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American War, 1965–1968

AMERICANIZATION

In March 1965, the United States responded to the onset of major combat operations and the killing of US personnel by communist forces in South Vietnam by initiating sustained bombing of the North, and, days later, deploying the first of hundreds of thousands of combat troops to the South. In time, forces from South Korea, Australia, Thailand, New Zealand, and the Philippines joined the American effort to curb communist aggression in Indochina and protect the regime in Saigon.[1] This sudden Americanization and partial internationalization of hostilities marked for Hanoi the end of the "Special War" era and the onset of the period of "Limited War" (*chien tranh cuc bo*). Though it had anticipated that scenario if communist forces below the 17th parallel failed to meet the goals outlined in Resolution 9 expeditiously, Le Duan's regime still found it unsettling because it underscored the inability of those forces, which included nearly 10,000 PAVN soldiers by the time the Americans landed, to do what was expected of them, as well as the resilience and competence of South Vietnamese troops. Giap, it seemed, had been right to point out that PAVN and communist forces generally were not ready for "big war."

Hanoi predicated its strategy in the American War on the now familiar tripod of three "modes of struggle," the same as had been used in the Indochina War. The military struggle aimed to attrit enemy forces and protect the human and material assets of the Vietnamese Revolution. Specifically, it aimed to annihilate the ARVN, while coping with its Western allies and limiting the amount of damage those foreign troops

could inflict on communist forces. The second mode, political struggle, concerned the use of propaganda to recruit fighters and partisans and fuel popular opposition to the Saigon regime. It was a struggle for South Vietnamese hearts and minds that challenged the enemy in the political and moral realms, considered absolutely vital by Hanoi in the new context. One of that struggle's critical components after 1965 was clandestine proselytization among Saigon's armed forces to encourage desertion and undermine overall morale, *binh van* in Vietnamese communist parlance. For much of the American War, the balance between military and political activities maintained by communist troops and agents in the South depended on the area where they operated. In sparsely populated "mountain-jungle" (*rung nui*) regions, the Central Highlands in particular, they prioritized military struggle; in more populated "lowland-rural" (*dong bang*) areas, especially in Nam Bo and the Mekong River Delta, they maintained an even calibration between military and political action; finally, in cities, where their movement was weakest and exposure made them most vulnerable, communist agents conducted secretive political work almost exclusively.

The third leg of the tripod was diplomatic struggle. Its goal was to garner popular support for the Vietnamese war effort and opposition to American intervention and the regime in Saigon overseas. This globalization of the political struggle aimed to manipulate world opinion and muster sympathy for the anti-American, anti-Saigon cause outside Vietnam, including in the United States. The dark horse that eventually became a crucial part of Hanoi's overall strategy and a central factor in its ultimate triumph, the diplomatic struggle had two critical components after 1965. The first consisted in praising the merits and righteousness of the "Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation," as Hanoi officially called it, and appealing to the spirit of "proletarian internationalism" and "Third-Worldism" (*tiers-mondisme*) to obtain maximal material assistance from "comrades" in the communist camp and "friends" in the Afro-Asian bloc and Latin America. That assistance, Hanoi believed, was essential for efficiently prosecuting the war in the South and defending the North against US air raids. The second component consisted in bringing worldwide attention to the situation in Vietnam, with a view to encouraging international condemnation of American intervention, isolating Washington and its allies diplomatically, and thus limiting their policy options in Indochina. Inspired by their own experience in the Indochina War and the recent triumph of Algerian revolutionaries, whose "diplomatic revolution" had facilitated achievement of their larger

strategic goals, Hanoi concluded that, the more the international community condemned US involvement in Vietnam the greater would be the pressure on Washington decision-makers to end it. Skillful use of diplomacy by the Vietnamese and the Algerians during their respective wars against France had demonstrated that Western military power could be partially neutralized by international opinion and the political and moral opprobrium of the global community. The aim was to shame the enemy into abandoning his designs.

Through the diplomatic struggle, communist leaders hoped, not only to exploit "contradictions" between the United States and other countries, but also to drive a wedge between policymakers there and their own people, as they had tried to do against France before. They recognized adverse public opinion and antiwar sentiment as potentially great vulnerabilities of Washington leaders, and key to derailing their efforts to prosecute the war in Vietnam. "People's diplomacy," introduced at the Second Party Congress in 1951, could serve them especially well in this new context. By their reading of American political history, presidential administrations could only do as much as the people allowed them to do; that is, public opinion could validate a policy just as easily as it could force its repudiation. Hanoi also recognized, however, that those administrations always endeavored to shape public opinion to their own advantage. Armed with these understandings, it devised strategies and tactics intended less to attrit US forces – to kill as many troops as it could – than to destroy the willingness of the American people to support the war, of Congress to finance it, and of the White House to prosecute it. "The emphasis was not on military defeat of the United States," David Elliott has fittingly written of Hanoi's approach, "but, rather, on exhausting the strategic possibilities open to it." The core element in that approach was to "defeat the 'aggressive will' (*y chi xam luoc*) of the United States – a psychological objective more than a military one."[2]

Le Duan's regime had done its homework on Washington. It knew that the commitment to contain communism around the world, formalized through the Truman Doctrine of 1947, and honored by every president since, might convince the Johnson administration to get more deeply involved in Vietnam. But it also knew, largely on the basis of its interpretation of the recent war in Korea, that any presidential administration would have a tough time sustaining a war in Vietnam without popular and congressional approval. The centrality of that diplomatic front in Hanoi's strategic calculus – it eventually became more important than the ground war in the South – demonstrated a commendable awareness

of the inferiority of its military capabilities vis-à-vis the United States, and how to compensate for it. Therein lies what was arguably the most distinctive aspect of Hanoi's war effort, the most revolutionary – and meritorious – dimension of its strategy: it aimed to defeat the United States by using circumstances outside Vietnam to deny Washington the ability to win.

PEOPLE'S WAR

To meet the aims of the war effort, DRVN authorities initiated a mass mobilization campaign in North Vietnam in April 1965. That they did not do so sooner demonstrates how sure Le Duan's regime was of itself that the United States would not dare deploying combat forces in Vietnam until at least 1966. Known as the "Three Readinesses," the campaign urged men to be ready to fight, join the armed forces, and perform other tasks as necessary. As part of it, the government adopted a new military service law mandating mass conscription of males aged eighteen to forty, indefinite extension of service for those already in the armed forces, and reenlistment of officers and enlisted men recently discharged for budgetary reasons. An unscrupulous few used their family's wealth or political connections to evade the draft. Most were not so lucky. By the end of the year, nearly 300,000 additional troops had been mobilized, two-thirds of them under twenty-six years of age. That brought the total number of servicemen in the PAVN to 400,000. Local militia forces similarly grew, from 1.4 million in 1964 to two million in mid-1965. The guiding principle behind these measures was "Let the Entire People Fight the Enemy and Take Part in National Defense."

Another campaign, the "Three Responsibilities," directed women to replace men on farms and in factories, and otherwise support the war effort however they could. Authorities conjured the Trung Sisters and Lady Trieu, folk heroines who had led rebellions against the Chinese some 2,000 years before, to inspire females to enthusiastically contribute to the anti-American struggle. Thousands of young, mostly single "long-haired warriors," as they became known, would go on to participate in the defense of the North, work on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and serve as medics and nurses in the South, distinguishing themselves for their valor. Despite finding themselves in harm's way, women were empowered by the war, assuming more visible and important roles in Vietnamese society. Soon, females made up to seventy-five percent of the Northern workforce, and more than half the members of local self-defense units

and militias. By 1967 they comprised forty-eight percent of officials in People's Village Councils, the Party's arm at the village level, compared to twenty-one percent when the American War began, and sixteen percent in 1961.

Unlike most Americans, who had no direct ties to the war, practically the entire North Vietnamese population contributed to it in one capacity or another. Children evacuated to the countryside assisted host families by performing various chores as needed, contingent upon their abilities. Artists, including musicians, singers, and actors, traveled to the front to entertain troops and sustain their morale. The fatherland had been invaded by the United States, Hanoi told the masses, and it was everyone's duty to contribute to its defense. Authorities did not hesitate to use coercion when necessary. Families whose members were reluctant to back the war effort, whose sons or fathers sought to evade the draft, to illustrate, received reduced food rations. For Le Duan, the war against the United States was an existential struggle akin to that the Soviet Union had waged against Nazi Germany in World War II. As Stalin had mobilized and led his people to victory against impossible odds, the VWP Secretary would now do the same for his nation.

