

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING FAILURES IN THE
TET OFFENSIVE

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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING FAILURES IN THE TET OFFENSIVE, by LCDR Charles A. P. Turner, USN, 57 pages.

Officers in today's United States military can learn from the policy and military decision-making failures and successes in American history. The hope is that in future military operations, they will not repeat the mistakes of the past. This thesis will address the question of how the American leadership failed to correctly assess the indications of an impending offensive in the months preceding the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam. The thesis will analyze and investigate the following weaknesses that contributed to the failure to foresee the Tet Offensive: North Vietnamese and Viet Cong deceptive actions, American inability to analyze those actions, measures the United States had in place to detect and to counter North Vietnamese preparations for the offensive, and the incomplete organization of the American intelligence organization in theater. The Tet Offensive serves as a cautionary parable for modern-day and future military leadership.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vi
TABLE LIST	vi
LIST OF ACROYNMS	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. DECEPTION AND WARNINGS	8
3. MISSED OPPORTUNITY	35
4. INTELLIGENCE STRUCTURE	43
5. SOLUTIONS	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	64
CERTIFICATION FOR MMAS DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT	65

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Overview of Tet Offensive Strikes	13
2. Monthly North Vietnamese Army Infiltration Totals, 1967	24
3. Infiltration Routes	36
4. Political Map of Southeast Asia	37
5. Pacific Command Chain of Command	45
6. Commander, United States Military Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) Chain of Command	46
7. MACV J-2 (Intelligence) Organization, 1967	47
8. Staff Organization for Assistant Chief of Staff, MACV J-2 (Intelligence), May 1967	48

TABLE LIST

Table	Page
1. North Vietnamese Import Levels for 1966 and 1967	40

LIST OF ACROYNMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam
CDEC	Combined Document Exploitation Center
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV	Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CMEC	Combined Material Exploitation Center
CMIC	Combined Military Interrogation Center
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operation and Revolutionary Development Support
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DFS	Defile System
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam
FWMAF	Free World Military Assistance Forces
GVN	Government of (South) Vietnam
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research (United States State Department)
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration

NLF	National Liberation Front
NSA	National Security Agency
NVA	North Vietnamese Army (People's Army of Vietnam, PAVN)
NVN	North Vietnam
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese Army)
PACOM	United States Pacific Command
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces (Viet Cong)
RVN	Republic of (South) Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of (South) Vietnam Armed Forces
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
SPOS	Strong Point Obstacle System
SVN	South Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong (People's Liberation Armed Forces, PLAF)
Viet Minh	Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (League for the Independence of Viet Nam)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If our opponent is to be made to comply with our will, we must place him in a situation which is more oppressive to him than the sacrifice which we demand; but the disadvantages of this position must naturally not be of a transitory nature, at least in appearance, otherwise the enemy, instead of yielding, will hold out, in the prospect of a change for the better.¹

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

The 1968 Tet Offensive demonstrates how a leadership inability to properly analyze the battlefield can reshape a war and influence the domestic political landscape. Due to flaws in this analytical process, the Tet Offensive ultimately became a major negative turning point in the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Tet accelerated a change in how the American public viewed the progress of the conflict. Despite the tactical defeat of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA, also known as the People's Army of Vietnam [PAVN]) and People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF, or more commonly known as the Viet Cong), many Americans now viewed Vietnam negatively and the Johnson administration with distrust. Increasingly, more and more people began to question the legitimacy of US involvement in Vietnam.

Did the American military leadership fail to correctly assess the indications of an impending offensive in the months preceding the Tet Offensive? In 1967, did the leadership ignore or misinterpret critical intelligence on the offensive including the movement of NVA and Viet Cong troops and supplies? Did Communist activities cause the American military and government to misread preparations being made for a larger operation? Based on information available at the time, what measures could the US have taken to correctly interpret NVA and National Liberation Front (NLF)

preparations for the Tet Offensive? Was the American intelligence structure and decision-making process optimized, in terms of organization, to analyze the intelligence it possessed?

During the early years of the Vietnam War, there was a common belief in the American government, both among civilian and military members, that the US could win the war with the usual American brilliance, hard work, dedication, industrial strength, and overwhelming force. The general sentiment was that a strong, stable South Vietnam would play a critical part in containing the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, thus sending a message to America's allies around the world that the US would go to great lengths to support them and to preserve democratic institutions. Commencing in earnest in March 1965, the United States incrementally built up a force of 525,000 troops (including 107 combat battalions) by the end of 1967.²

Knowing the American strategic background in Vietnam prior to the Tet Offensive sets the stage for understanding the fallout of the Tet Offensive. As the war effort languished and public opinion at home soured, senior decision makers in the Johnson administration, the Pentagon, and the staff of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), did not adjust their strategic and operational planning to reflect the realities of fighting a war in Vietnam. By 1967, the nature of the war had already shifted from counterinsurgency, which characterized the war earlier in the 1960s, into a war fought by conventional forces. The Vietnam War presented an internal conflict where only one side--the Communists--was willing to sustain horrific losses for an extended period of time in order to achieve victory on their terms. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong operated in a manner--strategically, operationally, and

tactically--which differed significantly from how Americans expected them to act. The Americans could not understand how the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong could continue to fight even with significant damage to their industrial and logistical capacity. The NVA and the NLF demonstrated a level of determination which was contrary to the American experience, and the enemy also placed a premium on operational deception. The American leadership failed to appreciate this particular emphasis despite previous US successes with operational deception, such as actions taken prior to Operation Overlord in World War II. In part, these shortcomings would blind the leadership in theater and in Washington from seeing the signs of a brewing storm that became the Tet Offensive.

We will now look at the Tet Offensive in terms of the Communist perspective. The Tet Offensive can be seen in terms of *dau tranh* (struggle), which is further subdivided into *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle) and *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle). Also embedded in the concept of *dau tranh* is *khoi nghia* (general uprising), which has been defined as “a truculent militant mass political action, either scattered piecemeal geographically or as a broad single ubiquitous entity. . . . [It] can be either temporary or continuous, either a brief flash of action or a drawn-out activity.”³ The Communists applied a combination of armed *dau tranh* and *khoi nghia* to the Tet Offensive, and they also thought in terms of a protracted conflict, realizing that an interminable war against a superior enemy would most likely wear down their opponent’s willpower and determination to finish the conflict on their terms. The term “fifty-year-war concept” is one way of describing this approach.⁴

The conduct of the Tet Offensive and the concept of *dau tranh* suggest a connection to the writings of NVA General Vo Nguyen Giap, published in 1961, where he describes guerrilla warfare and mobile warfare:

Mobile warfare is the fighting way of concentrated troops, of the regular army in which relatively big forces are regrouped and operating on a relatively vast battlefield, attacking the enemy where he is relatively exposed with a view to annihilating enemy manpower, advancing very deeply then withdrawing very swiftly, possessing to the extreme, dynamism, initiative, mobility and rapidity of decision in face of new situations. . . . The strategy of long-term war and the guiding principle of fighting from guerilla war gradually moving to regular war with the forms of guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare including entrenched camp warfare, were very successful experiences of our national liberation war [First Indochina War].⁵

Giap's reference to mobile warfare shows some similarity to the widespread attacks of the Tet Offensive. The "strategy of long-term war" bears resemblance to the "fifty-year concept" mentioned previously.

In terms of published works, significant decision makers published their memoirs and provided their insights on the events of the time. In particular, the memoirs of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara provided his perspective into the war's evolution and progress. He also provided insight into conferences held in 1997 and 1998 with his Vietnamese counterparts and historians where they discussed the war. These conferences provided an opportunity for both sides to reveal their insights and shed light on issues from the war.

Given this understanding of the broad conflict, my research focused on two sources. Firstly, the research for this thesis included a number of respected secondary works on the subject of the Vietnam War years surrounding the Tet Offensive. Secondly, research also covered primary sources which provide data to support, refute,

or bring into clearer resolution the decision making context for the leadership. The US military has declassified a significant volume of documentation from the Vietnam War era, and this documentation also has been an invaluable source of detailed information for use in my thesis. My research indicated that some agencies involved in the Vietnam War, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), still have not declassified any appreciable amount of documents produced during their involvement in the conflict. Discussions with staff at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) have confirmed this conclusion. The focus of the research was on the theater-level leadership, organization and processes of MACV.

Another aspect of my methodology examines the myth of “intelligence failure” as the cause of the failure to anticipate the Tet Offensive. On the contrary, the secondary literature suggests that sufficient intelligence existed to clearly indicate that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were preparing for a massive offensive in South Vietnam, even if the exact details and timing were unclear. Much of this intelligence surfaced with ample time for the MACV leadership to form a clear picture of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong intentions and to react accordingly. MACV should have directed a wiser use of intelligence-gathering efforts. Subordinate units could have been better employed in order to capitalize on this information and to decisively defeat Communist forces. Anti-infiltration barriers and surveillance systems were in place in 1967 which provided indications of the North Vietnamese buildup and, as my research suggests, were not fully utilized to their maximum capability.

Seldom does a single event have such a widespread impact that it can quickly change the course of a war’s agenda or a country’s willingness to fight. The inability to

see and pre-empt a major offensive, as happened during Tet, was such an event. Public support for the Vietnam War and President Lyndon Johnson had started waning in earnest by late 1967. However, Tet's impact profoundly changed the American public perception of the Vietnam War. The Tet Offensive was an unintended boon for the North Vietnamese government, and it shocked Americans. As a result of the Tet Offensive, the American public increasingly began to feel that the Johnson administration had not been forthright in stating the lack of progress being made in driving back the Communists in South Vietnam.⁶

In summary, this thesis will analyze the American decision-making process in Vietnam leading up to the Tet Offensive. It will explore the influence of deception, misinterpreted intelligence, and the systemic intelligence process. Another chapter, principally archival data, will examine the American anti-infiltration efforts and their influence, if any, on American decision making.

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Pelican Classics, 1968; Penguin Books, 1982), 104.

²Robert S. McNamara et al., *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), 355.

³Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 218.

