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THE GENERALSHIP OF GIAP--THE MYTHS AND THE REALITIES

Douglas M. Eye

Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

16 March 1973

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--THE MYTHS AND THE REALITIES--

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THE GENERALSHIP OF GIAP

--THE MYTHS AND THE REALITIES--

A MONOGRAPH

by

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US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
16 March 1973

ABSTRACT

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Vo Nguyen Giap has served for thirty years as commander of North Vietnam's Armed Forces, and has become something of a legend for his stunning defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and now recently for the TET Offensive of 1968 which shocked the world. This monograph attempts to sweep away some of the myths which surround the man, exposing his errors and defeats as well as his victories, by tracing events from his flight to China in 1940; through the founding of the Viet Minh; his struggle and victory over the French; his role as overlord of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam; and finally his war against American forces. Emphasis is placed on the strategy, tactics and forces of all sides in the two conflicts, as well as the political dimension which played a major role in both wars. Keen intellect, practical skill and an ability to learn from mistakes, both his own and those of others, are attributes which characterize Giap. He has recorded huge successes and tragic failures; he is an intelligent and resourceful adversary; but he is not ten feet tall.

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INTRODUCTION

An ancient Chinese legend, well known to Vietnamese, tells ". . . there was trouble in the state of Lu, and the reigning monarch called in Confucius to help. When the master arrived at the court, he went to a public place and took a seat in the correct way, facing south, and all the trouble disappeared."[1] Ho Chi Minh's works are but an addenda to this legend, for the legend is the paradigm of revolution in Vietnam. For the Confucians, of course, the "correct" position was that which accorded with the will of Heaven and the practices of sacred ancestors. For Ho Chi Minh, the "correct" position was that which accorded with the laws of history and the present and future judgements of the Vietnamese people. While Ho Chi Minh positioned the door of Marxism-Leninism in the "correct" way however, it was the hand of Vo Nguyen Giap that caused it to swing wide, disgorging the most effective native military apparatus in recent history.

The legends, the myths and the realities of Giap's life are inextricably intertwined. His rapid rise to prominence in the dark world of insurgent warfare, in itself, evokes myth. Born in 1912 in a village just north of the 17th parallel, he was the son of a bourgeois landowning family that had fallen into poverty. By the time young Giap was 14, he was a member of a clandestine, anti-French sect; four years later the French had him in jail for political agitation. Despite his apparent devotion

to a world of academia in the years to follow, Giap rose to share with only a few others, leadership in the strongest political organization in Vietnam. Apart from Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and Truong Chinh, there was no other leader who could rival his position in the party by the time he was 29 years old. Even what possibly can be regarded as Giap's first stride toward the threshold of generalship is set in an aura of mystic. One Friday evening in May 1940, it is told, he was taken by devious routes in a rickshaw through the suburbs of Hanoi to a safe location for the night. His absence was covered by Minh Tai, his wife . . . whom he had met while in prison, and who was to die later in a French jail. The following morning, he went with Pham Van Dong to the End-of-the-Bridge Station in time to catch the train for Lao Kay, the border station enroute to Kunming, China . . . and rendezvous with Ho Chi Minh. He was destined to return however, to ultimately "face south, in the correct way."[2]

Robert O'Neill, in his assessment of Giap says "He is a unique leader, and cannot be measured against conventional scales without severe risk of suffering magnification or diminution in the process."[3] Unfortunately, much that has been written tends to support magnification. This article is not a deliberate effort toward serving diminuation, but rather an attempt to achieve some semblance of balance in the ledger of Giap's professional life.