PAVN SOLDIERS

The Northern soldier deployed to the South in the early phases of the war was between twenty-one and twenty-eight years old, from a peasant family, and not an only son, as Hanoi generally exempted such people from combat duties. After basic training, he underwent specialized military and political training, lasting up to three months and designed explicitly for those going to the South. There, his superiors told him, he would be fighting Americans. Nothing was ever said about fighting other Vietnamese, even though among themselves his leaders had determined that "on the military front, we must above all bring about the annihilation of the puppet [i.e., South Vietnamese] armed forces," as iterated earlier in this chapter. As a consequence, troops deployed to the South were often surprised and a bit disoriented when they realized that they were also fighting other Vietnamese, and doing so for much of the time, at least in some areas. The deception was sensible: soldiers would be more motivated going into battle against a foreign enemy than against their own compatriots. It was specifically to reduce the moral conundrum of having to kill other Vietnamese that communist authorities sought to

dehumanize their Vietnamese rivals by labeling them "lackeys" and "puppets" of the Americans.

Despite undergoing extensive ideological indoctrination, the average Northern soldier was by no means a devout communist. He did, however, firmly believe in the righteousness of the cause he served. To him, battling Americans below the 17th parallel was not just a way of protecting his family, but a moral duty to his country on behalf of his embattled Southern compatriots. His willingness to serve for these purposes was a way of carrying on the heroic tradition that defined the Vietnamese character, or so his superiors persuasively argued. He was so well-programmed, so well-indoctrinated, that he was prepared to die to uphold that tradition, as he was for the cause of the anti-American war. He considered his chances of eventually returning home to his family alive slim, although, as one study put it, "he obviously would rather be anything than dead." His motto was "Use Weakness to Defeat Strength, Use Rudimentary Weapons to Defeat Modern Weapons, and Use a Drawn-out Struggle to Defeat a Swift Offensive."[3]

Unlike his American counterpart who served a one-year "tour of duty" in South Vietnam, the typical Northern soldier was there for the long haul: that is, indefinitely, for as long as his own physical and mental condition allowed and his superiors determined. His only ways back home were dead, severely maimed, mentally damaged – or victorious. Still, he accepted the constraints he faced and did not see in them reason to give up by going AWOL (absent-without-leave) or surrendering to the enemy. Besides death, his biggest fear was to be left behind on the field of battle, dead or wounded. Death meant his body would never be returned to his family, that he would receive no proper burial and his soul would wander aimlessly for perpetuity. To be seriously wounded and left on the battlefield implied that he would either die in agony or be captured by the enemy and tortured before facing execution. These and related anxieties prompted some Northern soldiers to defect, to go over to the enemy. However, relative to the total number of Northerners who served in the South during the war, defectors were few. By American estimates, they amounted to no more than 2,200 individuals.

EARLY STAGES

Although the war in Vietnam became Americanized in March 1965, it took some time for the United States to build up its military capabilities in the South. In fact, it was not until July 1965 that the Johnson administration committed the first sizeable contingent of US troops, more than

one hundred thousand of them, to South Vietnam. By then, there had been yet another coup in Saigon, in June, that brought to power a military-led National Leadership Council under Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Thieu (1923–2001) as Head of State. Through the spring and summer of 1965, therefore, the war remained a predominantly Vietnamese affair.

The first major encounter between US and PAVN forces took place in fall 1965 at Ia Drang, in the Central Highlands. The battle began on 14 November and lasted four days. It saw the heaviest fighting to date, and the casualties to show for it. When it was over, the Americans had lost about 250 killed, and the North Vietnamese in excess of 1,000 dead. In an assessment reflecting its willingness to tolerate excessive losses in pursuit of its goals, Hanoi considered the engagement a "victory," demonstrating that "our main force troops had high combat morale and a high resolve to defeat the Americans."[7] Meanwhile, it persisted in its efforts to decimate the ranks of ARVN forces, which it still considered the biggest key to victory. By year's end, communist forces in the South totaled 221,000, those of the United States numbered 175,000, and those of Saigon exceeded half a million.

As communist forces became aware of the dangers of taking on enemy units in large battles, they settled into a protracted war approach, favoring smaller operations that included ambushing isolated US platoons roaming the Vietnamese countryside looking to kill them in "search-and-destroy" operations, the brainchild of US Commander in Vietnam General William Westmoreland (1914–2005). They became partial to fighting in the remote Central Highlands and the Mekong River Delta, which made it more challenging for the United States to bring the full might of its military power to bear on them. To prevail in a war against such a powerful foe, Vietnamese communist forces and their leaders had to be shrewd, cunning, resourceful, disciplined, and adaptive.

The Viet Cong base in Cu Chi District outside Saigon was a testament to all these things. A popular tourist attraction nowadays, it consisted at the time of an underground tunnel complex running several miles right next to a major US air base. The installation included such facilities as nursing stations, an operating room, kitchens, as well as dining, resting, and storage areas – all of them situated beneath layers of dirt. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed guerrillas to operate right under the nose of American forces, to engage them unexpectedly with lethal consequences, and then to disappear quickly. "Lightning attacks" eventually became standard practice for communist forces, and a defining aspect of the Vietnam War. In most instances during the conflict, it was PAVN and

LAF troops waiting in ambush who instigated firefights. They usually retreated and vanished before their enemies could call for air or artillery support, after just a few minutes. Fundamentally, communist forces followed a strategy of evasion during the war, remaining hidden, as in Cu Chi, or constantly moving around, as in the Central Highlands, until ready to engage the enemy at a time and a place of their own choosing. These practices dictated the order of battle in the South, and thus the overall tempo of the war.

This all proved terribly frustrating for US forces, ill-prepared for such combat initially. In its efforts to annihilate hard-to-find communist units, while minimizing American and allied casualties, the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the organ managing the ground war in the South under the aforementioned General Westmoreland, became keen on bombing suspected enemy positions and strongholds. While the tactic succeeding in killing, maiming, and otherwise demoralizing scores of communist troops, the attendant collateral damage drove neutral civilians into the arms of the Viet Cong. According to one study, "conditional on how strong the Viet Cong presence was in any hamlet [small cluster of houses] at one point in time, the addition of more bombs increased the likelihood that the Viet Cong was able to maintain or increase its level of control in subsequent periods."[8] Beyond that, indiscriminate killing of innocent Southern Vietnamese, from thousands of feet up in the air, served as a powerful propaganda tool in Hanoi's public diplomacy and domestic propaganda campaigns.

By virtue of its roots in this broad-based appeal, the NLF could even charm and marshal sympathy from organizations and individuals inside the United States. Its struggle captured the political imagination of Americans dissatisfied with the status quo at home and struggling for their own brand of justice. The NLF became an icon for American radicals, who often adopted its flag as a symbol of their own resistance effort. It nurtured that sympathy by hosting antiwar and social activists, as well as academics, from the United States at its missions abroad and even in "liberated areas" of South Vietnam. The more the Front reached out to and engaged its own supporters in the West, Hanoi correctly estimated, the more they spoke and wrote favorably of its purposes. That, in turn, facilitated the mobilization of larger numbers of Americans against their government's intervention in Southeast Asia. Female Viet Cong warriors,

rare as they were in reality, became objects of special adulation in American feminist circles because they attested to the possibilities of social emancipation. Radical African American civil rights activists, for their part, shared a sense of commonality and kinship with the Vietnamese resisting the American intrusion upon their country. They chanted "No Viet Cong Ever Called Me Nigger," a mantra misattributed to the American boxer Muhammad Ali, at rallies to suggest the absurdity of fighting noble revolutionaries overseas while racism thrived at home.[16] The militant Black Panther Party even proposed sending members to South Vietnam to fight alongside the Viet Cong, as it did to other places struggling for national liberation. Meanwhile, pacifist religious organizations sent to both the DRVN and NLF medical and other supplies purportedly intended for civilians and children. Quakers and Mennonites were especially active in these respects, as well as in protesting the war at home.