⁴*Ibid.*, 215-216, 218-220.

⁵Vo Nguyen Giap, General, People's Army of Vietnam, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961; reprint, Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), 106, 110; and Phillip B. Davidson, Lieutenant General, US Army (Retired), *Vietnam At War - The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), 439-443.

⁶Davidson, 484-486.

CHAPTER 2

DECEPTION AND WARNINGS

Now war is based on deception. Move when it is advantageous and create changes in the situation by dispersal and concentration of forces.¹

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The Tet Offensive was not some hastily conceived and executed operation but rather an assault that was the culmination of a plan developed over the previous year. By early 1967, the North Vietnamese leadership altered its strategy in their struggle for the unification of Vietnam. They recognized that they had come to a stalemate in their struggle to unite Vietnam, and the Thirteenth Party Plenum cited a need to achieve a “decisive victory in a relatively short period of time.”² Their strategy now included orchestrating an offensive which would inspire a mass uprising against the South Vietnamese government and which would humiliate the South Vietnamese military. Planning for such an offensive required time and detailed planning. Success would depend on masking the North Vietnamese’s true intentions from American planners. The Vietnamese Communist Party first discussed plans for a major offensive in South Vietnam during the Thirteenth Party Plenum, which was held in Hanoi from 23 to 27 January 1967. Their goal was two-fold. The first goal was to draw US forces into large battles out in the countryside, thus pulling them away from the cities and leaving the cities vulnerable to attack. With the Americans thus distracted and not able to support the South Vietnamese military, the second goal was for Communist forces to target the South Vietnamese government infrastructure in the cities. The Communists expected the South Vietnamese government to collapse with relative ease, feeling that the population would willingly participate in a mass uprising. Once this uprising was

completed, the North Vietnamese government would present a *fait accompli* which would force the United States to accept the new government now in place. Limited planning for the Tet Offensive began in March 1967, and solid plans were laid by July.³

On 25 October 1967, the Vietnamese party Central Committee issued Resolution 14, which provided a plan for a series of attacks under the code name “General Attacks, General Uprisings” or “General Offensive, General Uprising” (Tong Cong Kich, Tong Khoi Nghia [TCK-TKN] in Vietnamese). Regarding Resolution 14, North Vietnamese General Tran Van Tra, the senior Communist general in South Vietnam, would later write:

The upcoming general offensive/general uprising will be a period, a process, of intensive and complicated strategic offensives by military, political and diplomatic means. . . . The general offensive/general uprising is a process in which we will attack and advance on the enemy continuously both militarily and politically.⁴

Giap bore the responsibility of planning TCK-TKN and designed it with three phases in mind. Phase I would occur during September to December 1967 and involve large-scale assaults throughout the rural areas of South Vietnam carried out by the NVA. By drawing out the American forces from the cities, Giap hoped to create favorable conditions for the Viet Cong to attack the urban areas. He would also station two NVA divisions around Khe Sanh as preparation for future operations. TCK-TKN’s Phase II involved Viet Cong forces attacking positions throughout the country--South Vietnamese cities, South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam or ARVN) units, and the American support structure. Giap wanted to use the Viet Cong since the accents of the northerners in the NVA would give them away, and he wanted to give the appearance that South Vietnamese compatriots were instigating the attacks.

This ploy also allowed Giap to keep the NVA as a reserve. Phase III of TCK-TKN was the political offensive where the liberated South Vietnamese would overthrow their government and isolate the American forces.⁵

During 1967, Communist forces slowly prepared for the offensive, moving supplies and ammunition into place while maintaining tight operational security. In mid-1967, the North Vietnamese deployed the two NVA divisions, totaling 20,000 men, in the Khe Sanh Valley north of the Marine stronghold. General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), was convinced that he could use the Marines at Khe Sanh to bait the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong into positioning a bulk of their forces there and to deliver a shattering blow against them.

Westmoreland felt that there were strong similarities between what faced MACV at Khe Sanh and what the French had endured at Dien Bien Phu. He was determined to prevent a repeat of the French forces' fate from occurring to the MACV forces at Khe Sanh. During 1966 and 1967, the US determined that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were attempting to lure them towards the DMZ. The MACV leadership felt that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were going to make their main thrust in the border regions, where they were perceived as concentrating their strength, contributing to Westmoreland's fascination with Khe Sanh. Westmoreland's preoccupation caused him to misjudge the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong effort to lure US forces away from protecting Saigon and other urban areas, which were the primary targets for the NVA and the Viet Cong. The US underestimated the

level of resources that the Communists could develop around Saigon just as the French had underestimated the Vietnamese capabilities at Dien Bien Phu.⁶

While Westmoreland was fixated on Khe Sahn, fifteen Viet Cong battalions, totaling approximately 6,000 troops, positioned themselves in and around Saigon. Giap, who was now the NVA commander and had become the North Vietnamese Defense Minister, realized the fallacy of the Dien Bien Phu analogy. He realized that in launching a massive offensive against the Americans, the Communists would be facing a vastly different enemy from the French whom they opposed at Dien Bien Phu in 1953-1954. The Communists knew that success depended on hitting the relatively feeble South Vietnamese forces only and on avoiding combat with the American Army and Marines. The intended impact of the offensive was to further degrade the shaky credibility that the government in Saigon had with the South Vietnamese population.⁷

Westmoreland had become uneasy because intelligence about NVA and Viet Cong troop movements indicated a possible offensive starting sometime around the Tet holiday. He began lobbying with the Saigon government for a cancellation of the normal Tet truce. Some subordinate commanders took action within their units. For example, in January 1968, Major General Charles P. Stone, Commanding General of the 4th Infantry Division, placed his division on alert, moving an American tank company to Pleiku as a mobile reserve.⁸ Earlier, on 27 December 1967 while visiting Australia, Johnson made a curious comment to a closed session of the Australian cabinet, saying that “[w]e face dark days ahead” and that he “foresaw the North Vietnamese using ‘kamikaze’ tactics in the weeks ahead,” but he did not repeat his comments to the American public.⁹

The initial indications of the Tet Offensive came on 30 January 1968. Guerrillas prematurely attacked Nha Trang, Ban Me Thout, Kontum, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Tan Canh, Hoi An, and Da Nang. A captured North Vietnamese soldier revealed that the initial attacks of the Tet Offensive would commence at 0300 on 31 January. This revelation would prove to be highly accurate. Because of the early attacks and intelligence reports, MACV ordered an alert on 30 January, and the Seventh Air Force placed its ground security teams at the Condition Red state of readiness. South Vietnamese “watchmen” assigned to guard the houses of generals and colonels in Saigon slipped away from their posts at sunset on 30 January, a sure sign that an impending Viet Cong attack was about to occur in Saigon. Despite its concerns over the indications of a possible mass attack, MACV did not feel the need to notify their South Vietnamese counterparts and, in reports to Washington, did not appear to have much confidence in its own intelligence reports.¹⁰

Starting at 0300 on 31 January 1968, the NVA and the Viet Cong shocked the US and South Vietnamese troops by conducting a stunning series of surprise attacks all over South Vietnam. Striking at over 100 locations, the NVA and Viet Cong attacked Saigon, 39 of the 44 provincial capitals, 71 district capitals, 5 of 6 autonomous cities, 50 hamlets, and major South Vietnamese Army installations, including every ARVN corps headquarters. Figure 1 gives a graphic depiction of the extent of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacks in South Vietnam. An estimated 67,000 NVA and Viet Cong troops engaged approximately 1,100,000 multinational troops in South Vietnam, including 492,000 Americans.¹¹

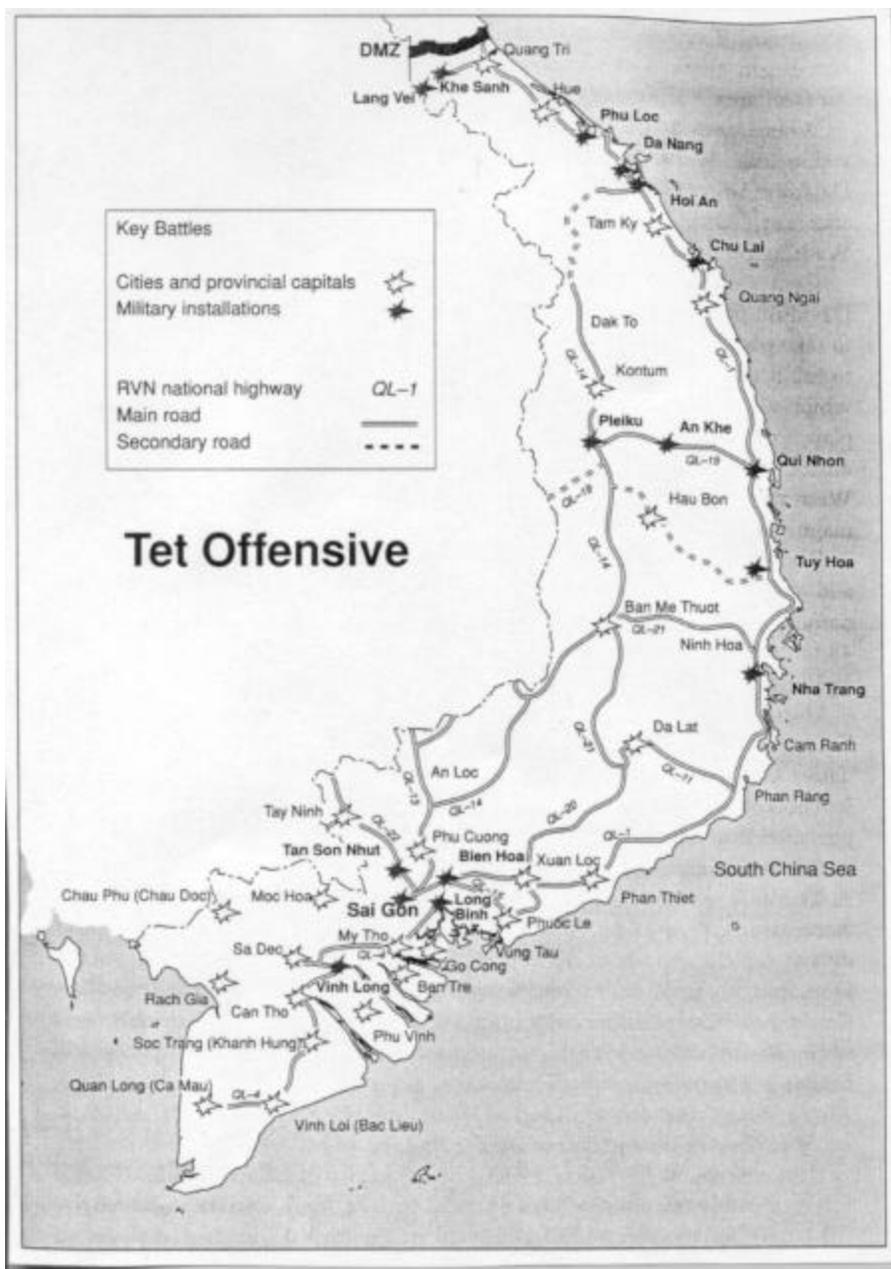


Figure 1. Overview of Tet Offensive Strikes. Spencer C. Tucker. *Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 137.