THE THRESHOLD OF GENERALSHIP (THE FORTIES)

> . . . Giap diappeared into the hills with 34 men, nearly half of them armed only with flintlocks. From these humble beginnings, came a force that would give the French Army a frightful beating at a lonely garrison at Dien Bien Phu. . . .[4]

The responsibility for organizing and training the Viet Minh Army was clearly Giap's, assigned by Ho Chi Minh in China in 1940. The compelling question however, is . . . who trained Giap? His doctrinal works, along with those of Mao Tse Tung are replete with unmistakable plagarisms tracing back to Sun Tzu, the Chinese strategist and military historian who lived 2500 years before Christ. For whatever teacher, Giap was undoubtedly an apt pupil, with a scholarly background in history and an obsession for Napoleon. He had first become a serious student in the thirties at the Lycee Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, a school normally reserved for rich Vietnamese and French children, where he was sponsored by Louis Marty, the French Director of Political Affairs and General Security Services in Indo China--and later at the University of Hanoi. History was, and remains, Giap's passion. He had gone on to teach it at the Than Long (Rising Dragon) High School after attending the University, where among his pupils was a youngster named Le Duc Tho--many years later the Chief negotiator for Hanoi at the Paris Peace Conference. But it was probably in the caves of Yenan, in China, that he put aside his passion for the Napoleonic

Wars and was taught the art of guerrilla warfare by the Chinese. His principal teacher was not Mao, but probably Peng Teh-Huai, who became Peking's Defense Minister until disgraced a few years ago as "revisionist." In addition, there is evidence that Viet Minh cadres trained extensively in tactics and guerrilla warfare in areas of China during the early forties.

Giap returned to Vietnam in 1941 to the Pac Bo region just south of the China border. With him were Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong. How much Giap learned from this association, or from Truong Chinh, soon a strategist in his own right, is unknown. With Ho in particular, it is not unlikely that the lessons from the older man, who had been trained for years in Moscow and had 20 years experience in defiance of superior forces, were substantial.

Nevertheless, it was the principles of Mao Tse Tung, which Giap had absorbed during the years of World War II, that formed the basis for Viet Minh military policy, the essential characteristics of which emerged in the three classical phases of revolutionary war . . . that the Viet Minh had to pass from the strategic defensive through guerrilla warfare to the general counteroffensive. Essential to the first phase was the achievement of a broad base of popular support to insure survival. This task was first, and foremost, political in nature, and the legend of Giap's disappearance into the hills with 34 men unfolds. In October 1944, over three

years after Giap's return from China, Ho Chi Minh ordered the establishment of an Armed Propaganda Brigade for efforts "more on political action than on military force."[5] In response to this directive, Giap selected essentially what was the first platoon of his only main force unit--less than company size--and set out to achieve a modest victory over the French that was necessary for a propaganda campaign to succeed. On Christmas Eve, 1944, Giap attacked two small French border posts at Phy Khat and Na Ngan and massacred their garrisons. The Peoples Army of Vietnam was born.

The end of the decade would find Giap commanding 32 regular and 137 regional battalions--and again, indebtedness to the Chinese accrues. Following Mao Tse Tung's victory in China in 1949, intensive training of Viet Minh regular forces was launched on Chinese firing ranges in Kwangsi, from which such units as Division 308 would later emerge. The primary factor in limiting expansion of the Viet Minh however, had not been one of training, for Giap had fought the Japanese--sparingly--and had tested the French. The problem had been one of support, both tactical and logistical. The solution lay through the Chinese Communists, and the fact that he had not launched a major offensive during the decade indicates that the situation in China played a dominant role in determining his strategies. Now the situation was changing, and the tests of generalship lay ahead.

THE FIRST TEST (1950)

> . . . The Viet Minh now (1950) had excellent leadership in Giap, the promise of help from the Chinese Communists, just across the border, and the advantage of fighting a guerrilla war against an enemy that had no understanding of guerrilla war. . . .[6]

6 Guerrilla war comes to an end when artillery and shells to feed it are at hand. Although it can be argued that for Giap, this moment arrived in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, there is substantial evidence to support the view that the Viet Minh ceased to be guerrillas and became a conventional army much earlier--probably in 1950--and Giap's first test of generalship was to occur in 17 awesome days of October of that year.