NLF propaganda, like that of the DRVN, never failed to note that the gripe of the Vietnamese was not with the American people, but with Washington policymakers. In that alone, they had much in common with disaffected groups in the United States. Their propaganda invariably characterized Americans in flattering terms, as peace-loving and progressive, but their leaders as duplicitous and imperialistic. Differentiating between the "desire for peace of the American people" and the "warmongering tendencies" of Washington policymakers allowed the NLF to appeal directly to the American masses without contradicting the line of argument espoused by the authorities in Hanoi that the United States was the source of all evils in Vietnam. Admittedly, various elements contributed to the rise of antiwar sentiment in the United States, but the successful spread of the image of the NLF as a hapless victim of Washington's criminality warranted some reciprocity. The NLF looked magnanimous; American policymakers seemed maniacal. That, to no insignificant degree, helped turn American opinion against the war.

In retrospect, few factors did more to encumber Washington's efforts to prosecute the Vietnam War than the resulting domestic opposition to it. Public diplomacy may not have singlehandedly won the war for Hanoi, but it certainly played a seminal role in shaping its outcome. The antiwar movement never rallied a majority of the population in the United States, but it was vocal and well organized, and featured prominently on the front pages of newspapers and during network television evening news broadcasts. It raised troubling questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the American intervention, roused opponents of the administration, including otherwise sympathetic moderate civil rights leaders

and their supporters, and widened the credibility gap between the Oval Office and the people. The antiwar movement became emblematic of a growing malaise in American society, characterized by a mounting lack of trust in the competence of the federal government. It also incited, even as it seemed to validate, foreign criticism of American policy in Indochina. After all, if Americans themselves – a meaningful segment of them, at least – stood in opposition to the war, why should others abroad not do the same? The net effect of these trends was to alienate many Americans from their own government. This result was far from absolute, but it was sizeable and meaningful enough in time to topple an American president.

As Hanoi infiltrated more men and supplies into the South, and the Viet Cong enlisted new recruits, the United States brought in more troops, and Saigon dragooned more young men into its armed forces to counter them. By mid-1967, 277,000 PAVN and LAF regulars were battling 1,334,000 allied troops, including 448,000 US military personnel, in the South, a 1:5 ratio. The war grew deadlier and more destructive, but the military balance essentially remained the same: that is, highly unfavorable for communist forces. Losses inflicted upon American and ARVN units were notable, as previously related, but paled in comparison to those suffered by communist forces. During the same 1965–7 period, the PAVN and LAF lost an astonishing 230,000 killed. Troops kept fighting with determination and discipline, but the staggering decimation of their ranks, in conjunction with the slow pace of progress in the war, and the inability to take advantage of the sectarian infighting in the South, raised serious concerns in Hanoi.

The Pacification program, managed jointly by American and South Vietnamese authorities, and formally known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) after May 1967, also hurt the communist effort below the 17th parallel. As Washington's answer to Hanoi's political struggle, CORDS specifically targeted the NLF's political infrastructure and sought to rally Southern opinion in support of Thieu and his regime. Core initiatives included the *Chieu hoi* ("open arms") program, designed to counter Hanoi's *binh van* efforts and encourage defection of communist troops and cadres, some 75,000 of whom, mostly Viet Cong, had absconded by 1967. That program also assigned US advisers to train local militias, promoted rural development and land redistribution initiatives, and assisted internally displaced persons. Arguably, the most effective and controversial CORDS initiative was the Phoenix program. Modeled on a "counter terror" effort mounted

by the French during the Algerian War, it employed "hard interrogation" techniques and targeted assassinations to neutralize Viet Cong cadres and sympathizers. Despite its controversial nature, it exacted a major toll on the Viet Cong's political apparatus, resulting in the death or incarceration of tens of thousands of operatives.

GOING FOR BROKE, AGAIN

By summer 1967, Le Duan was losing patience with the results of the war. A few months earlier, in January, the Central Committee had given him its blessing to devise a stratagem to bring about "decisive victory" within two years. In June, the Secretary proposed a new initiative, one he hoped would create the possibility of a major triumph over the enemy and bring the war to a prompt and successful conclusion. The only way to force Washington to withdraw from Vietnam, Le Duan surmised, was to show political leaders there that they could not win. On orders from the Politburo, and with direct input from Le Duan, the PAVN General Staff devised a plan for delivering that kind of message. The plan called for a "general offensive," sudden enough to catch the enemy off-guard, and powerful enough to inspire a "general uprising" by the Southern population. Essentially, the General Staff sought to combine military and political struggle to foment mass popular uprisings and eclipse Saigon's authority. Its plan specifically called for major synchronized uprisings in cities and towns across the South to end Saigon's authority over them. Unable to rule populated areas, Thieu's regime would collapse, and the Americans would have to disengage.

The military parts of the plan involved concerted attacks by main force units and local guerrillas on urban settlements in the South, which, according to Le Duan, constituted the enemy's "rear base" and "nerve center." The main targets were the South's largest cities, Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang. Though a variety of objectives would be achieved through the attacks, their central military aim was to "crush every large puppet army unit." That aim was consistent with Resolution 9 of 1963, which continued to guide Hanoi's war strategy. The military plan also mandated direct strikes on US forces, especially in remote regions, less to annihilate them than to pin them down, keep them away from cities, and prevent them from coming to the rescue of embattled ARVN units. The siege of the isolated US garrison at Khe Sanh, to begin ten days before the start of the general campaign, was integral to that plan. If that 7,500-strong encampment happened to fall to communist forces, in a sort of replay of

Dien Bien Phu, Washington might follow the French example: accept a negotiated settlement and withdraw the rest of its forces. But that was not the chief reason for the attack there. Le Duan had long believed that striking forcefully at the South Vietnamese armed forces, while keeping their American counterparts bogged down elsewhere, represented the likeliest way to exploit the vulnerability of the former, while neutralizing the might of the latter. Should that occur, it would be enough to change the strategic balance in the war, and deliver victory.

In October 1967, the Politburo convened to discuss the timing of the proposed campaign. After careful consideration, it agreed on a launch date to coincide with lunar New Year's Day, 30 January 1968: a date sure to surprise the enemy and optimize the campaign's impact. That day – Tet – is Vietnam's most celebrated holiday. Festivities last several days as many urban dwellers rejoin relatives in the countryside to celebrate. Communist military planners were convinced they would catch the enemy off-guard, since heretofore the two sides had observed an informal truce during that period. The timing of the campaign would also allow communist forces to take advantage of the vulnerability of South Vietnamese units depleted by troops and officers taking leave to be with family. Hanoi had a keen sense of history. As related in Chapter 1, Emperor Quang Trung had taken advantage of the New Year celebrations in 1789 to defeat a Chinese army occupying Hanoi and secure the independence of Vietnam.

Le Duan's regime also had a keen sense of the American political calendar. The proposed offensive would take place at the start of a presidential election year. Officials in Hanoi had spent a great deal of time studying the American system of government and its political culture, as noted earlier. They appreciated the central role presidents played in shaping foreign and military policy, exercising as they did almost imperial authority over both. They also recognized, however, that in an election year presidential hopefuls needed to pander to public opinion on such matters, especially during wartime. That encouraged them to shape policy agendas according to the needs and demands of specific constituencies to improve their prospects for victory. As those agendas were being formulated, Hanoi would endeavor to sway American opinion in favor of the candidate who seemed to offer the least resistance to the realization of its own goals.

That was no small feat, to be sure. Nonetheless, DRVN leaders attempted to do just that in 1964, would do so now in 1968, and then try their luck again in 1972. What they would do now was dramatically

escalate hostilities, not just to the point of altering the balance of forces in the South, but also generating a political tsunami in the United States. In other words, Hanoi intended to use the American system against itself, for its own benefit. Despite its own lack of experience with liberal democracy, it demonstrated a sharp understanding of its workings, plus an aptitude for taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of American politicians to the vicissitudes of domestic opinion. That was a major reason Hanoi was able to compensate for its relative military weakness against Washington throughout the war.

In the days prior to the offensive, guerrillas, assuming the identity of merchants or relatives of residents, infiltrated Southern cities. Weapons came separately, concealed in foodstuff cargoes or in the coffins of fake funeral processions, among other means, and then stored at designated safe locations, usually a sympathizer's private residence. In early January, the Central Committee gave final sanction to the campaign, ratifying Resolution 14, which called for communist forces to initiate major combat operations later that month. To make sure the element of surprise was not compromised, instructions withheld the exact day and time of the start of the attack. Meanwhile, the Politburo directed military commanders to make final preparations for the assault on American forces at Khe Sanh and elsewhere. Failure was not an option; only success on the field of battle could guarantee that Southerners would join in mass demonstrations – the hoped-for general uprising – against the Saigon regime and the American presence, which represented the most critical component of the entire effort.