Three enemy divisions--the 7th NVA Division and the 5th and 9th Viet Cong Divisions--3,000 additional Viet Cong soldiers, and commando/sapper teams had penetrated into the Saigon suburbs. A Viet Cong sapper team breached the American Embassy in Saigon, trading fire with US forces guarding the compound before all members of the team were killed. Eight Viet Cong and NVA battalions infiltrated Hue, commencing a bitterly-fought twenty-six-day struggle for control of the city.¹² Initially caught unprepared for these attacks, the US and South Vietnamese troops swiftly worked to defeat the attackers with the exception of the lengthy siege at Hue. By the end of February 1968, the US and South Vietnamese forces had tactically defeated the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, but already the seeds of change in the United States' strategy were sprouting.

By 10 March 1968, NVA and Viet Cong forces had dwindled to between 6,000 and 8,000 men near Khe Sahn, and General Westmoreland reported to Washington that the Communists had ceased repairing their trench systems. On 10 March, *The New York Times* reported Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 American troops, which would have increased the number of American forces in Vietnam from 525,000 to a proposed ceiling of 731,756.¹³

The aftermath of the Tet Offensive caused the United States to reevaluate its purpose and strategy in Vietnam. On 31 March 1968, President Johnson announced a suspension of American bombing and naval attacks in North Vietnam except for the area immediately north of the Demilitarized Zone. He further surprised many people by unexpectedly announcing that he would not seek the candidacy for President that fall. For the entire Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong lost an estimated

40,000 soldiers killed in action compared to 1,100 Americans and 2,300 South Vietnamese killed. The reevaluation of the strategy in Vietnam would lead to increased public pressure to commence a drawdown of the American presence in Vietnam. This effect was not an intended consequence of the Tet Offensive as Giap had only aimed to achieve a decisive battlefield victory and did not aim to influence American public opinion.¹⁴

Some people, such as retired Army Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson and authors Douglas Pike, Dave R. Palmer, and Harry G. Summers, Jr., have argued that the Tet Offensive decimated the effectiveness of the Viet Cong. Because of the losses, the NVA and the Viet Cong lost a significant number of experienced sympathetic southerners. Until the Tet Offensive, Viet Cong units did the bulk of the fighting with NVA units providing some level of assistance and support. The NVA slowly added more troops to assist them due to the increased American participation alongside the ARVN. After the offensive, the NVA bore the brunt of the fighting with the Viet Cong playing, at best, an ancillary role.¹⁵

In analyzing why the Tet Offensive surprised the Americans, this thesis will first look at how the US addressed two critical sources in predicting future Communist offensive operations--a history of deception on the North Vietnamese side and the utilization of existing intelligence on the American side. These two areas are intertwined since the deception effort seemed to cause the Americans to misinterpret or to discount the intelligence information they had. Communist deception efforts also impacted how the American leadership developed its strategies by masking the North Vietnamese's true strategy.

Deception played a critical role in the Vietnamese style of war as they exploited to their advantage pauses provided by truces. Confronted with a significant technological deficit when pitted against American forces, the Communists needed any advantage they could find. The Vietnamese have a long history of employing deception in unconventional warfare, first frustrating the Chinese as far back as the third century BC. During holiday periods, it was not uncommon for the Vietnamese to conduct surprise attacks and truce violations. On the eve of Tet 1789, Emperor Quang Trung sent 100,000 troops against Chinese forces in Hanoi. In 1944, Giap sent the Vietnamese People's Army against the Vichy French on Christmas Eve. On the eve of Tet 1960, Viet Cong forces attacked the South Vietnamese military headquarters at Tay Ninh. During the Tet 1967 cease fire, the NVA and Viet Cong initiated 338 incidents, and North Vietnamese shore batteries shelled an American destroyer.¹⁶ Thus, the recent Tet cease fire violations gave Westmoreland and MACV some sense of concerns regarding Tet 1968, but the implication of those violations did not create the sense of urgency that one would expect.

Beginning on 19 October 1967, the North Vietnamese government announced that they would be observing a seven-day truce for the Tet holiday, the longest truce that they had proposed to that date. On 17 November, the NLF also announced the seven-day truce at approximately the same time as they announced three-day truces for Christmas and New Year's Day. A large number of documents captured in 1967 strongly indicated a major offensive was brewing. Some additional documents also discussed tactics for urban combat, which heretofore the Communists had neither discussed nor for which they had trained their troops.

US and South Vietnamese intelligence analysts felt that the Communists would use the extended truce to fortify their preparations for a major winter-spring offensive. The offer of peace talks also served as a diversionary tactic to disguise preparations for the offensive. As 1968 began, intelligence reports indicated that the upcoming winter-spring campaign had the markings of a major offensive, primarily focused on the Khe Sanh area. Intelligence analysts stated that they could not pinpoint a timeline for the offensive. Analysts could only speculate when or if the offensive would occur, but the South Vietnamese analysts felt that it was more likely that the Communists would conduct the offensive after the Tet holiday. In his monograph *Intelligence*, ARVN Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, J2 for the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, supports this conclusion but does not specify how the South Vietnamese arrived at it.¹⁷

During the late months of 1967, these previous holiday violations, among others, made Westmoreland and the MACV staff suspicious of an impending major North Vietnamese offensive. Westmoreland had been uneasy about a cease fire around the Tet holiday after violations of the cease fire on 1 January 1968. During the holiday standdown for Christmas Day, 1967, the MACV Command History recorded 118 truce violation incidents, 40 of them considered to be major incidents. During the New Year's truce, which extended from 1800 on 31 December 1967 to 0600 on 2 January 1968, the MACV Command History reports 170 truce violation incidents (63 being major), which is markedly increased from the 1967 New Year's Day truce. Westmoreland feared that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong would use the truce to reinforce their troops.

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu agreed to a cancellation of the truce in southern North Vietnam so that the US could attack Communist supply routes.

Without explanation, the South Vietnamese failed to announce the truce cancellation, which was eventually promulgated after frantic US efforts. On the eve of the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese government ordered a celebration of the holiday a day early, a shift that the rest of the world failed to notice.¹⁸ The early celebration would allow the NVA and the Viet Cong to achieve a tactical surprise ahead of the Tet holiday celebration.

The Communists effectively used deception to their advantage by violating truces. In doing so, they created opportunities to attack or to resupply and taking advantage of the American expectation that they would honor the truces. These deceptive practices were aided by the American inability to effectively coordinate their intelligence effort. The US did not fully integrate information flowing in from intelligence sources and did not place any significance in the changes in the way the North Vietnamese dispersed their forces.

There is no evidence of a theater-level effort to exploit the intelligence provided by captured documents. In March 1967 in III Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), the ARVN captured a document from the NVA CT-5 Division which provided a very basic summary of the offensive to be conducted in Saigon. In early 1967--almost full year before the Tet Offensive--the US captured a plan from the 5th Viet Cong Division which called for an attack on Saigon. Both plans were readily dismissed--in reading one of them, American officers joked that "they fired that planner."¹⁹

Further indications of unusual activity came in July 1967 as the North Vietnamese finalized their decision to conduct the Tet Offensive. The planning came after Resolution 13 was issued in April or May 1967, announcing the change in strategy

to seek a major offensive in South Vietnam, but it was not until October that ARVN was able to obtain a copy of the resolution. The resolution clearly called for a large-scale offensive to bring about final victory. Shortly after passage of the resolution, an intelligence report on the first known political preparation for the offensive was prepared. The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the organization which directed Communist military operations in South Vietnam, tasked the deputy chairman of the Saigon-Gia Dinh's Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals to maintain close contact with individuals whom the Communists wanted to participate in the future coalition government.²⁰

In June, an informant reported that the North Vietnamese ambassador to France had been recalled home. The ambassadors to Indonesia and China were also recalled to Hanoi, and soon, all major diplomats had returned to North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese dismissed the unusual nature of the recalls as being for routine matters.²¹ Such unusual diplomatic activity should have aroused someone's suspicion, but no one appears to have seriously questioned the moves.