Phase Two of the classic revolutionary struggle--that of guerrilla warfare--although largely indefinable probably passed during the latter years of the forties, beginning on December 19, 1946, when sufficient French forces were mustered following the close of World War II to seize Haiphong and Hanoi, and drive the fragile Viet Minh government back into the hills whence they had come. This point also marked the beginning of seven years of carnage, years in which 92,000 men of the French Expeditionary Force were to die, along with untold thousands of Vietnamese. Certainly in the years 1946-49, the French were confronted with guerrilla warfare, and they held and lost garrisons as they lunged fruitlessly at a vanishing enemy. The principles of

avoidance, deception, and maneuver that Giap had learned were inherent in the art of guerrilla warfare were aptly used during this period, as he continued to build his force for the general counteroffensive.

In early 1950, after the Chinese Communists had established firm control over Yunnan and Kwangsi, facilities for amalgamation of Giap's battalions into regiments, and regiments into divisions became a reality. Working on a pattern of four regiments to a division, Giap was able to form five infantry divisions of over 12,000 men each. The Chinese provided sizeable quantities of heavy weapons and artillery, and formalized two practice ranges at Tsingsi and Longchow for training purposes. Viet Minh officers were sent to special staff courses in southern China, and Chinese advisors and technicians entered Vietnam. After relentless training, Giap was ready for his first direct showdown with the French.[7]

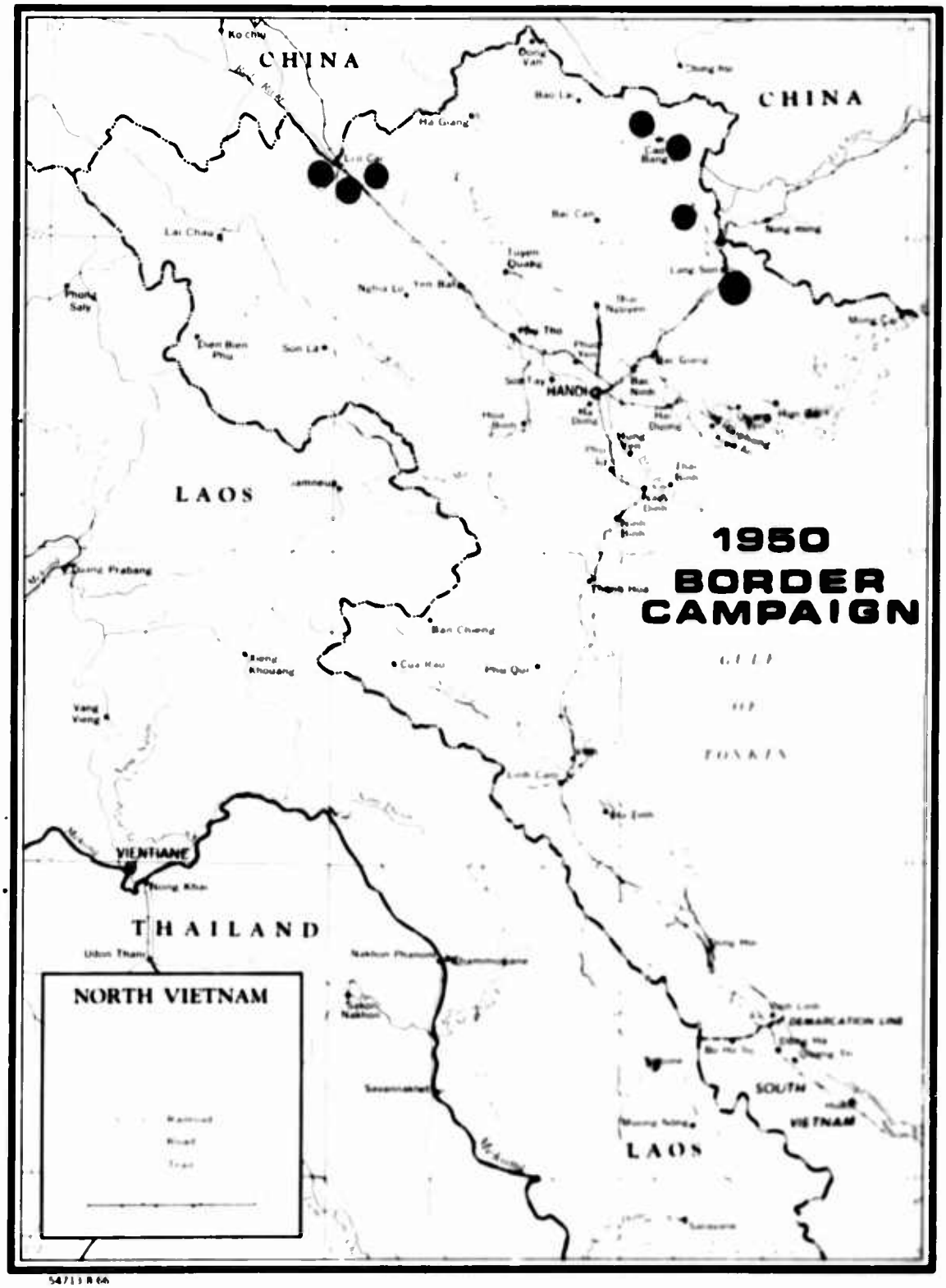
On October 1, 1950, taking advantage of the prevalent ground mists of the late wet season to conceal his advance, Giap began systematically attacking--in detail--the string of French garrisons along the Chinese border, using up to a total of 14 battalions of infantry and three artillery battalions. Isolated by miles of jungle from the French main line of resistance, and restricted in lateral movement and support by Giap's forces, the defenders had little chance, even though their numbers totaled close to 10,000. On the night of 17 October, as Giap was closing on Lang Son,