TET OFFENSIVE

On 21 January 1968, communist forces began laying siege to the American garrison at Khe Sanh, pounding it with heavy artillery before launching sustained infantry attacks against it. Unlike French forces at Dien Bien Phu, the Americans at Khe Sanh controlled the surrounding

hilltops, maintained continued access to air-dropped supplies, and enjoyed the protection of massive airpower – including raids by B-52 strategic bombers. That enabled the defenders to hold out for a total of seventy-seven days.

As that battle unfolded, on 30 January the cities of Da Nang, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, Hoi An, Qui Nhon, and Kontum all came under attack. According to one source, the command of Interzone V, under whose jurisdiction these cities fell, never received word that the general offensive, originally supposed to start that day, had been postponed at the last minute for twenty-four hours. Fortunately for Hanoi, neither Washington nor Saigon realized that these attacks presaged the imminence of a much larger, general offensive. Intelligence reports noted augmented enemy infiltration and troop build-ups in the northern panhandle of South Vietnam, and even warned of possible attacks in and around Quang Tri Province, but none hinted at an offensive on the scale about to take place.

During the early morning hours of 31 January, a small *Peugeot* truck and an old taxicab pulled up in front of the US embassy in Saigon. Out of the nondescript vehicles surged nineteen guerrillas, who proceeded to blast their way through the outer wall of the compound and place it under siege. Within hours, eighteen of the intruders were dead, the remaining one wounded and taken captive. This unsuccessful but astonishingly bold raid was the opening shot of the Tet Offensive, a colossal, unprecedented effort involving some 84,000 communist troops, who attacked a total of 100 urban centers, including all large cities and provincial capitals in South Vietnam. In several places it took some time for ARVN and US forces to realize an attack was underway; the sound of shots fired by communist forces was drowned out by the cacophony of exploding firecrackers ushering in the New Year. In Saigon itself, besides the US embassy, guerrillas raided the Presidential Palace, Tan Son Nhut Air Base/Airport, and the headquarters of both the South Vietnamese police and MACV. They also attempted to take over the national radio station, but were overcome as they were about to air a pre-recorded message urging the population to rise against American "imperialists" and their Saigon "lackeys."

The generalized attack caused shockwaves, not just in South Vietnam but around the world. At a time in the war when American and South Vietnamese forces had made so much apparent progress, the scope and nature of the offensive seemed unfathomable. The jolt in the United States was amplified by the fact that, just weeks before, President Johnson had to

great fanfare launched his so-called Success Offensive – a major public relations effort to rally domestic opinion behind the war, by exalting the merits of the American intervention in Vietnam and, more crucially, its progress. By the widely-publicized account of MACV's General Westmoreland, military and political conditions in the South had improved so much recently that "the end" was beginning to "come into view," and victory was "within our grasp." In light of the optimism generated inside the United States by that assessment, among others, the series of widespread, coordinated, and surprise attacks constituting the Tet Offensive exploded the myth of American progress in the fight against Vietnamese communist forces. That in turn shattered the credibility of the Johnson administration, the military brass, and the President himself, and called into question the whole project of the American military enterprise in Vietnam.

This initial reaction was soon shown to be vastly overdone, from a strictly military standpoint, but its effects persisted long enough to sow doubt in the minds of people of many political persuasions: that defeating Hanoi and the Viet Cong in a reasonable amount of time at an affordable cost – short of dropping a nuclear bomb on the North Vietnamese capital – was out of the question. The storming of the American embassy in Saigon became the symbol of these fears and concerns. If even the safety of that piece of real estate – sovereign US territory under international law – and of its occupants could not be guaranteed after nearly three years of American effort, involving more than half a million troops at a cost of more than 25,000 US dead, how could all of South Vietnam and its people ever be fully pacified?

As this and related questions were still being pondered, the moral position of Washington collapsed before the lens of an unscrupulous photojournalist. A man, presumed to be Viet Cong, wearing a checkered shirt and a pair of shorts, hands tied behind his back, was brought before National Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan (1930–98).[19] Loan proceeded to slowly unholster a .38 caliber revolver, signaled bystanders to move back, brought the gun to the man's head, and pulled the trigger. This episode, entirely caught on camera, generated massive press coverage, and prompted further questioning of the virtues of working in tandem with such men as Loan. After the incident, Walter Cronkite (1916–2009), the most influential US television news anchor at the time, told his audience of millions that it seemed "more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." President Johnson's endeavors in Indochina were failing. Hanoi had seemingly scored the unequivocal victory it had sought.

REALITIES OF TET

Politically and diplomatically, the Tet Offensive paid huge dividends for Hanoi. It galvanized antiwar sentiment across the United States and the West, and demonstrated that communist forces were much better organized, disciplined, and capable than Washington had ever assumed. The final military tally, related below, mattered less to global media audiences, whose thinking on the American war effort had become conditioned more by iconic images and acerbic analyses, both of which the Tet Offensive generated in abundance, than actual statistics. Thus, from a psychological standpoint, the offensive was a major strategic victory for Hanoi and, in light of subsequent events in the United States, a watershed moment in the history of the Vietnam War. That victory would in fact vindicate in the eyes of its own people and armed forces Hanoi's decision to undertake such a daring, risky, and, ultimately, costly wager. Elsewhere, the false but enduring assumption that psychological victory had been their principal objective all along made North Vietnamese leaders look like wizards who seemed to have inflicted a mortal blow on Washington and Saigon's ability to carry on the war. All things being equal, the Tet Offensive's greatest impact was on perceptions of the war in the United States and around the world.

As it turned out, the offensive was an unqualified, unmitigated military disaster for Hanoi. What Le Duan thought was a "sure thing" turned into a nightmare for communist forces. The raid on the American embassy was, again, emblematic of what happened. Taking advantage of the element of surprise, the attackers quickly secured their assigned target. However, they could not hold on to it when American and South Vietnamese forces counterattacked, and lost everything, including their lives. Some of the local victories in the Tet Offensive were meaningful, to be sure, but none translated into long-term gain. In the aftermath of the main offensive, Hanoi tried to recoup its losses by launching two follow-up efforts, "mini Tets," in March and again in May. Consisting primarily of further concerted attacks on Southern cities, they produced no significant gains – only more casualties, especially the May campaign.

Looking back upon the entire effort, it is clear that Le Duan had again grossly overestimated his prospects for victory. The general uprising he predicted, and upon which success in the 1968 campaign rested, never materialized. Once the initial wave of attacks had subsided, South Vietnamese forces quickly regrouped and, with US reinforcements, fought back successfully. The masses felt no incentive or compulsion to

rise against Saigon and the Americans. As a direct result of the offensive, Saigon for the first time ordered a general mobilization that dramatically expanded the size of its armed forces. As to the human cost of the offensive for Hanoi, it exceeded 40,000 troops killed and untold numbers of others wounded. According to conservative estimates, perhaps 165,000 civilians also died during the campaign, and between one and two million were displaced from their homes.

Most of the communist troops involved in the offensive, and therefore most of the casualties, belonged to the LAF. In fact, the failed Tet gambit decimated its ranks. Because the offensive had been planned and coordinated by Hanoi, this subsequently led to speculation that Northern leaders had consciously used Southerners as sacrificial lambs to fight and be killed, in order to spare their own forces and ensure their total domination of national politics once reunification was realized. The speculation is on its face preposterous. To be sure, the bulk of the troops in the Tet Offensive were Southern, but that was because the nature of the campaign required it. In preparation for the attack, combat and other personnel infiltrated cities. Northerners were ill-suited for that because they lacked familiarity with local geography and, most importantly, their accent could have easily alerted local authorities to their presence, compromising the entire campaign. Besides, the Southern masses were more likely to be roused by calls for a general uprising – the fundamental objective of the campaign – issued by fellow Southerners whom they might even know personally.

In the final analysis, the use of Southerners was sensible policy, a product of the strategic necessity of fighting in Southern cities, and not duplicitous intent. The decimation of Viet Cong ranks did nothing to improve Hanoi's prospects for military victory, and in fact constituted a huge setback. For Le Duan and other Hanoi leaders with Southern ties, the loss of so many Southern compatriots, many of whom they knew personally having previously struggled alongside them, was especially tragic.