More unusual activity occurred in late 1967. The Communists initiated a deceptive effort to make MACV focus on routine enemy operations on along the DMZ. The 812th NVA Regiment assaulted the Marine firebase at Con Thien on 10 September. After repelling the attack, the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines withstood numerous NVA ground attacks and artillery fire, which peaked with the NVA firing nearly 3,100 artillery rounds at Con Thien between 19 and 27 September. On 4 October, MACV declared that the siege was over.²²

Just after the American victory at Loc Ninh on 29 October 1967, a defector from the 66th NVA Regiment tipped off the Americans that the Communists were planning to assault Dak To in Kontum Province. The defector provided highly accurate information on NVA and Viet Cong force disposition and battle intentions. The Communists had massed four infantry regiments and a rocket/artillery regiment around Dak To. By mid-November, Westmoreland enlarged the American presence around Dak To from a single battalion to a force comprised of the US 4th Infantry Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, six ARVN battalions, and supply, communications, and fire support units. By 15 November 1967, the North Vietnamese began their assault on Dak To in earnest. While both sides fought fiercely, the Americans eventually prevailed but at the cost of 187 dead and nearly 1,000 wounded while the Communists suffered between 1,200 and 1,600 dead.²³

On 3 November 1967, during the Dak To battle, US forces also captured B-3 (Highlands) Front Command directives for the 1967-1968 Winter-Spring Campaign. These directives called for Communist forces to conduct concentrated attacks on American forces, to destroy large US units, to liberate large areas, and to conduct closely coordinated attacks throughout South Vietnam to achieve an united attack. General Westmoreland downplayed the significance of these directives, stating that the Dak To battle marked “the beginning of a great defeat of the enemy.”²⁴

On 7 November 1967, the ARVN 25th Division captured a Viet Cong top secret document issued to personnel in the Long An Province giving them instructions regarding the placement of agents in Saigon with the objective of overthrowing the South Vietnamese government. The report did not arrive at MACV J-2’s Combined

Documents Exploitation Center (CDEC) until mid-December, but it is interesting to note that it called for “every effort . . . be made to complete the placing of agents by late January [1968]”²⁵ My research has not revealed any rationale for why this document was delayed in arriving at CDEC.

Members of the NLF were told to anticipate the final phase of a revolution in South Vietnam. A document captured by the 101st Airborne Division on 19 November 1967 in the Quang Tin province stated:

Central Headquarters concludes that the time has come for a direct revolution and that the opportunity for a general revolution and general uprising is within reach.²⁶

Despite the widespread Communist discussions regarding a general offensive and uprising, this captured document was the first one to state that the enemy was entering the final phase of their long war and that attacks were to be carried out in the South Vietnamese urban areas. This document was ambiguous regarding the timing of the final phase, and it was more for propaganda purposes than actually directing any action. Few people took this and other captured documents seriously, yet there were other disturbing corroborating pieces of evidence at this point--enemy prisoner statements that talked of impending efforts to liberate South Vietnam by Tet, the greatly reduced numbers of Communist defectors, the unusual attacks at Loc Ninh and Dak To. In November, the enemy conducted nearly forty simultaneous attacks targeting outposts and towns in the Dinh Tuong Province in the Mekong Delta, a region known as a testing ground for new Viet Cong tactics.²⁷

On 4 December, the US 198th Light Infantry Brigade found a document which called for two strategic objectives: (1) the destruction of a major enemy force, and (2)

the deployment of Viet Cong organizations in urban areas to foment an uprising. The document reached CDEC on 19 December and was circulated on 23 December. One of the surprising points about this document was the size of the force that it discussed. For an area covering only “a few districts or villages,” the document called for local units to organize “4,950 hard-core members to act among a group of participants expected to number 22,800.”²⁸ Such a large, concentrated force suggested a general uprising.

The intelligence community and Westmoreland gave indications of acknowledging an impending offensive by late 1967. In late 1967, the CIA’s Saigon station compiled its information on hand which indicated a shift in Communist strategy, but it did not provide an analysis of the information. Officers from the MACV J-2 protested the CIA’s actions as they were close to lowering their published estimate of Communist strength in South Vietnam in order to demonstrate American progress in the war.²⁹

In a cable to Washington on 20 December, Westmoreland wrote:

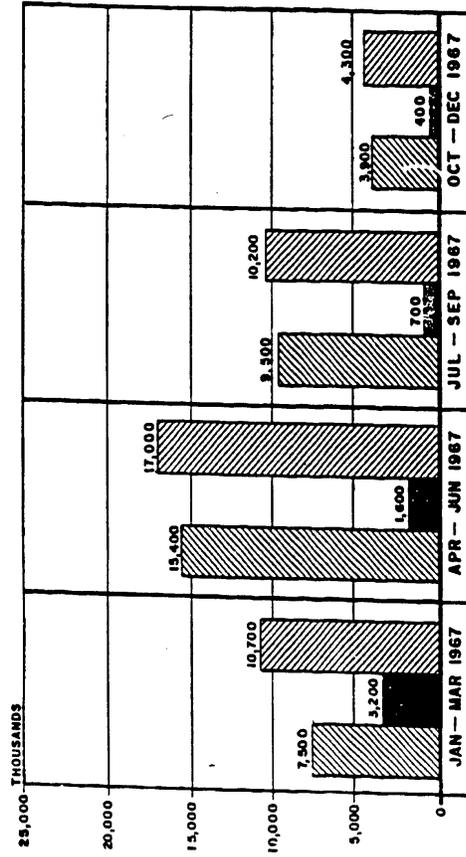
[T]he enemy has already made a crucial decision concerning the conduct of the war . . . to undertake an intensified countrywide effort, perhaps a maximum effort, over a relatively short period of time.³⁰

Westmoreland did not feel that the Communists would conduct heavy attacks on the urban areas. On 15 January, Westmoreland and Brigadier General Philip B. Davidson, MACV J-2, briefed the US Mission Council at the American embassy on their assessment of the situation. Westmoreland felt that the Communists would attack prior to Tet, and Davidson felt that they would attack after Tet. Neither one anticipated an attack during the actual holiday itself. Military intelligence officers felt that the attacks

would center on Khe Sanh and other border areas, dismissing country-wide attacks against urban areas as not being a “likely course of action.”³¹

The Johnson administration’s fascination with numbers, led by McNamara’s zeal for data collection, drove the belief that real progress against Communist infiltration was occurring in 1967. The “body counts” of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong killed were on the rise, and social and political progress appeared to be on track in South Vietnam. People were migrating toward the cities, areas were being cleared of Communist control, and democratic electoral reforms appeared to be taking hold. Lost in a mountain of numbers and details, the Johnson Administration did not see the bigger picture unfolding before them--that the Communists were not only pulling back some of their troops but also hiding sappers, supplies, and agents among the refugees flooding the cities as they prepared for the Tet Offensive push.³²

Figure 2, published in the MACV Command History for 1967, shows a dramatic drop in North Vietnamese Army infiltrators during that year, a drop of 75 percent in quarterly infiltrations from the second quarter to the fourth quarter of 1967. One cause for the decrease in the number of infiltrations was the movement of refugees to the urban areas in South Vietnam. The concentration of refugees in the cities played into the Communist hands, allowing their infiltrators to blend in easier and preposition themselves and their supplies.³³ Standing alone, the declining number of infiltrators would indicate that MACV was successfully defeating Communist efforts to bring in more people. If this trend had been correlated with the captured Communist documents, then someone could have critically questioned the situation and investigated deeper, possibly piecing together evidence of the impending offensive.



(A) CONFIRMED - CONFIRMED UNIT/GROUP DETERMINED BY MINIMUM OF TWO CAPTIVES, RETURNEES OR CAPTURED DOCUMENT. (ANY COMBINATION)
 (B) PROBABLE - PROBABLE INFILTRATION UNIT/GROUP BELIEVED TO EXIST BASED ON INFORMATION WHICH CAN BE EVALUATED AS PROBABLY TRUE PROVIDED BY ONE CAPTIVE, RETURNEE OR CAPTURED DOCUMENT.

▨ CONFIRMED (A)
 ▩ PROBABLE (B)
 ▧ TOTAL ACCEPTED

NVA INFILTRATION INTO SOUTH VIETNAM

Figure 2. NVA Infiltration Totals, 1967. Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Command History 1967* (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1968), I: 36.

The US did not make a concerted effort to analyze and exploit the results of signals intelligence. The turn of the year 1968 brought a shift in the displacement of Communist troops near Saigon. Communications intercepts indicated a significant increase in the volume of radio traffic and that the sources of the traffic had shifted. More transmissions originated closer to Saigon and inside the areas strongly held by US forces. These indicators should have alerted the MACV staff that a major enemy offensive or action was imminent.

In November 1967, a detachment from the Marine 1st Radio Battalion stationed at Hill 881 South at Khe Sanh detected signals indicating that the 304th and 320th NVA Divisions were moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The 304th Division moved from Tchepone to the Laos border southwest of Khe Sahn, and the 320th Division moved to the intersection formed by the Laos border and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Related to these NVA movements, forward air controllers reported a marked increase in traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, including both NVA units and supplies. Air and ground teams reported over 200 trucks moving down the Trail in October 1967. During the month of November, observed vehicle traffic increased as ground teams reported 695 trucks while air spotters reported 4,235 trucks.³⁴ A rapid increase in vehicle traffic should have indicated a probable North Vietnamese and Viet Cong effort to bring in more supplies, possibly for some major operation or offensive. This increase in vehicle traffic was in stark contrast to the decrease in infiltrators mentioned earlier, a variance that should have been pursued in more detail.

To their credit, the Americans did display some effectiveness with communications intelligence after the Tet Offensive started. One example occurred

after the US inflicted heavy casualties on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong at Khe Sahn. Communications intelligence indicated that a significant Communist figure was in the area. Westmoreland ordered a strike with thirty-six B-52s, almost hitting the field headquarters where General Giap had stopped during his tour of the casualties and damage inflicted by the Americans.³⁵

In early January 1968, more evidence of unusual North Vietnamese and Viet Cong movement surfaced. Marines at the Khe Sahn Combat Base engaged an NVA patrol and killed five of the six individuals including a regimental commander, his operations officer, and his communications officer. Although American commanders were concerned about this incident, the high-level positions of the patrol's participants should have created more of an alarm among the Americans than apparently it did. This incident preceded the arrival of the 304th and 325-C NVA Divisions in the mountainous region southeast of Khe Sahn. On 20 January, an NVA officer defected to the US forces, declaring that preliminary attacks were to begin that evening with a main offensive to commence on Tet. The CIA and General Westmoreland were interested in these events. However, Westmoreland's attention was focused on Khe Sahn, and he continued to be fascinated with its potential similarity to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.³⁶ MACV passed up an opportunity to take advantage that these incidents provided -a tip-off that some sort of major Communist action was developing. Westmoreland still felt that the NVA and the Viet Cong would mount a major offensive centered on Khe Sanh. His analysis dismissed the possibility of the NVA and the Viet Cong attacking elsewhere or throughout South Vietnam.