the main base in the northeast with up to three divisions, the French abandoned the post leaving intact huge stocks of supplies including 13 field guns, 125 mortars, 450 trucks, three platoons of tanks, 940 machine guns, 1200 sub-machine guns, more than 8000 rifles and 1100 tons of ammunition--sufficient to equip another Viet Minh division.[8] By the end of the year, the whole of the border was under Giap's control and unimpeded communication with China was established, at a cost of 6000 French lives.

Giap had passed his first test, however judgements as to his generalship based on such limited exposure are perhaps premature. For the contest at that time--as perhaps all are to a degree--was fundamentally one of relative risks. The French had placed their forces in a weak position, were ill informed of the true stength of the Viet Minh, and had chosen a plan involving their troops in a high degree of risk; while Giap was able to launch his offensive at the time and place of his choosing, using an incredible degree of mobility on foot to mass overwhelming strength at each point of decision, and therefore enjoyed virtually no risk. Perhaps he was one of those few generals fortunate enough to make a reputation before running the risk of losing it.

THE RED RIVER DELTA (1951)

The situation in 1951 made it clear that the reestablishment of Ho Chi Minh's authority depended on greater Viet Minh control


1950
BORDER
CAMPAIGN
CHINA
CHINA
LAOS
LAOS
THAILAND
HANOI
VIENTIANE
NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH
VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE

54713 R 66

over the Vietnamese population. Despite Giap's victories in the 1950 border campaign, and the fact that a large proportion of the countryside was under Viet Minh control, two main population centers--the Red River Delta in the north, and southern Cochin China (from Saigon to the Bassac River) remained under French control. Control over at least one of these centers had to be broken.

On the French side, Marshal de Lattre de Tasigny had arrived, and assumed command of the Indo China theater on December 17, 1950, and had undertaken several measures to upgrade French capability. Seeing that his major outposts had fallen, he established a surface stability with the famous ceinture (belt) of forts and blockhouses to defend the triangular wedge of the Hanoi-Haiphong delta, a ceinture that might have been drawn from the blueprints of the Japanese in north China in 1945. He gave substance to this stability by mobilizing French civilians for guard duties, thus releasing garrison troops for combat, and sent back to France the ships that had arrived to evacuate women and children living in Indo China. As de Lattre said, "as long as the women and children are here, the men won't dare let go."[9]