The challenges confronting Hanoi in the South after Tet were compounded by a sordid event attributed to its forces, and which would haunt it for years afterwards. During their month-long occupation of Hue, the old imperial capital, communist troops, most of them from the North, summarily executed some 2,800 people on charges of being enemies of the people. Victims included members of the South Vietnamese government and armed forces, as well as hospital staff, teachers, and others with only indirect ties to the regime in Saigon. A number of foreigners, among them missionaries, were also killed. Victims' bodies were dumped in mass

graves, later investigation revealing some were buried alive. Admittedly, atrocities were commonplace during the war; communist forces had a habit of summarily executing "traitors," to punish them and to deter others from associating themselves with, or otherwise supporting, the regime in Saigon. However, this instance of violence stands out because of the number of victims, their status, and the methods used to kill them. It was also eerily reminiscent of the barbaric behavior exhibited later on a much larger scale by the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Disclosure of the Hue massacre shortly after South Vietnamese and US forces reclaimed the city called into question the intentions and purposes of Hanoi and the NLF. Many Southerners linked to the regime in Saigon had been drafted into the armed forces, or else depended on it for their livelihood. That is, their ties to it were not voluntary, but necessary or obligatory. The killings in Hue were not only misguided, but made a mockery of communist propaganda that theirs was the side of freedom and justice. They also spawned rumors that similar bloodbaths would ensue if and when communist forces defeated the Saigon regime. Those rumors not only motivated South Vietnamese soldiers to fight harder, but also produced a wave of eager volunteers for the army, just as Saigon issued its general mobilization order. In the waning days of the war, they fueled panic among Southerners, encouraging many to flee the country. In retrospect, few events did more than the Hue killings to undermine the communist political struggle in the South.

The Tet debacle had a sobering effect on Le Duan. It tempered his impetuousness and bellicosity, and encouraged him to think and act more pragmatically thereafter. It also chastened his revolutionary zeal and, for a period, shook his confidence in the ability of the forces under his command to realize their objectives as he defined them. Thereafter, the Secretary developed a new appreciation for diplomatic struggle, which his regime would come to rely upon more heavily to advance their cause after 1968. "Inwardly," historian Lien-Hang Nguyen has written, Le Duan knew that the Tet Offensive had failed, and that he "would have to shift tactics to save the revolution."[20] For the second time in four years, he had gambled big, and lost big. It was time for a new approach.

The Tet Offensive thus turned out to be a major psychological victory for Hanoi. But the war was far from over, and communist decision-makers could not gloss over the reality of the appalling losses their side suffered in the campaign. The Viet Cong was in particularly bad shape. The loss of hundreds of highly-skilled and experienced political operatives compounded that of thousands of fighters, and disrupted day-to-day operations, while greatly impairing recruitment and training of replacement combatants thereafter. North Vietnamese forces fared slightly better, but still suffered far more casualties than anticipated. For the first time, Le Duan confronted the reality that defeating the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies might take much longer – and cost a lot more, in terms of both material and human resources – than he had anticipated.

Le Duan's gross miscalculations, and the resulting cost borne by his forces, did little to undermine his stature in Hanoi. The man behind the offensive came out of it largely unscathed, his authority as dominant as before, if not more. There were reasons for this. First, the purges of the previous year had rid the Party and government of actual and potential detractors, allowing the Secretary to centralize power to an unprecedented degree. Second, unlike his American counterpart, Le Duan did not have to answer to his people, only to a Politburo stacked with his staunchest allies. Lastly, the absolute control over information exercised by the DRVN government enabled his regime to obscure the devastating effects of the Tet Offensive, made easier by the reaction to it: in the United States generally, and Washington specifically. Indeed, that reaction validated in the eyes of many in the North Le Duan's boldness and competence as a military leader, as suggested in the previous chapter. Dissident antiwar organizations, critical of his hardline policies, sprung

up in certain cities, including the capital, but were promptly quelled by the Ministry of Public Security.

In light of these circumstances, and the situation in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world, Le Duan faced no significant external pressure to rethink his regime's strategy or goals after Tet. He understood, however, that it could not sustain hostilities at previous levels, nor continue following an aggressive military strategy, in light of the losses recently suffered. Accordingly, beginning in mid-1968, Hanoi scaled back armed struggle in the South, and instructed its forces to exercise greater caution and patience. Caution and patience had never been the Le Duan regime's strong suit, but circumstances compelled it to think and act more pragmatically and less impetuously. Ideology still guided its strategic thinking thereafter, but now it subordinated dogma to realistic assessments of the new military and geostrategic situation it confronted. That shift signaled the abandonment of the Maoist revolutionary model, closely followed since Le Duan had become paramount leader in 1964. His regime's goals remained the same after mid-1968, but its tactics to meet them changed, for a period at least.

During the second half of 1968, on orders from Hanoi, communist forces in the South suspended major combat operations, and went back to waging low-intensity guerrilla warfare, as they had before 1964 and the introduction of Northern forces into the South. "The enemy's cumulative losses during his Tet and follow-up offensives," wrote Robert Komer, head of the Pacification program in South Vietnam at the time, "were a major factor in forcing him to revert to a protracted war strategy in 1969–71."[3] This paring down of military activity was accompanied by renewed emphasis on political struggle to enlarge and strengthen the Viet Cong, whose recruitment methods became more coercive in the post-Tet era. Hanoi also used the opportunity afforded by Johnson's de-escalation of the war to rest and regroup its own forces, recall battered units to the North for refitting, deploy fresh troops to the South, and otherwise rebuild the PAVN's capabilities. In a move attesting to the extent of the PAVN's decimation in the Tet Offensive and the difficulties North Vietnamese leaders faced in replenishing its ranks, Hanoi drafted growing numbers of young men from groups it had until now avoided tapping because of their questionable allegiance to the DRVN: namely, ethnic minorities and Catholics. Under current circumstances, achieving "economy of forces" became the strategic priority of Le Duan's regime. By official account, the communist struggle entered the phase of "fighting while consolidating" its forces.

MY LAI MASSACRE

Le Duan's regime did catch an important break in late 1969, which offset some of its stresses. This was the disclosure, in November, of the killing of somewhere between 350 and 500 South Vietnamese villagers, including women and children, by US troops, at a place called My Lai. The event had taken place more than a year earlier, on 16 March 1968. News of the slaughter captured television and newspaper headlines worldwide. In fact, the American and world press featured accounts and gruesome photographs of it for weeks. The My Lai massacre, and the attention it received, galvanized opposition to the war in the United States, which had lost some steam after Nixon was elected president promising "peace with honor." It also returned the

international spotlight to Vietnam, creating fertile grounds worldwide for Hanoi's diplomatic struggle. Exposure of the massacre in fact dominated Vietnamese communist efforts to win hearts and minds abroad thereafter. A good portion of propaganda materials disseminated overseas through DRVN and NLF missions consisted of photographs documenting the My Lai incident and other war crimes actually or allegedly perpetrated by US forces. Those materials were intended to disgrace Washington, and corroborate communist claims that the American War was in fact a neo-colonial crusade of the worst kind. They also vindicated Hanoi's narrative of the anti-American struggle as a national resistance war while undermining Washington's counter-narrative that its forces were in Indochina to defend freedom and democracy from communist subversion and brutality.

Owing partly to the shrewdness with which Hanoi handled this campaign, and to the receptiveness of foreign audiences, it no longer mattered that US troops in Vietnam acted professionally the vast majority of the time, and certainly no less so than did their enemies. The propaganda implied that the Americans always behaved callously and savagely in Vietnam. The net effect of all this was to make Washington policymakers, as well as US forces, accountable to world opinion for their actions. Hanoi made sure of that, just as it made sure the case was made that American forces in Vietnam were fighting not just Vietnamese troops but history itself. The gist of Vietnamese history embedded in Hanoi's propaganda was a tale of repeated victimization by foreign aggressors and of inevitable triumph over them. Casting the United States as the latest in a long line of invaders generated sympathy for Hanoi's "resistance war," a patriotic struggle that enabled Le Duan and other communist leaders to pose as determined nationalists and seize the moral high ground. American decision-makers were never as competent as their Hanoi counterparts in rationalizing their actions and manipulating public perception of their purposes and policies; that is, they could never develop and cultivate the kind of broad-based, global political awareness communist leaders could. Communist forces also committed crimes and atrocities, the most notorious of them taking place in Hue in 1968, but the United States could not turn that to its long-terms advantage. Besides, those forces usually enjoyed the benefit of the doubt: they were in their own country and ostensibly fighting for their own freedom and independence.