The Communists also used operational deception to help disguise their strategy for the Tet Offensive and to further confuse the American intelligence analysis. In September 1967, Radio Hanoi broadcasted Giap's article, "The Big Victory, the Great Task," laying out the basic outline of the Tet Offensive. Giap also expressed his support for a protracted war in the debate with those on the North Vietnamese Politburo who favored obtaining a quick decisive victory. While keeping the exact timing of the offensive secret, the Communists hoped that the article would prepare the cadres in the south to play their part in a mass uprising in the near future. The North Vietnamese gambled that US analysts would misinterpret or dismiss the article, especially considering that the broadcast coincided with the NVA siege of Con Thien which lasted until 4 October. The Americans did not let them down, dismissing the article as propaganda related to the attack.³⁷

The North Vietnamese used the mass media as a means of widely signaling coded orders. At the end of December 1967, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh read the following poem over Radio Hanoi as a signal, now recognized as an order, to commence the Tet Offensive:

This Springtime certainly will be more joyous than all such previous seasons
For news of victories will come from all parts of the country
North and South (our people and our soldiers) will compete in the anti-American
struggle
Forward we go
And total victory will be ours³⁸

Complacency had caused analysts to overlook the significance of the poem, which Radio Hanoi repeated frequently prior to the offensive. It was common practice for President Ho to broadcast greetings to the North Vietnamese population for an

upcoming Tet holiday. Oft-repeated Communist propaganda and calls to victory had dulled analysts' sensitivity to the fact that the poem indicated anything out of the ordinary.³⁹

The flow of captured documents and corroborating prisoner interrogations continued as the Tet Offensive approached. A press release issued on 5 January 1968 by the US Mission in Vietnam proved to be astonishingly revealing. Although the press release came out of the State Department and not the military, it is significant since it reproduced a captured document giving the basic guidelines for the Tet Offensive. The release, titled "Captured Document Indicates Final Phase of the Revolution at Hand," did not give a time line for the offensive, but it stated general instructions:

Use very strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities. Troops should flood the lowlands. They should move toward liberating the capital city, take power and try to rally enemy brigades and regiments to our side one by one. Propaganda should be broadly disseminated among the population in general, and leaflets should be used to reach enemy officers and enlisted personnel.⁴⁰

The mission's press release was based on a document culled from a notebook captured by in the Quang Tin Province. Analyzed by CDEC on 6 December 1967, the notebook, titled "Ho Chi Minh's Order for Implementation of General Counteroffensive and General Uprising during 1967 Winter and 1968 Spring and Summer," discussed "a November 12 meeting held to promulgate a Hanoi decision embodied in the so-called Resolution 13, adopted by the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party" and further stated:

The time for a direct revolution has come and . . . the opportunity for a general counteroffensive and general uprising is within reach. . . . The entire army and

population is ordered to implement a general counter offensive and general uprising in order to achieve a decisive victory for the revolution with the [campaign season].⁴¹

CDEC circulated its translation of the document on 15 December, and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) published this intelligence discovery in a memorandum on 3 January 1968.⁴² The document infers a detailed level of planning that would be expected for an upcoming major operation.

On 4 January 1968, the US 4th Infantry Division captured “Urgent Combat Order Number One,” which delineated specific operational instructions for Pleiku Province with some actions to be conducted prior to Tet. In that same month, the US 101st Airborne Division captured documents which provided detailed information on attacks to be executed against Phu Cuong, the capital of the Binh Duong Province; the 5th ARVN Division; and the Headquarters, 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron, also located in the Binh Duong Province. A defector from the 273rd Regiment, 9th NVA Division, confirmed some of this information.⁴³

Captured Viet Cong soldiers in the city of Qui Nhon revealed to their South Vietnamese interrogators details about specific upcoming attacks. On 28 January, police in Qui Nhon arrested several Viet Cong agents who had a tape that was meant to be played on the Qui Nhon radio station once it was captured. The tape announced the capture of key cities in South Vietnam, which would force the US to accept a coalition government in South Vietnam.⁴⁴

An NVA lieutenant who surrendered to the Marines at Khe Sanh on 20 January 1968 accurately described an impending assault against the base. Events over the next day corroborated his information, but his story only strengthened Westmoreland’s

conviction that Khe Sanh alone was the focal point of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong effort. No one believed a campaign of larger proportions was going to develop.⁴⁵

Lieutenant General Phillip Davidson, who served as the MACV J-2 from 1967 until 1969, commented:

[T]he major element of tactical surprise was not the timing of the assault, but the fact that the enemy attacked so many cities and did so simultaneously. Both General Westmoreland and I confidently expected the enemy offensive to be launched either just before or just after Tet. The fact that the enemy attacked *during* Tet was therefore only a mild surprise.⁴⁶

Davidson claims that the North Vietnamese did not achieve strategic surprise with the Tet Offensive since he felt MACV was aware of an impending massive operation, but he gives credit for tactical surprise in the timing and extent of the offensive.⁴⁷ Captured Communist documents, interrogations with captured soldiers, and an historical analysis should have provided sufficient information to avoid even tactical surprise. While very ably processing intelligence information on the tactical level, MACV J-2 did not truly integrate and exploit this information on the operational level.

US commanders underplayed the significance of mounting intelligence, dismissing the reports of such a major assault as ludicrous. American officers felt that a wide-reaching assault was well beyond the capabilities of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. They felt that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong did not possess enough manpower to carry out such a large-scale action or to occupy the cities, remembering past Communist exaggerations about their own strength. Westmoreland's prevailing mind set allowed for a possible major strike at Khe Sahn, but there was a common view that the Communists could not sustain nationwide attacks throughout South Vietnam.

The failure to properly interpret intelligence, as noted above, precluded seeing what was in hindsight a complete picture of what would eventually happen. Prudence should have caused more serious concern over the recovered plans, prisoners' statements, and reports of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troop movements. Abundant amounts of intelligence pointed towards a mounting Communist offensive. Captured documents gave varying degrees of detail regarding the mounting offensive. The unusual trend of NVA and Viet Cong troop movements, North Vietnamese diplomatic activity, and Communist holiday truce violations also should have aroused suspicion. By itself, each piece of intelligence leaves considerable room for interpretation, but once all of the evidence is studied in whole, there develops a pattern of a mounting offensive to occur during the Tet holiday timeframe. The evidence would have shown that the North Vietnamese were pushing for an offensive to expedite the conclusion of the war in Hanoi's favor. The next chapter will build on this evidence by examining some of MACV's missed opportunities to exploit intelligence that could have been gathered through anti-infiltration operations.

¹Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Clarendon Press, 1963; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 106.

²Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 9.

³Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 703-704, 710-713; Spector, 9; and Robert S. McNamara et al., *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), 281, 362-363.

⁴Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 99; Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Son and Lieutenant Colonel Le Van Duong, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, eds., *The Viet Cong Tet Offensive (1968)* (Translated by RVNAF J5/Joint General Staff Translation Board) (Saigon: RVNAF Printing and Publications Center, 1968), 45-46; Colonel Hoang Ngoc

Hoang, ARVN, *Indochina Monographs: The General Offensives of 1968-69* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1981) 24-25; and Phillip B. Davidson, Lieutenant General, US Army (Retired), *Vietnam At War - The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), 441-442.

⁵Davidson, 442-446.

⁶James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 106.

⁷Sheehan, 703-704, 710-713; Hoang, *General Offensives*, 24-25; and Davidson, 448.

⁸William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 316-321.

⁹Davidson, 484.

¹⁰Wirtz, 80; John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 247-248; and Davidson, 482.

¹¹Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 134; Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US-Vietnam in Perspective* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 186; and Spector, 41.

¹²Robert Pisor, *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), 170-177.

¹³*Ibid.*, 235; and Naom Chomsky and Howard Zinn, eds. *The Pentagon Papers, The Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 548.

¹⁴Gilbert and Head, 84.

¹⁵Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 48-49; Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US-Vietnam in Perspective* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 202; Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 95-97; and Davidson, 457.

¹⁶Pisor, 145; Oberdorfer, 88; and Henry Cabot Lodge, "For the President from Lodge (Saigon, 18014)," (15 February 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX).

¹⁷Hoang, *General Offensives*, 11, 27; and idem, *Indochina Monographs: Intelligence* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1982), 147.

¹⁸Oberdorfer, 88, 148-151; and Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Command History 1968 (Sanitized)* (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1969), I: 375.

¹⁹Oberdorfer, 154; and Hoang, *General Offensives*, 32.

²⁰Hoang, *General Offensives*, 25, 33; and McNamara, et. al., 74.

²¹Oberdorfer, 62-63.

²²Wirtz, 71.

²³Pisor, 73-74.

²⁴Oberdorfer, 125-126; and Hoang, *General Offensives*, 34.

²⁵Gilbert and Head, 147-148.

²⁶Oberdorfer, 136.

²⁷Sheehan, 372-373; and Oberdorfer, 136-138.

²⁸Gilbert and Head, 148.

²⁹Oberdorfer, 138.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 138.

³¹*Ibid.*, 139.

³²Gilbert and Head, 116-120.

³³Sheehan, 712-713.

³⁴Prados, 237-239.

³⁵Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 553.

³⁶Oberdorfer, 126-128.

³⁷Wirtz, 71; and Davidson, 449-450.

³⁸Pham and Le, 47.

³⁹Hoang, *Intelligence*, 149.

⁴⁰Palmer, 178-179.

⁴¹Gilbert and Head, 148.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 147.

⁴³Hoang, *General Offensives*, 35.

⁴⁴Oberdorfer, 134-139, 144-146; and Palmer, 179.

⁴⁵Sheehan, 704-707.

⁴⁶Davidson, 479.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 478-481.