The difficulties for Giap centered on the fundamental fact that French defensive strength in either area was formidable, in terms of numbers, mobility and firepower. In view of the advantages enjoyed by the French, it would seem on the evidence available to Giap that his chances of forcing the French out of one of their

strongholds were slim, and hence a frontal confrontation would be avoided. After all, it was Sun Tzu, whose writings were well known to Giap, that summed up some of his thoughts in the fourth century B.C. as follows: ". . . the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces; the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field; the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities. . . ."[10]

Giap was in a hurry, and he would attack against walled cities. Perhaps he reasoned that the French could choose either to fight his regulars in the mountains or to garrison the populous Red River Delta, but could not do both--and he would therefore be unable to entice them from their stronghold. As far as the south was concerned, querrilla forces had been able to harrass French garrisons, contest their control of the population and draw sizeable combat forces away from the north, but their effectiveness did not match their northern counterparts. This, coupled with the staggering problem of supporting a major effort over extended lines of communication from China, ruled out the latter as a feasible course of action. It was apparent that it was too soon to "face south, in the correct way" and the decision was made that the war would be fought in the north. On January 10, 1951, the bulk of Giap's forces--81 battalions, including 12 heavy weapons battalions and eight engineer battalions, were ready for the general counteroffensive to crush the French Army in the Red River Delta. He was to fail spectacularly.[11] ". . . From

1950 onwards, campaigns were successively opened and we won the initiative on the northern front. . . ."[12]

Not only did Giap lose the initiative he had won so decisively in 1950, but he nearly lost his army in attempting to crush the French in three offensives in the first six months of 1951. The first of his efforts was against Vinh Yen some thirty miles northwest of Hanoi. The size of the force he allocated to the assault were the 20,000 men of 308 and 312 Divisions, and at 5:00 p.m. on 17 January all of 308 Division attacked. By noon the 18th, Giap withdrew, leaving 6000 dead, 500 prisoners and probably another 8000 wounded. The majority of the casualties resulted from napalm. The scene was to be repeated, however--at Mao Khe in March and again at the Day River in May and June. By July 1951, Giap's efforts to breach French defenses had cost the Viet Minh over 20,000 casualties. He had failed to recognize the vulnerability of light infantry in direct assault against fortified positions, supported by artillery and aerial bombardment, and now it was necessary to withdraw into safe areas, re-study his approach to the war, and restore the fighting strength of his army.

What may have saved the Viet Minh army was simply the inability of the French to exploit success by mounting an offensive, due to insufficient resources to both defend vital areas and operate effectively in the field. As it was, de Lattre was obliged to

remain on the defensive, unless French policy and support from Paris was changed. Such change was not forthcoming, and Giap was to be permitted other decisions.

HOA BINH TO DIEN BIEN PHU (1952-54)

Marshal de Lattre returned to France in late 1951, to die of cancer. Paris sent lesser men; lesser men, specifically than Vo Nguyen Giap. The first was Raoul Salan, who later would lead the Secret Army Organization, the OAS, against the rebels in Algeria; the second, the man who devised the strategy of forcing a showdown at Dien Bien Phu, was Henri Navarre. It was de Lattre however, who conceived the taking and holding of Hoa Binh, and who set the plan in motion. De Lattre had made significant contributions during his tenure on Indo China, but had he lived, he would have been hard pressed to have retained his laurels following the hell of Hoa Binh. The salient on the Black River takes on significance perhaps only when seen from a long range point of view, and from differing perspectives. For Giap, the battle was an important dress rehearsal for a future showdown; and for the French, it was neither a dress rehearsal or a portent of things to come.