In South Vietnam, reports of the My Lai massacre, and other incidents of wanton violence by US forces against civilians, became important recruitment tools for the NLF among appalled, fearful, and incensed

civilians. They made urban dwellers, usually wary of the Front, more receptive to its message. Intellectuals in particular had a habit of reproving the Viet Cong's use of violence against other Vietnamese, insisting that the country had had enough of war and should solve its problems by non-lethal political and diplomatic means instead. But American war crimes changed the thinking of some of them, by diverting attention from Hanoi's role in instigating and prolonging the war and giving credence to NLF claims that it existed to protect Southern Vietnamese from foreign invaders and their local agents. That increased the Front's appeal among conservatives and non-communist nationalists in the South, who otherwise shied away from the Viet Cong because of its suspected ties to Hanoi.

In light of the recent successes of its own forces and Thieu's plunging stock, as well as the disappearance of Nixon from its own strategic calculations, the Politburo decided to deliver a *coup de grâce*, by proceeding with the general offensive proposed back in March. Militarily and politically, conditions were as good as ever for such a move. Even the weather was ideal. The launch of the general offensive would coincide with the onset of the dry season, when downpours were less frequent and combat much easier. This time, Le Duan thought, boldness would surely pay off.

The objectives of the new campaign were nothing less that total annihilation of enemy forces and conquest of all major cities, including Saigon. This time, however, the assaults on cities would be in sequence – not simultaneous, as in the Tet Offensive – and the attack on each urban center would occur only after its periphery had been "pacified." Hanoi was not going for shock and awe, as in earlier campaigns; it intended instead to seize and, most crucially, maintain effective control of targets, one after the other. This was another go-for-broke effort, but in such inviting circumstances that success seemed guaranteed. Interestingly, not all Northern military commanders were as confident of success as Le Duan. Some of them believed their forces were still unready for such an ambitious plan. Local guerrilla units were too weak and disorganized to be relied on, and Saigon's forces were actually much stronger than Le Duan seemed to think. The Secretary and the Politburo took those reservations under consideration, but ultimately chose to ignore them.

The plan developed by Le Duan and his advisers called for extensive use of mechanized units, including tanks, which meant that road conditions had to be optimal. A more delicate task was to make available to forces on the ground the hardware and other supplies they needed when they needed them. Reductions in foreign arms deliveries meant that certain items were in short supply, including ammunition for large guns such as cannons, mortars, and heavy machine-guns. To remedy that problem, Hanoi created a new organization, the General Technical Department (GTD), to coordinate the collection, repair, and distribution of weapons of all types, from hand grenades to armored vehicles, and

also to manufacture explosive devices and replacement parts for tanks and other vehicles, as well as guns. Among the GTD's most important functions were inventorying, refurbishing, and distributing military and other hardware captured from the enemy for use by communist forces. In preparation for the general offensive, the GTD repaired and refitted thousands of field radios, telephones, and generators, previously seized from ARVN forces, which markedly enhanced the communications capabilities of both PAVN and LAF units.

To accelerate the infiltration of men and supplies into the South, Hanoi also invested heavily in the restoration and improvement of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, badly pummeled by American bombs in 1972. Engineering units also completed a gas pipeline, running along the border inside of Laos and Cambodia down to Bu Gia Map, some ninety miles northeast of Saigon. More than a thousand miles long, and fitted with concealed fueling stations every ten miles or so, the pipeline facilitated the movement of vehicles, and thus of people and supplies, into the South. Considering how vulnerable it was to air attack, its existence was a measure of Hanoi's confidence that the Americans would not return.

All that preparation paid off. In November–December 1974, as the campaign got under way, communist forces scored a series of rapid and relatively painless victories. On 13 December, they launched an attack on Phuoc Long Province, located north of the South Vietnamese capital and near the Cambodia border. That effort was specifically intended to test American intentions, to see whether Washington would intervene in support of its allies in a critical battle, and secure key transportation routes for a final assault on Saigon. The results were unequivocal: communist forces crushed their opposition, achieving the "liberation" of the entire province on 6 January 1975. Despite repeated pleas for assistance by Thieu, during and after the battle, Washington did nothing. The Ford administration approached Congress about the possibility of another aid package in the form of material and financial support for its embattled ally, but to no avail. In late December 1974, a North Vietnamese intelligence estimate concluded that, on the basis of the American reaction, for now the United States would undertake no dangerous action against the DRVN, or its forces in the South, to save the Saigon regime. Washington was out for the count; Thieu and his armed forces were on their own.

The liberation of Phuoc Long eased the resupply of communist units in the deep South. In its aftermath, the Politburo endorsed a proposal by Le Duan to complete the liberation of the South not by the end of 1976, as originally projected, but before the onset of the next monsoon season,

in April 1975. This was ambitious, to be sure, but the situation seemed so favorable, Le Duan argued, that it was best to take advantage of this "opportune moment" and launch "the strongest and swiftest attack possible" to achieve "a complete, total victory." The triumph that had eluded Hanoi so often in the past seemed finally to be at hand.

FINAL PUSH

In March 1975, communist forces assaulted the strategically important city of Ban Me Thuot, in the southern Central Highlands. Military planners estimated that enemy forces there were weaker and more vulnerable than elsewhere. Their assessment proved correct: Ban Me Thuot fell within days, along with the rest of the southern third of the Central Highlands. As communist forces prepared to move against their next targets, including Pleiku, home to a large ARVN airbase, Thieu decided to evacuate the rest of his forces, including elite Airborne and Marine divisions, from the region and redeploy them along the coast, as well as to areas just north of Saigon. He ordered the redeployment to consolidate the defense of what was left of his country and, specifically, to form protective rings around areas of greatest strategic importance, such as the capital, until his forces had regained enough strength and momentum to retake Ban Me Thuot, and other lost positions in the Central Highlands.

It was at this point that everything began to unravel for Thieu. Southerners, including members of his own armed forces, interpreted his decision to redeploy elite divisions, and surrender the Central Highlands, as presaging the surrender of the rest of the South to communist armies. That effectively doomed his regime. ARVN soldiers, a good portion of them conscripts with little interest in sacrificing their lives in a hopeless cause, lost what little will they had left to fight, and either surrendered, defected – or simply shed their weapons and uniforms and went home. They were encouraged in this by Southern mothers recruited by communist forces to broadcast radio messages imploring ARVN soldiers to stop fighting. Those who remained loyal to the regime did their best to follow orders, but the precipitate withdrawal from the Central Highlands compelled them to abandon vast quantities of weapons and equipment, thus diminishing what fighting capabilities they had left. In fact, what began as an orderly retreat from the Central Highlands quickly turned chaotic, with South Vietnamese soldiers literally running for their lives to escape fast-approaching communist forces.

The hardware left behind by the fleeing ARVN forces included everything from tanks, armored personnel carriers, trucks, and heavy artillery to rifles, pistols, and hand grenades. The quality and quantity of enemy materiel captured by communist forces was such that it offset both their battlefield losses and shortfalls in weapons deliveries from abroad. To illustrate, in an earlier series of raids over one five-day period, North Vietnamese forces overran an ARVN district headquarters and its peripheral outposts and police stations, seizing more than a thousand weapons of various types, including four 105mm howitzers plus their 7,000 shells. Days later, they used those same artillery pieces and shells to win a series of battles in which they seized 10,000 more shells, instantly compensating for what they had just expended and actually shoring up their inventory. Communist forces were thus able to take advantage of their own momentum, as well as the panic on the other side, to crush the remnants of Thieu's army and give it no chance to regroup. They added to the confusion and mayhem by occasionally going into battle wearing ARVN uniforms, slightly altered so that only communist forces could differentiate between friendly and enemy combatants. In a twist of irony, the generous assistance lavished upon the South Vietnamese regime by the United States just before and after the signing of the Paris agreement helped seal the doom of the regime it was intended to save.

The disarray in the South Vietnamese armed forces demoralized Southern civilians who still supported Thieu or otherwise dreaded a communist takeover because of their ties to his regime. Approximately seventy percent of Southerners were either employed by, or had close relatives working or fighting for, the Saigon regime in 1975. Many of them feared they would be killed or tortured if communist forces triumphed. After all, those forces had set a terrifying precedent in Hue back in 1968, during the Tet Offensive, when they murdered some 2,800 civilians whose only crime was to have ties to Thieu's regime. Who was to say such a bloodbath would not happen again? According to a rumor floating around in the South in 1974–5, able-bodied Southern women who had lent no support to the communist war effort would have their fingernails plucked out one-by-one if ever captured by Northern soldiers. They would be thus punished, the rumor went, for being "bourgeois reactionaries," more concerned about their physical appearance than the liberation of the country. In the midst of this final campaign, local guerrillas in one district displayed in a market square the bodies of militiamen loyal to Saigon they had just killed in combat. Their intention was to convince enemy troops to lay down their weapons and civilians to rally against

Saigon to avoid dying unnecessarily, as these men had. In reality, such acts reminded Southerners of the abominations communist forces were capable of committing, and alarmed them about what would come next.