CHAPTER 3

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

In all the insurgencies of the past twenty-five years, since the Second World War, none has been sustained, let alone successful, without substantial outside support.¹

British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson

Intelligence gathered during American anti-infiltration operations underway in 1967 produced ample logistical data to infer that the North Vietnamese were preparing to conduct a major offensive not just around Khe Sanh but throughout South Vietnam. With this valuable knowledge, American commanders, once alerted to the brewing threat, might have countered accordingly. These anti-infiltration operations provided a potent means of monitoring and interpreting NVA and Viet Cong troop movement and resupply efforts. Once done, these movements could have been correlated with operational patterns.

Was the intelligence available from these operations indicative of the upcoming Tet operation? If so, did this resource represent a missed opportunity to better anticipate the true character of the upcoming Tet Offensive? If they had been further developed, barrier systems constructed in 1967 were one example of operations that could have provided even greater intelligence on NVA and Viet Cong movements into South Vietnam. Figures 3 and 4 depict the difficulty in gleaning intelligence from the twelve-hundred-mile-long Ho Chi Minh Trail.

A brief review of the sensor systems implemented in 1967 and 1968 is provided here to describe the limited capabilities of the sensors in place prior to the Tet Offensive. There were land, air, and naval operations which monitored and interdicted

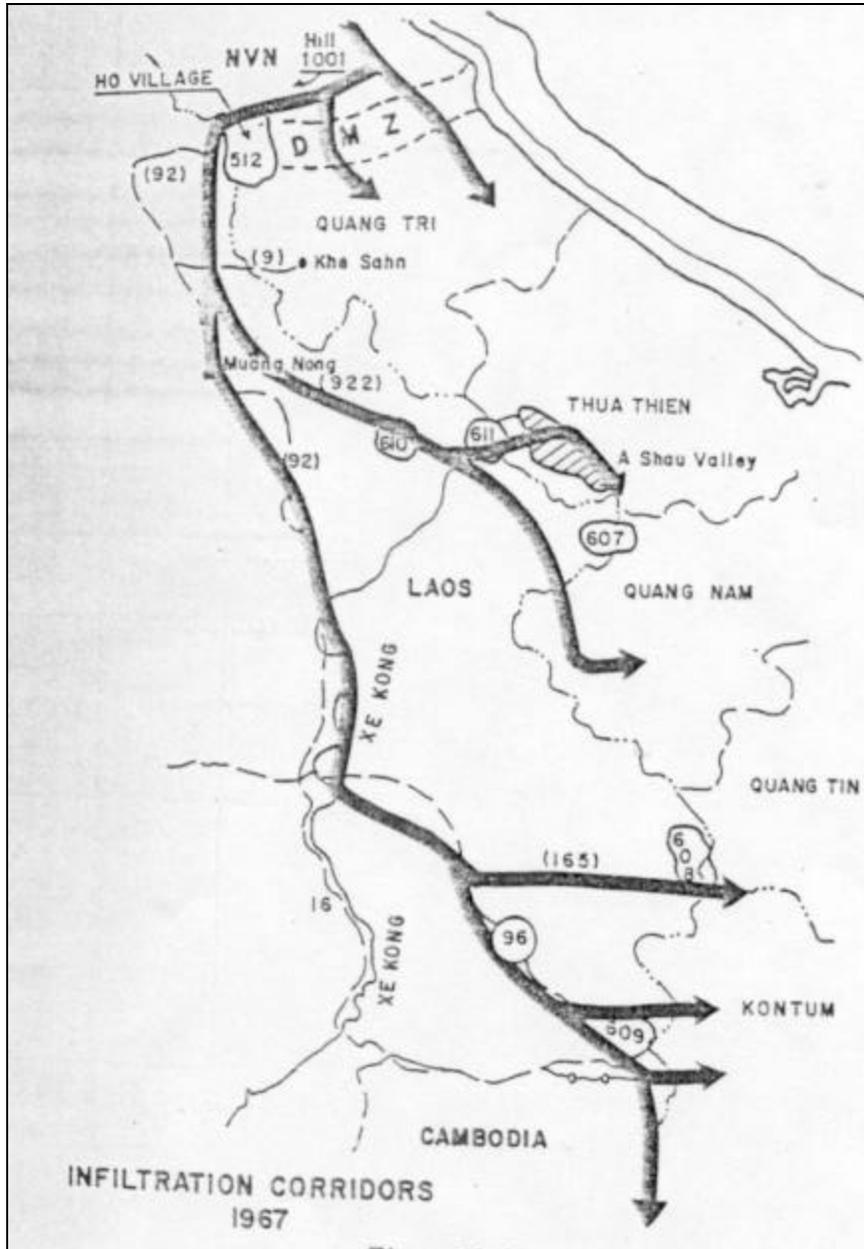


Figure 3. Infiltration Routes. Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. *Command History 1967* (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1968), I: 35.



Figure 4. Political Map of Southeast Asia. United States Center of Military History. *Army Historical Series: American Military History* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1989), 622.

the flow of personnel and material from North Vietnam to the South. Operation Dye Marker covered the two ground-based subsystems. One subsystem was the Strong Point Obstacle System (SPOS) started on the east coast and proceeded west through Con Thien to the western foothills south of the DMZ. It included “five strong points, four support bases, 23 kilometers of cleared obstacle line, and personnel sensors.”² Only partially complete by the end of 1967, its completion was projected for 1 July 1968. The other subsystem was the Defile System (DFS), but at the end of 1967, it was still in the conceptual stage. The intention for the Defile System was to have it be a westward extension of the SPOS out to the Laotian border and provide coverage along the DMZ.

In addition to the more conventional barbed wire, mines, and flares, the SPOS utilized several new sensors and surveillance systems, such as the Balanced Pressure System, Unattended Seismic Detectors, and Infrared Intrusion Detectors (IID). Other detection devices included the AN/PPS-5 and AN/PPS-6 pulse radars for intruder detection; the emergence of night vision devices with the Night Observation Device, Medium Range (NOD MR), a tripod-mounted telescope for surveillance outposts; and a jeep-mounted Xenon Searchlight for a mobile surveillance capability. These sensors represented the wide range of detection systems which provided significant intelligence on North Vietnamese movements.³

In April 1966, Deputy Ambassador William J. Porter proposed the implementation of a barrier from Saigon west through the Hau Nghia Province straight to the closest approach of the Cambodian border. Westmoreland determined that such a diversion of manpower and equipment would seriously detract from offensive operations and dismissed the proposal. Instead of taking action, MACV spent valuable

time studying data in 1967 and too much time “assessing the possible impact of such plans on the overall strategy of the 1966 and 1967 Joint Campaign Plans.”⁴

Operation Muscle Shoals consisted of two air-delivered subsystems. One subsystem was Operation Mud River, which was in place by 1 December 1967. It was an anti-vehicular system comprised of air-delivered and air-monitored sensors and mines and was deployed in central Laos where it was difficult to conduct conventional land operations. The other air-delivered subsystem was Operation Dump Truck, which was an anti-personnel system covering part of Laos, southwestern North Vietnam, and northwestern South Vietnam. Not completed until early 1968, Dump Truck utilized aircraft-deployed and aircraft-monitored mines and sensors. If it had been completed in early 1967, Dump Truck had the potential to add a significant volume of data along a heavily-traveled route. Aircraft not only laid and monitored Mud River and Dump Truck, but they also doubled as strike platforms to engage the enemy.⁵

An ample measure of data existed in 1967 regarding the level of imports and vehicle traffic. Changes in the level of imports had a corresponding affect on the supply-related traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A National Security Council memorandum dated 5 May 1967 (as displayed in Table 1) broke down the import levels and impact of interdiction on imports. In late 1967, the traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail significantly increased. American sensor systems were able to track truck traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Khe Sanh, detecting increases from 1,166 trucks in October 1967 to 3,823 trucks in November to 6,315 trucks in December.⁶

Table 1. North Vietnamese Import Levels for 1966 and 1967

	Current Import Capacity (tons/day)	1966 Imports	1967 Rate	Interdicted Capacity
By Sea	6,500	2,600	3,800	650
By Red River from China	1,500			150
By Road from China	3,200			2,000-2,400
By Rail from China	6,000			3,000-4,000

Source: National Security Council, "Interdiction of Imports to NVN," 5 May 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX

Supplies did not only come just from North Vietnam. For much of the American involvement in the conflict, supplies also flowed freely in through supposedly neutral Cambodia. Communist supplies also entered via the major seaport at Sihanoukville (Kompong Som), Cambodia, and up the Sihanoukville Trail. By 1967, the flow of supplies was in full operation, sending material up Route 4 from Sihanoukville to two major depots at Kompong Speu. MACV made no apparent effort to aggressively monitor or interdict supply routes coming up from Cambodia.

Considering even their limited spectrum, the barrier operations in place or under construction in 1967 provided significant data on the pattern and volume of Communist material and personnel flowing into South Vietnam. If properly analyzed, this evidence could have been added to other mounting intelligence information, which would have provided ample warning of the Tet Offensive and a clearer pattern of North Vietnamese

activity. Operation Muscle Shoals and the SPOS were deployed too late to provide meaningful data prior to the Tet Offensive. They represented a capability that should have been established considerably sooner since they had the potential to provide significant information regarding North Vietnamese movements into South Vietnam.⁷

MACV did not fully utilize the information being gleaned from these systems. In addition to conducting a better analysis of the data from the systems, MACV should have expanded the area being covered. Even if the barriers were reinforced with small numbers of troops, MACV could have greatly increased its ability to monitor and to react to Communist activity coming into South Vietnam. In addition to monitoring traffic on the trail, these systems could have provided a springboard for the United States to significantly hamper the Communist logistical resupply efforts into South Vietnam. MACV conducted anti-infiltration operations with the intention of monitoring and interrupting the North Vietnamese supply effort into South Vietnam.

Data shows that not only did the barriers and operation have impressive potential and results, they also provided valuable information that should have been cross-referenced with other intelligence and information available to the MACV and Pentagon leadership. Along with the intelligence information presented in Chapter 2, the systems and operations mentioned in this chapter provided a wealth of logistic information. The MACV leadership overlooked or simply did not fuse valuable indications of a major impending offensive from these sources throughout South Vietnam. Even with information from their barrier operations indicating otherwise, the MACV leadership appeared to remain fixated on enemy operations around Khe Sanh and the DMZ. The next chapter will analyze how MACV was not effectively organized

to synthesize the wealth of intelligence and indications in its possession leading up to the Tet Offensive.