Hoa Binh lay about 25 miles to the west of Hanoi, and served as a staging point on the Viet Minh north-south supply route. It also had psychological value to the French, for it was the center of the Muoung tribe, loyal to France, and many Muoung

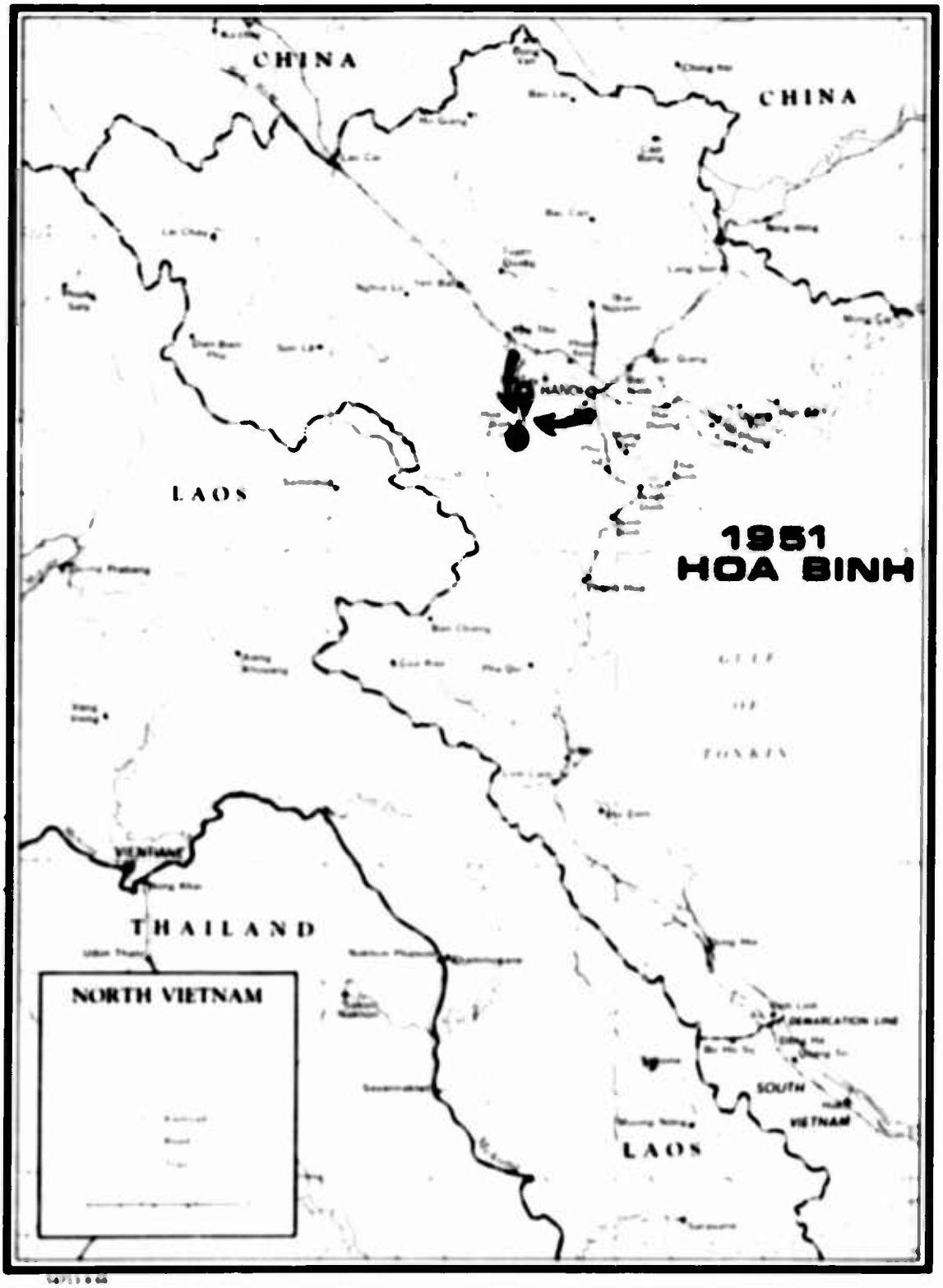
CHINA
LAOS
1951
OFFENSIVE
THAILAND
NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
SOUTH
VIETNAM
LAOS

tribesmen had relocated their families in the refuge of the delta, while they fought alongside Frenchmen. From a strategic point of view, seizure of Hoa Binh would enlarge the area of the Red River Delta, now hedged in completely by the de Lattre line.