By the end of March, broad swaths of the South were under communist control, and the Saigon regime was disintegrating. Events unfolded so rapidly that Hanoi leaders had a difficult time adjusting to the resulting circumstances. As communist forces completed their sweep of the Central Highlands, the Politburo met twice to discuss the situation in the South. On 25 March, Le Duan and the Politburo gave their final sanction for taking Saigon and complete the liberation of the South within a month. Le Duan entrusted none other than Le Duc Tho to go to the South, to personally supervise what he hoped would be the final campaign of the Vietnam War.

The next main targets of communist forces were the coastal cities of Hue and Da Nang, the South's second largest city. Their fall was spectacularly fast, and cut off the northern half of the South from Saigon. In less than a month, communist armies had scored their biggest victories of the entire war. The 1974–5 general offensive was indeed the "strongest and swiftest attack" launched by Hanoi in the South, as Le Duan had hoped it would be. It was also its most successful, by far. The offensive exceeded even the expectations of Le Duan, who always demanded more than his forces could deliver. At long last, brashness was paying off. By early April, close to half of the entire South Vietnamese population, some eight out of nineteen million people, lived in areas controlled by communist forces. By then, too, the South Vietnamese army had become a shadow of its former self, having lost nearly half of its troops and weapons in just a few weeks. These developments completely "transformed the situation," as an official communist history states.[7] Hanoi could now launch the final attack on Saigon.

SAIGON FALLS

Immediately after the fall of Hue and Da Nang, the last major battle of the war, the so-called *Ho Chi Minh* campaign, began. Supervised by Tho, but directed by PAVN General Van Tien Dung (1917–2002), it aimed to seize Saigon and force the capitulation of the regime there. Spearheaded by tanks – and involving bombing raids on enemy positions using captured aircraft, including at least one flown by a defector from the South Vietnamese air force – the battle unfolded at lightning speed. As communist forces approached Saigon, they learned that the Cambodian capital of

Phnom Penh had fallen to the Khmer Rouge. On 21 April, Thieu resigned as RVN President, and fled the country. Thousands, mostly members of the elite, followed him, boarding the last flights out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base/Airport outside Saigon, which closed to civilian airlines on the 26th (US military planes continued to fly people out of there for the next three days). Tran Van Huong (1903–82), a former prime minister, replaced Thieu, only to step down himself less than a week later, at which point ARVN General Duong Van Minh, who had briefly replaced Diem in the aftermath of the November 1963 coup, assumed the presidency. Highly respected in both halves of Vietnam for his patriotism, moderate views, and distinguished career, Minh offered to negotiate an end to the war. Hanoi turned him down.

Over the next few days, remaining American personnel prepared to evacuate the South Vietnamese capital and other sites. Concerned about setting off a general panic in the South, the Ford administration refused to organize an early evacuation of its diplomatic corps. Staff at the US embassy in Saigon nonetheless went on a frenzy, destroying any sensitive materials and equipment they would not be able to take with them once the order to leave came. At the secret behest of Washington, relayed through the Soviets, Hanoi presumably ordered its forces to slow down their advances on the capital, to allow the Americans to complete their evacuation, thus avoiding a complicated and hazardous situation for both governments.

Meanwhile, panic set in among the population, particularly those with close ties to the regime and the United States who had missed the last flights out of Tan Son Nhut. Fearing harsh retribution from communist troops in the event of their victory, thousands of government officials, ranking members of the armed and security forces, religious leaders, doctors, teachers, artists, and other members of the intelligentsia prepared to flee the country with their families. Lower-level personnel from both the government and armed forces, and Catholics, also sought to leave. These prospective refugees sold what they could, exchanged as much of their Vietnamese currency for gold and US dollars, gathered the most valuable possessions they could carry with them, and attempted to contact any American they knew, hoping they could facilitate their departure from Vietnam.

Just before noon on 30 April, a tank bearing the NLF flag, but actually belonging to the PAVN, crashed through the main gate of Independence Palace in Saigon, the South Vietnamese President's official residence. Newly-invested President Minh offered the surrender of his government,

FIGURE 6.1 PAVN tanks in the streets of Saigon hours after the surrender of the South Vietnamese regime, 30 April 1975. Courtesy of National Archives Center 3, Hanoi.

only to be told that he had nothing left to surrender. Flanked by communist troops, he went on national radio and called on all remaining ARVN forces to lay down their weapons (possibly, Minh's message was prerecorded by communist cadres). Some unit leaders disregarded the order, but they and their men were soon neutralized. As this unfolded, frantic Southerners attempted to reach the safety of US warships, anchored off the South Vietnamese coast, by any means they could find, including army helicopters. More than 120,000 Southerners left their country on or just before that day, accompanied by some one thousand remaining US personnel. In a scene emblematic of the national humiliation suffered by the United States in Vietnam, and forever embedded in the national psyche, some of the last Americans, along with their closest Vietnamese collaborators and their families, ungracefully departed by helicopter from the rooftop of not the US embassy, as is usually assumed, but a hotel in the South Vietnamese capital.[8]

Interestingly, the first communist troops to enter Saigon were in no mood to celebrate just yet. In fact, many were terrified. They feared and actually braced for a repeat of the Tet Offensive, when they had seized Southern cities with relative ease only to be expelled and decimated in subsequent enemy counterattacks. Veterans of the 1968 campaign were

especially unnerved by that possibility. To their great relief, there was no response by the enemy. This time, only peace ensued.

Thus ended the Vietnam War. Hanoi won; Saigon and the United States lost. Le Duan finally had his moment of triumph – and vindication for the millions of lives lost or shattered because of the war he had so desperately wanted, and been instrumental in precipitating more than a decade before.

Epilogue: Legacies

REUNIFICATION & RE-EDUCATION

Two weeks before the fall of Saigon, on 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia. In December, the People's Democratic Republic of Laos was proclaimed, under pro-Vietnamese communist leader Prince Souphanouvong (1909–95), completing the "liberation" of Indochina. Following a largely ceremonial consultative conference between PRG and DRVN representatives, Northern and Southern Vietnam were formally merged into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) on 2 July 1976. According to its constitution, recycled from the DRVN's 1959 constitution, the SRVN was a "people's democratic state," a euphemism for communist state, led by "the working class," a euphemism for the Communist Party. National reunification under communist governance, the main thrust of the anti-American resistance, fulfilled a fundamental objective of the Vietnamese Revolution launched forty-five years earlier. In 1980, the SRVN adopted its first original constitution, confirming its proud membership of the communist bloc, and marking the apogee of Le Duan's power.

Formal reunification of the country was much easier to achieve than national reconciliation and unity. Southerners proved extremely wary of the new regime responsible for their well-being, and reluctant to buy into the socio-political and economic order it supported. The relationship between Hanoi and those who had previously served in Thieu's government and armed forces, and otherwise supported his regime or worked with Americans, was especially fraught with distrust. As noted in the previous chapter, during the latter stages of the conflict Vietnamese communist

authorities had estimated that more than seventy percent of Southern households had direct or indirect ties to the Saigon regime. Years of war, pitting Northerners against Southerners, and the dire consequences of Vietnamization in particular, created a lot of bad blood between the two. Mutual acrimony and mistrust persisted long after hostilities ended.