¹Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US-Vietnam in Perspective* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 111.

²Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Command History 1967 (Sanitized)* (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1968), III: 1069.

³*Ibid.*, III: 1090-1092.

⁴*Ibid.*, III: 1070.

⁵*Ibid.*, III: 1069-1070.

⁶*Ibid.*, III: 1070-1071.

⁷*Ibid.*, III: 1069-1070.

CHAPTER 4

INTELLIGENCE STRUCTURE

I have never underestimated the Viet Cong. They are not pushovers. I do not think we have bad intelligence or have underestimated the Viet Cong morale.¹

President Lyndon Baines Johnson, 6 February 1968

Should the US intelligence structure in Vietnam have been more centralized and better organized into a more effective entity? In conducting research for this thesis, very little information has been found on the exact configuration of US intelligence agencies in Vietnam outside of MACV J-2. However, detailed information does exist on the MACV intelligence structure and on the combined intelligence structure with the ARVN. This chapter will primarily examine the MACV J-2 structure as it pertains to processing of intelligence pertaining to the Tet Offensive.

American intelligence agencies in Vietnam were not consolidated under COMUSMACV or any other single commander. General Westmoreland did not control all the intelligence assets available nor did he receive full intelligence support from the CIA, the DIA, the Army Communications Agency, CINCPAC, and the military intelligence agencies.²

Figures 5 through 8 show the command relationships in PACOM and MACV as they existed in 1967. Figures 5 and 6 show the CINCPAC and COMUSMACV chains of command respectively. They show operational control, command (less operational control), and coordination and cooperation relationships with the US military services, Republic of (South) Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), and other allied forces. Figures 7 and 8 display in increasing detail the command relationships within MACV J-2.

Missing from Figures 5 through 8 are any references to working with elements from the CIA and the DIA or how these agencies channeled their information to MACV. These organizational charts make no reference to any formal coordination and cooperation relationships with these agencies. If the CIA and DIA were actively exchanging intelligence information with MACV, my research has revealed little information regarding the extent of their involvement in Vietnam, what information they possessed, and to what extent they passed along intelligence to either MACV or the Pentagon.

Even with the lack of formal working relationships, there was some informal cooperation with the CIA and the DIA. For example, Major General Joseph A. McChristian, MACV J-2 from 1965 to 1967, requested DIA assistance in training for his intelligence specialists in CDEC. A second example took place during a 6 February 1967 conference on MACV J-2's order of battle manuals. Along with representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), MACV, and MACV's component commanders, the CIA, DIA, and National Security Agency (NSA) participated in the conference. A third instance happened when that the DIA assisted MACV J-2 with automated data processing support by providing some intelligence-related computers to J-2.³ However, such low-level activity did not fill the void left by the lack of full collaboration among all the intelligence agencies.

Some senior general officers of the day have provided their views regarding the working relationships with the CIA. Their statements support the conclusion that interagency cooperation on intelligence needed vast improvement. McChristian made an interesting observation regarding relations with the CIA:

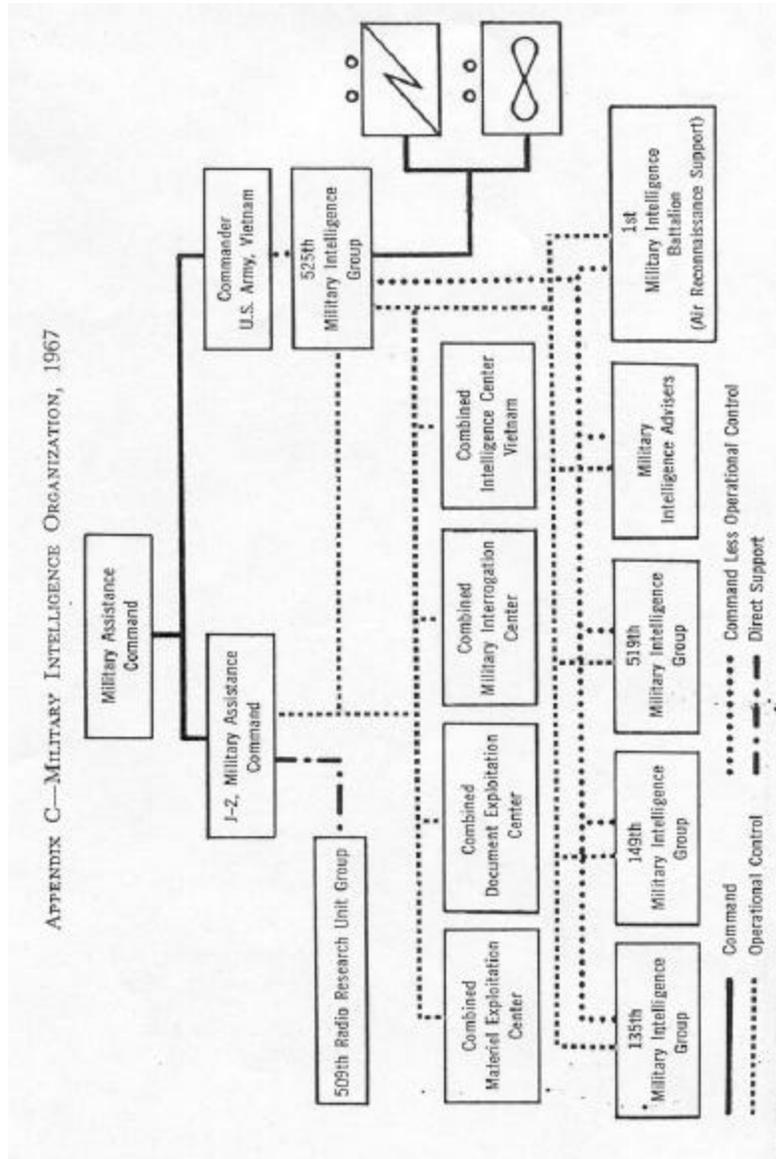


Figure 7. MACV J-2 (Intelligence) Organization, 1967. Joseph A. McChristian, Major General U.S. Army, *Vietnam Studies: The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), Appendix C.

CHART 3—ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF, J-2, STAFF ORGANIZATION, MAY 1967

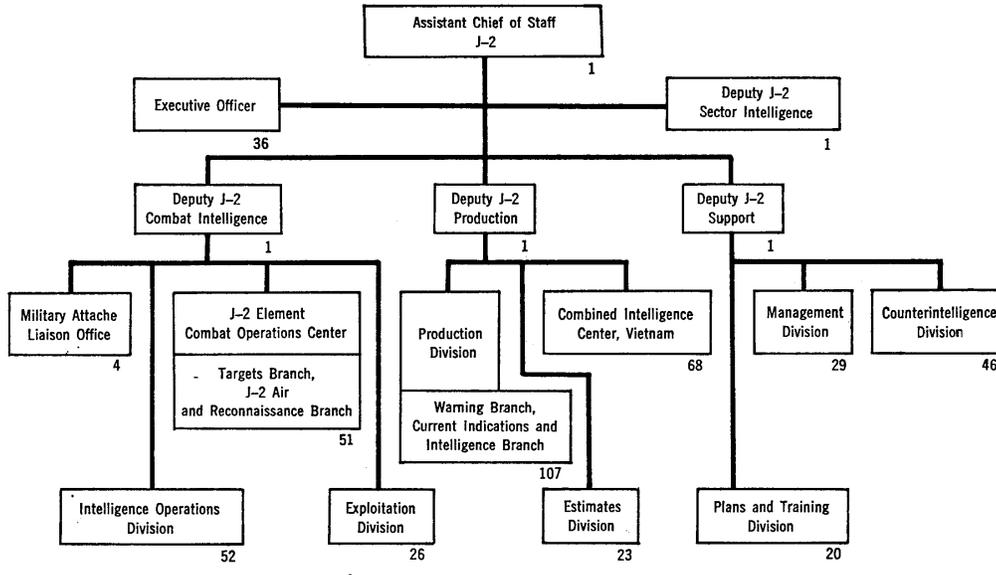


Figure 8. Staff Organization for Assistant Chief of Staff, MACV J-2 (Intelligence), May 1967. Joseph A. McChristian, Major General, U.S. Army, *Vietnam Studies: The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 17.

In the realm of area intelligence and the utilization of sensitive sources, initial plans called for an elaborate collection organization which could conduct shallow and deep operations. The original expectations proved overly ambitious and the program was reduced considerably. In addition, some jurisdictional questions arose from interservice disputes, hindering the establishment of an effective control mechanism. These were referred to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and were resolved in favor of Military Assistance Command, creating a precedent for future controversies of this nature. However, relations with the Central Intelligence Agency were not covered by this decision, and while co-operation generally was excellent, J-2, Military Assistance Command, was not privy to all Central Intelligence Agency operations.⁴

McChristian's statement indicates the existence of an effort to improve the organization of the intelligence entities in the MACV area of responsibility. McChristian does not elaborate on the exact nature of the "elaborate collection organization," but the proposal demonstrates an understanding of the need for stronger interagency interaction between MACV, the CIA, and the DIA. Together, they could have consolidated intelligence from a wide range of sources and combine their strengths to infiltrate the Communist structure more effectively for intelligence exploitation.