At dawn on November 14, 1951, three French paratroop battalions descended on the city. Concurrently, a total of 15 infantry battalions, seven artillery battalions and two armored groups, supported by engineers, surged into the Black River valley, and by the next afternoon, all major objectives had been taken. Three months later, it would take them 11 torturous days to come out, with casualties nearly as great as they were destined to suffer later at Dien Bien Phu.[13]

Hoa Binh had been taken against virtually no resistance, as Giap chose to watch and wait--for he was back to fighting the war of the guerrilla. He was undoubtedly quick to note that the French were overextended, and dependent on two extremely tenuous lines of communication, Route 6 and the Black River. These became the targets for his divisions, and he went about systematically isolating the garrison. But Hoa Binh was not to be the point of decision.

The Viet Minh took heavy casualties at Hoa Binh, but the French had been the heavier losers. For the French, the humiliation of the withdrawal--which fell to General Salan--contributed heavily to the steady erosion of resolve in Paris for continuation of the conflict, and when Henri Navarre arrived a year later,


CHINA
CHINA
HANOI
LAOS
1951
HOA BINH
GULF
OF
TONKIN
VIETNAM
THAILAND
NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
SOUTH
VIETNAM
LAOS

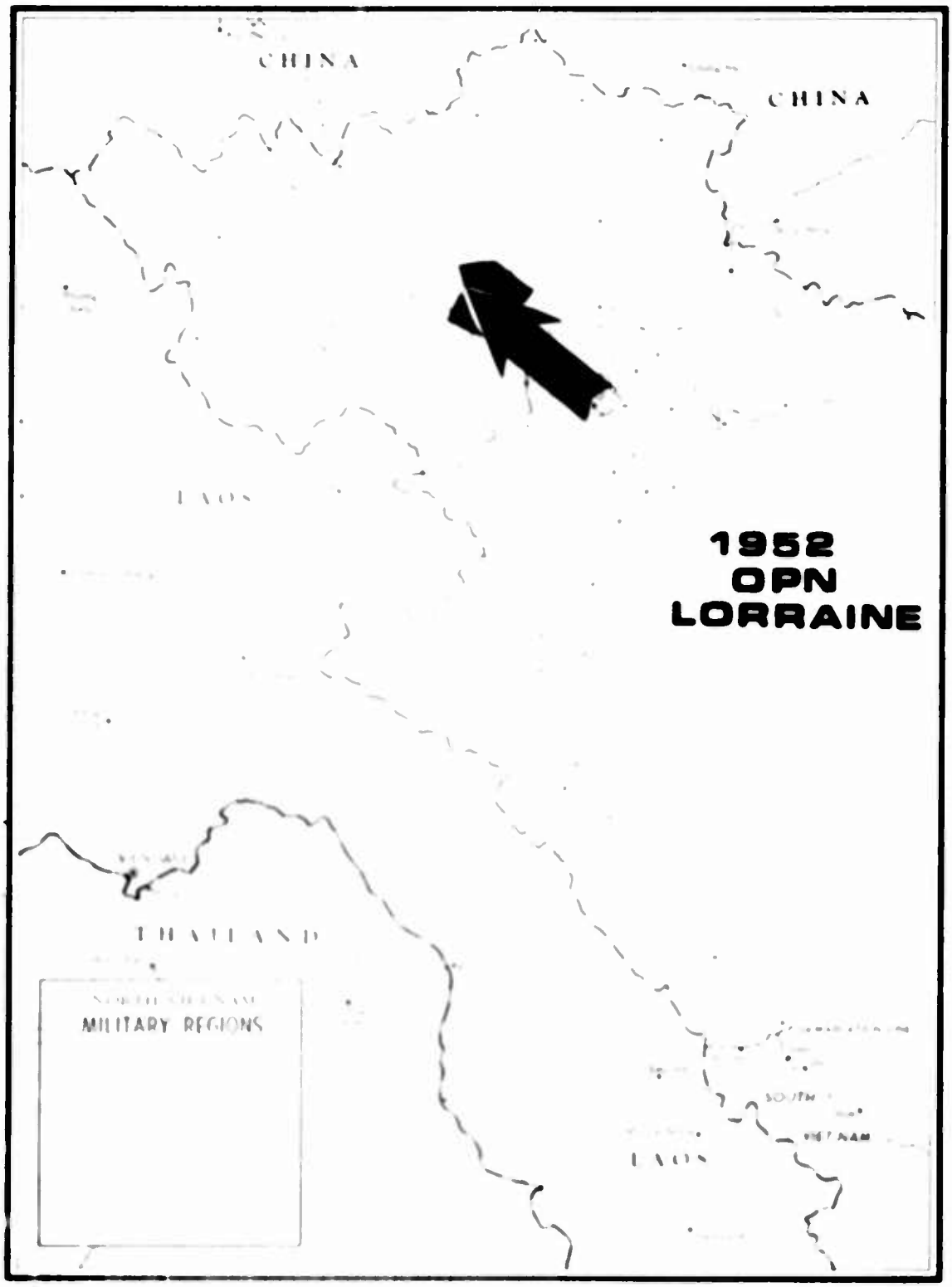
he was expected only to use sufficient military power to bring the Viet Minh to the conference table, without dishonoring France in the process. On the military side, the capability of the French Expenditionary Force to reach a successful military conclusion had diminished nearly to the vanishing point following Hoa Binh. The time was right for Giap to press his war of contradiction--force the French to defend their vital areas and at the same time, come to grips with him in the field. Either task was difficult for the French to fulfill.