Mistreatment of former enemies by the victors was particularly detrimental to national reconciliation. Contrary to rampant rumors at the time, there was no bloodbath, no mass killings of Saigon loyalists following the fall of that regime. Summary executions of RVN government, armed forces, police, and other personnel occurred, but were rare and unsanctioned by communist authorities. There was, however, a mass incarceration of as many as one million Southern "reactionaries," only a handful of whom were ever formally charged or tried in court, in more than eighty "re-education camps" spread across the country. By official account, Hanoi aimed only to "reform" those individuals to facilitate their rehabilitation into "new society," a practice introduced in the North in 1961 to deal with unrepentant former members of the French colonial government and armed forces. The reality proved much starker. Re-education camp detainees received a mandatory "education" centered on history and communism. They also had to write their life history, and confess as well as atone for their crimes, which included supporting the Saigon regime, colluding with the Americans, opposing the Vietnamese Revolution, and committing national treason. Detention lasted anywhere between a few weeks to several years, depending on one's former activities, response to "treatment," and family connections. Many spent over a decade in the camps. As part of their "therapy" detainees performed hard, often dangerous "productive labor," such as clearing mine fields. They endured sleep and food deprivation as well as frequent beatings. Malnutrition, maltreatment, and diseases claimed the lives of more than 150,000 detainees. These Vietnamese "gulags," a reference to the unforgiving Siberian prison camps where Stalin sent his real and imagined enemies, were veritable death camps.

Healing the physical and emotional wounds of war among Northern civilians was no easy task either. Many Northerners blamed Southerners for causing and prolonging hostilities by colluding with the United States. That, in conjunction with the fact that Vietnam had no real tradition of national unity and been partitioned for so long, further encumbered national reconciliation. Long after the war ended, Northerners continued to look down upon, and speak disparagingly about, their Southern compatriots. Tensions between Northerners and Southerners remain palpable

to this day. Northerners also felt a great deal of anger and resentment toward their own government and leaders, though few dared express such sentiments openly. Close to a million of them served in the South between 1965 and 1975. Most fought multiple years; countless never returned. As previously mentioned, during the war DRVN authorities rarely notified families of the confirmed death of a relative to sustain morale and support for the war at home. Shortly after the war ended, however, the government had to inform those families. It was only at that point, when they received official word that their loved ones, like those of so many other households, would never be coming home, that Northerners began to get a real sense of the war's actual cost. Realization that the government had deceived them – and known for years of the death or disappearance of their fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters but chosen to withhold that information – compounded the exasperation and ire of bereaved families.

So it was that the exhilaration resulting from the war's end in both halves of Vietnam quickly gave way to gloom, sadness, and despair. Vietnam holds nationwide celebrations and commemorations on 30 April each year. For those Vietnamese who lived through the war, they are merely stark reminders of the war's appalling cost, of the sacrifices their families had to make, and of the personal losses they suffered.

ECONOMIC WOES & EXODUS

A few months after reunification, in December 1976, Vietnamese communists held their Fourth Congress, the first in sixteen years. Le Duan was reappointed Secretary and, to mark the dawn of a new era in Vietnamese politics, the VWP was rebranded the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). More meaningfully, the Congress adopted a new five-year plan (1977–81) stressing expedited reconstruction along socialist lines, integration of the South into the socio-political and economic order already in place in the North, and completion of nationwide communization. That meant the immediate expropriation of all private property and the collectivization of farming in the South. Many of the objectives outlined in the plan, it turned out, were too ambitious. "Drunk with pride in their success in war," political scientist Tuong Vu has written, "Vietnamese leaders set highly unrealistic goals and employed draconian tactics in their quest to develop socialism 'in five, ten years.' "[1] Predictably, those goals were never met, but resort to draconian measures by the authorities lasted well into the 1980s.

Hanoi faced a mountain of challenges at the time which, insofar as the authorities were concerned, warranted the application of harsh measures. The war was over, but much remained to be done before people could enjoy the fruits of peace. Merely repairing and rebuilding what had been damaged and destroyed during the conflict seemed impossible. Millions of bomb craters, as well as land mines and other unexploded ordnance, littered the countryside. The latter killed and badly injured people, especially peasants and children, long after the fighting stopped. And they still do. At the last count, undetonated explosives had claimed more than 40,000 lives, nearly the number of Americans killed in the war itself.

Improving economic and living conditions and returning to normalcy was made all the more difficult by the exodus of many of the best and brightest Southern minds just before and after collapse of the Saigon regime. And while the SRVN would receive generous assistance from other communist states and the Soviet Union in particular after 1975, including an army of technical and other experts, the rest of the world, seemingly so concerned about the fate of the Vietnamese during the period of US military intervention, largely forgot about them after it ended. Always quick to denounce the destruction of factories, schools, and hospitals by American bombs during the war, the international community was largely absent when time came to rebuild them afterwards. Japan and a handful of West European states were the only capitalist countries to maintain trade relations with Vietnam after its reunification under communist governance. But even that was not enough to ward off the threat of famine in certain Northern cities, including the capital, in spring 1978.

Agent Orange, a carcinogenic herbicide, as well as other chemical substances used by the United States during the war to deprive enemy forces of crops and jungle cover, poisoned the soil in parts of Southern Vietnam, making food production in affected areas either impossible or dangerous for farmers themselves or consumers of their produce. As many as four million Vietnamese were directly exposed to and suffered illnesses because of Agent Orange. Thousands of children were born with horrific birth defects because of their parents' exposure to the toxic chemical. Labor hours lost because of those effects, and the cost of providing and caring for victims, compounded the economic woes of the SRVN and its people.

Another important challenge was demobilizing, rehabilitating, and finding jobs for more than two million soldiers whose services were no longer needed once hostilities ceased. Many were young men who had

spent their entire adult life fighting for one side or the other, and possessed little or no professional or technical skills. Some were looking forward to putting the past behind them and to start living normal lives; others simply could not. Emotional, psychological, and physical wounds hampered their reintegration into civilian life. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is not a diagnosable condition in Vietnam. However, if close to a quarter million Americans who served in the war were subsequently diagnosed with the mental illness, a significantly larger number of Vietnamese combat veterans presumably suffered the same affliction. Some of the more than 1.5 million Vietnamese combatants maimed in the war eked out a living begging on street corners, or performing whatever menial work they could find after it ended. Several wounded veterans from the North turned to smuggling goods from China and other countries. Owing to their military service, SRVN authorities usually turned a blind eye to their activities.

While most veterans, especially former members of the South Vietnamese armed forces, were left to fend for themselves after hostilities ended, Hanoi rewarded demobilized PAVN soldiers who had distinguished themselves by their valor and leadership with lucrative managerial positions in Southern and some Northern state-owned enterprises (SOEs). These "heroes of the Revolution" made terrible bosses. Lacking pertinent knowledge, training, and interpersonal workplace skills, they proved incompetent and highly ineffectual. Their presence at the helm of sometimes very large and important firms slowed the pace of Vietnam's recovery and contributed to its serious economic problems, including underperforming SOEs, lasting well into the 1990s. The attendant domination by Northerners of the Southern civil service, including the security and education sectors, added to the frustrations of people there. The presence of and privileges enjoyed by these "carpetbaggers" was especially irksome for those who had fought for and otherwise supported the NLF during the war. A majority felt Hanoi simply turned its back on them once peace returned and it no longer needed their services. The government's decision to rename Saigon "Ho Chi Minh City" did nothing to alleviate Southern feelings of vexation and destitution.

The economic situation remained so bad through the 1980s that the government had to institute a system of rationing, as had existed in wartime. But whereas the North Vietnamese population had rarely if ever experienced shortages of necessary commodities during the war, they became regular occurrences throughout that decade. Other features of life in the "subsidy era," as the Vietnamese call it, included queuing for

hours each week to obtain basic allotments of vital items; spartan living conditions in a politically repressive atmosphere; and extreme dependence of foreign aid, especially from the Soviet Union. The total embargo on trade imposed by Washington after the fall of Saigon and strictly enforced afterwards exacerbated those misfortunes. In the absence of healthy manufacturing and agricultural sectors, cheap labor became one of Vietnam's chief exports. Workers went to other communist countries, which also trained them and other specialists. Remittances from overseas relatives, including in time from those resettled in the West, became a lifeline for countless families.

The dire economic situation, plus discrimination and maltreatment by the authorities, prompted more Vietnamese to flee their country. As many as one million people left during the late 1970s and 1980s, some by land but most by rickety fishing vessels, prompting the international community to label them "boat people." While leaving was a challenge in itself, it was nothing compared to the dangers awaiting them on the high seas, including dehydration, starvation, and drowning, as well as rape, capture, or death at the hands of pirates who abounded in coastal waters. Under the best of circumstances, asylum-seekers would be picked up after a few hours or days by passing cargo ships. Most, however, were at sea for anywhere between a few weeks to a few months before reaching safe havens in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Hong Kong. Unsurprisingly, many did not survive the voyage. The UN estimates that 300,000 boat people perished at sea. Some survivors resorted to or witnessed cannibalism, pushing them to suicide later.