McChristian is not alone in commenting on relations with the CIA and the DIA. General Bruce B. Palmer, Jr., who served as Deputy Commanding General, US Army, Vietnam in 1967 and the Army Vice Chief of Staff from 1968 to 1973, wrote in 1984:

The Vietnam experience pointedly brought out the woeful unpreparedness of the United States to establish an adequate intelligence organization in a "new" overseas theater of operations, that is, one where there are no US commands or forces in being in the area . . . It was years before a competent MACV J-2 organization became operational--an inexcusable performance. . . . In Vietnam, moreover, unity of the US intelligence effort was lacking. As the senior US commander, the MACV Commander should have exercised overall direction of intelligence collection and analysis (as distinguished from covert activities) in the area, including the CIA's, while still authorizing the CIA station chief in Saigon to submit his own views to the US ambassador and CIA headquarters in Washington. To avoid the confusion that resulted from allowing both the CIA and MACV to work with the South Vietnamese intelligence organizations, MACV should have been given coordinating authority for these

activities. . . . In time of national emergency or war, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency should continue to serve the president directly and to maintain his central intelligence role. But he should act in such a way as not to hamper the Department of Defense in carrying out his responsibilities. Current statutes and executive orders are not entirely clear in this respect. They should be reviewed and modified to underscore the importance of the central intelligence role in time of war or a national emergency.⁵

Here Palmer confirms McChristian's statement that the CIA did not closely work with MACV J-2. His observations assert that a strong working relationship should have been established between the CIA and MACV that allowed for the free exchange of intelligence but that did not impinge on traditional and independent reporting relationships. The MACV intelligence organization took too long to form up, and once it was operational, interagency parochialism prevented the J-2 from being a truly effective intelligence organization.

McChristian's and Palmer's statements imply that decision makers from MACV to Washington did not heed the prudent advice of the Pacific Strategic Bombing Survey from World War II:

At the start of the Pacific war our strategic intelligence was highly inadequate, and our overall war plans, insofar as they were based on faulty information and faulty interpretation of accurate information, were unrealistic. . . . If a comparable lack of intelligence should exist at the start of a future national emergency, it might prove disastrous. . . . The basis for adequate intelligence can only be laid in peacetime. The solution to our problems . . . appears in part to be the greater centralization to be provided by the National Intelligence Authority, particularly in securing more adequate coordination and dissemination. It appears also to lie in close integration into the various operating organizations of appropriate intelligence units, adequate budgets and personnel for intelligence work, and a sufficient increase in the prestige attached to such work to attract the highest quality of personnel. . . . The lessons of the Pacific war strongly support that form of organization which provides unity of command, capable of clear and effective decision at the top, strengthens civilian control and thus provides closer integration of military policy with foreign and domestic policy, and favors a high degree of coordination in planning, intelligence, and research and development.⁶

The Pentagon, CINCPAC, and MACV did not appear to understand the importance of integrating intelligence under a central authority. Such an entity would have provided sound advice to the military commander and ultimately civilian leaders. The USSBS-Pacific advised that this centralized organization would have to include many intelligence organizations, including those inside the military as well as crossing interagency boundaries.

The organization of the MACV J-2 provided the best place to integrate and fuse intelligence. This arrangement would have provided a more complete intelligence picture to Westmoreland and Washington. Elements within MACV J-2 such as the Combined Document Exploitation Center (CDEC), the Combined Material Exploitation Center (CMEC), and Combined Military Interrogation Center (CMIC) all had a very detailed and rational organizational structure. The centers were further subdivided with each subsection also having well-established duties. The Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV) provided a combined intelligence structure with the South Vietnamese and was best suited to provide a common operating picture for the joint, interagency, and combined intelligence effort. The composition of the CICV did not include elements from the CIA, the DIA, and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), but CICV would have been the most logical place to centrally locate those elements.⁷ Such an integrated organization would have painted a common, all-source, and more robust intelligence picture for the MACV commander.

Based on incidents such as the handling of captured documents and prisoner interrogations mentioned earlier, research has not revealed documentation of any

coordinated effort among the American intelligence agencies to centrally process and fuse the information and to disseminate analyzed intelligence products to forces in theater. There is a paucity of evidence regarding other intelligence agencies in terms of their cooperation with MACV J-2. For whatever reason--stovepiping information, institutional biases, or otherwise--research indicates that MACV lacked valuable intelligence sources in its fight against the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. A stronger and more robust CICV could have integrated the information such as was presented in Chapters 2 and 3 along with intelligence from many diverse sources in order to provide a fuller picture of the enemy's strategy for COMUSMACV.

Although the magnitude and extent of assets in theater could have been expanded, the weightier issue appears to be one of integration of intelligence. General Westmoreland did not have control of all or access to all intelligence assets in his theater of operations as other commanders directed forces that were not permanently based in Vietnam. In modern terminology, he should have been the supported commander where other commanders, acting as supporting commanders, provided units and collection management support to Westmoreland for his operational control. The lack of a single intelligence agency overwhelmed the intelligence and communications systems. The competing agencies increased the strain on these systems with their increased traffic and requests for information, making the system of reporting and analyzing intelligence unwieldy. The end result of this multiplicity was the inability to provide COMUSMACV with a central, well-integrated intelligence estimate on the NVA and Viet Cong strategies and capabilities. COMUSMACV was deprived of the best way of effectively countering an enemy's strategy--good, effective intelligence.

The next chapter will examine solutions that the American leadership could have implemented so that they could have been more prepared for an event on the magnitude of the Tet Offensive.

¹Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 26.

²William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 415-416.

³Major General Joseph A. McChristian, US Army, *Vietnam Studies: The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 33, 128, 153.

⁴*Ibid.*, 106.

⁵General Bruce Palmer, Jr., US Army, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), 195-196.

⁶*United States Strategic Bombing Survey Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), 31-32.

⁷McChristian, 21-78.

CHAPTER 5

SOLUTIONS

If this is a failure, I hope the Viet Cong never have a major success.¹

Senator George Aiken, R-VT

These are some of the many factors which will confront our national leaders who will have primary responsibility for correctly reading the signposts of the past.²

United States Strategic Bombing Survey (European War)

Intelligence available in 1967 pointed towards Communist plans for a major operation or offensive during the 1968 Tet holiday timeframe. Decision makers unswerving in their preconceived notions about how to fight the Vietnam War either misinterpreted or simply ignored the evidence at hand. Although not a certainty, a more flexible and dynamic approach in engaging the NVA and the Viet Cong in 1967 and 1968 might have converted the Tet Offensive into an American strategic success.

This thesis investigated the actions that the United States, in the months leading up to the Tet Offensive, could have taken to avert the offensive and to exploit weaknesses in the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. Hindsight easily allows for the detached observer to clearly see shortcomings and failures, but the evidence on hand at the time should have provided the prudent commander with sufficient reason to suspect a massive offensive was brewing. With a meticulous analysis of intelligence and history, the American commanders and intelligence community could have gleaned the finer details of the North Vietnamese government's plans for an imminent major offensive. MACV could have also exploited weaknesses in the NVA and Viet Cong disposition to strengthen their hold on South Vietnam and to reduce their effectiveness

in future operations. During 1967, the US missed many opportunities to ameliorate the surprising events of early 1968.

Johnson and McNamara could have expanded the scope of MACV's control by reorganizing all military intelligence assets and personnel in Southeast Asia under the MACV's purview. This structure should have included all nonmilitary intelligence assets and personnel in theater either permanently or on a tactical or operational control basis under the control and supervision of CICV. An unity of effort in the intelligence realm would have been more likely to have produced clearer and more effective results.

Early in the American involvement in Vietnam, proposals were made for manning anti-infiltration barriers. In a memorandum dated 14 October 1966, McNamara submitted his solution:

It is my judgment that, barring a dramatic change in the war, we should limit the increase in US forces in SVN [South Vietnam] in 1967 to 70,000 men and we should level off at the total of 470,000 which such an increase would provide. . . . A portion of the 470,000 troops--perhaps 10,000 to 20,000--should be devoted to the construction and maintenance of an infiltration barrier. Such a barrier would lie near the 17th parallel--would run from the sea, across the neck of South Vietnam (choking off the new infiltration routes through the DMZ) and across the trails in Laos. This interdiction system (at an approximate cost of \$1 billion) would comprise to the east a ground barrier of fences, wire, sensors, artillery, aircraft and mobile troops; and to the west--mainly in Laos--an interdiction zone covered by air-laid mines and bombing attacks pinpointed by air-laid acoustic sensors. The barrier may not be fully effective at first, but I believe that it can be effective in time and that even the threat of its becoming effective can substantially change to our advantage the character of the war. It would hinder enemy efforts, would permit more efficient use of the limited number of friendly troops, and would be persuasive evidence both that our sole aim is to protect the South from the North and that we intend to see the job through.³

McNamara's solution involved using less than five percent of the forces in Vietnam to work a barrier that had the potential to monitor and interdict the North Vietnamese and

Viet Cong land supply routes. The manpower diversion and monetary expenditure would have been a tolerable investment to achieve these aims, even though McNamara acknowledged that results would be slow to show themselves. If he had proceeded with his proposal immediately at this time, the barriers could have produced a more thorough evaluation of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong movements.

Conducting research for this thesis has brought up issues that could not be completely answered to any degree of satisfaction. Topics that could be studied by other researchers include:

1. Once sufficient documentation has been declassified, what was the organization of and inter-relationships between CIA, DIA, and NSA intelligence assets in the Southeast Asia area of operations during the Vietnam War? What was their process for analyzing and forwarding their intelligence information?
2. What is the optimal organization for a joint intelligence organization involving the military, CIA, DIA, and NSA? How should this joint organization interact with coalition/allied intelligence agencies?
3. What are optimal methods for land-based and maritime barrier operations when monitoring and neutralizing an enemy's troop movement and resupply efforts in a jungle environment or in an unconventional war?

This thesis has had two main purposes. Firstly, it has provided an historical overview of the opportunities that the United States missed in terms of properly interpreting the signs of an impending offensive being developed in 1967. Secondly, it is hoped that present and future leaders learn from the mistakes of the past and apply the lessons to their decisions in the future. In a conflict, commanders will need to consider

all means of engaging the enemy from interrupting the enemy's logistical effort to capitalizing on captured intelligence. With modern technological advances in satellite capabilities and other diverse electronic means of monitoring activities, the commander has even more means at his disposal to actively track the enemy's activities. The Tet Offensive serves as a cautionary parable for the modern-day and future military leadership.

¹Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 24.

²*United States Strategic Bombing Survey Summary Report (European War)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1945), 18.

³Steven Cohen, ed., *Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to A Television History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 138-139.

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