on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1968, which was known as "the Withdrawal Speech". It should be noted that although Johnson himself had repeated that PAVN/NLF were defeated and they were unable to achieve their goals for the Tet Offensive, he was in respite from making an official speech about the Offensive until late March.<sup>25</sup> In this speech, after speaking of the possibility of another offensive by the communists, which he was in full confidence that the US forces could win but with damages and losses, he said that "There is no need for this to be so. There is no need to delay the talks that could bring an end to this long and bloody war".<sup>26</sup> A partial bombing halt was announced for the area North of the 20<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Another move in the US strategy was the emphasis on the principle that the main war burden must be borne by the South Vietnamese army and they should be more committed to the war.<sup>27</sup> A cablegram to the US Ambassadors in some countries stressed the need for the South Vietnam Government and its army to increase their effectiveness with American equipment and other support. This set the first priority in the U.S. actions in Vietnam. The Pentagon Paper stated saidthe top priority was to re-equipthe

---

<sup>21</sup> Zarefsky, David (2014), " Lyndon Baines Johnson Withdrawal Speech (31 March 1968)", *Voices of Democracy* No.9 (2014), p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> "Wheeler's '68 Report to Johnson after Tet Offensive", Pentagon Papers, p. 615.

<sup>23</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, p. 620

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 591.

<sup>25</sup> Zarefsky, David (2014), " Lyndon Baines Johnson Withdrawal Speech (31 March 1968)", *Voices of Democracy* No.9 (2014): p. 41

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

South Vietnamese army.<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that the policy of Vietnamization of war, which was commenced in the Nixon presidency term was pathed after the Tet Offensive. Regarding the request for the increase of more troops to South Vietnam, in February 1968 the Johnson Administration approved only 10,500 combat units to be sent. This number was far from the 206,500 troops that Westmoreland had requested. Last but not least, Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election for another presidential term.

The Tet Offensive, as argued by many researchers, demonstrated that the American war strategy for Vietnam by that point was seriously flawed.<sup>29</sup> Researchers' points of view on the impact of the Tet Offensive on the American strategy afterwards have been examined in detail by Willbanks in Chapter 13 of his *Tet Offensive: A Concise History*. The author either praised the MACV/SVNA for their military victory over the communists or denounced their unpreparedness to counter the communist synchronized attacks. The common view, however, is that the strategy of attrition proved to be unworked in the case of Vietnam.

In short, in order to win a quick victory over the communists in Vietnam, from March 1965, the U.S. Government committed a tremendous amount of both manpower (up to more than half a million units) and money (by mid-1967, an amount of \$20 billion on average each year) and applied the Strategy of Attrition with Search and Destroy Tactics and Rolling Thunder air strikes. However, both the Search and Destroy operations in South Vietnam and the Rolling Thunder air strikes in North Vietnam were unable to break the Vietnamese will of liberating the South and re-unifying their homeland. Infiltration of manpower and supply of weapons from the North to the South were never cut off and the revolutionary forces in the South were built up to a level that enabled them to launch such a large-scale synchronized assaults like the Tet Offensive. The Johnson Administration, as argued above, had some immediate modifications of their strategy within months following the Offensive. Although the U.S. military circles still continued to advocate for more military actions in Vietnam, the U.S. Government during both Johnson's presidency and his successor Nixon's from 1969 managed to rule down the war escalation in Vietnam upon public pressure. In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, the U.S. administration decided to halt bombing north of the 20<sup>th</sup> Parallel, reduced the number of troops sent to Vietnam, gave more responsibility to the South Vietnamese regime and army, and later applied the Vietnamization of war.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, p. 622.

<sup>29</sup> See for example: Willbanks J.H. (1990), *Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, Columbia University Press, U.S.A., 118



## References

1. Arnold, James (1990), *Tet Offensive: A Turning Point in Vietnam*, Osprey Military, Campaign Series 4, London.
2. Asprey, Robert (1994), *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, New York.
3. Browner, Charles (1990), *Strategic Reassessment in Vietnam: the Westmoreland's "Alternative Strategy" of 1967-1968*, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, U.S.A.
4. Karnow, Stanley (1983), *Vietnam – A History the First Complete Account of Vietnam War*, The Viking Press, New York, p. 514.
5. The Pentagon Papers (1971), *The Secret History of the Vietnam War*, published by the New York Times, New York.
6. Westmoreland W. (1967), "March 18 Memo on Increase in Forces", Excerpts from cablegram to Pacific Command, dated March, 18<sup>th</sup> 1967, in *The Pentagon Papers* published by the New York Times, New York, 1971, pp. 556-560.
7. Westmoreland W. (1967), "March 28<sup>th</sup> Cable to Joint Chiefs on Troop Needs", Excerpts from cablegram to Joint Chiefs of Staff dated March, 28<sup>th</sup> 1967, in *The Pentagon Papers* published by the New York Times, New York, 1971, pp. 560-565.
8. Willbanks J.H. (2009), "Shock and Awe of Tet Offensive Shattered U.S. Illusions", <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/01/29/shock-and-awe-of-tet-offensive-shattered-us-illusions>.
9. Willbanks J.H. (1990), *Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, Columbia University Press, U.S.A,
10. Zarefsky, David (2014), " Lyndon Baines Johnson Withdrawal Speech (31 March 1968)", *Voices of Democracy* N<sup>o</sup>.9 (2014): 41-55,<http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Zarefsky-LBJ-Withdrawal-Speech-Critical-Analysis-Final-Draft.pdf>