The stalemate in Korea, that had set in when the line stabilized in June 1951, was of great benefit to Giap. American equipment, in particular, captured by the Chinese in Korea was sent on to the Viet Minh, and it is rather ironical that from this period onwards, Giap frequently had American arms and equipment that were more modern than that of the French. Owing to this situation, the Viet Minh were able to replenish ammunition and spare parts by capturing it from the French, who were also increasingly supplied with American war materiel. In general, Giap expanded his forces, trained intensively, and absorbed new arms and equipment during the rainy season, and by the autumn of 1952, was ready.[14]

Excluding the Red River Delta, there were four main areas into which Giap could send his main force to achieve the contradiction he sought--South Vietnam, Central Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos--and he had the choice of operating in any one or several of these areas simultaneously. Cambodia offered the least prospect

for success, primarily due to the fact that Vietnamese, of any political flavor, were traditionally regarded as aggressors by the Cambodians. The Mekong Delta in South Vietnam alleviated the problem of differing nationalities, but the openness of the countryside favored the French. The rugged highlands of Central Vietnam on the other hand, maximized French vulnerability, as ambush sites abounded on the narrow roads that led through gorges and jungles canalizing mechanized French forces. Laos offered a great advantage due to its close proximity to Giap's source of supply, as well as the vulnerability of shallow French control. Giap chose Central Vietnam and Laos, in addition to the Red River Delta, as the vehicle with which to inexorably spread-eagle the French Expenditionary Force for the kill.

The latter part of 1952 and early 1953 was essentially a war of movement. Giap moved three divisions west of the Black River in the direction of Laos in October 1952, and began working against French outposts, using as much as a full division against isolated, battalion-sized forces. With the ghost of the border disaster of 1950 before them, the French responded with reinforcements. When it appeared Giap's efforts were grinding to a halt, General Salan launched Operation Lorraine, a massive force of 30,000 troops to penetrate Viet Minh base areas, isolate them from their sources of supply and seek out Giap's main force units. Lorraine terminated in November after it had bogged down about 100 miles from the De Lattre line in stalemate. Giap used only two regiments


CHINA
CHINA
LAOS
1952
OPN
LORRAINE
THAILAND
MILITARY REGIONS
LAOS

against the massive force began its withdrawal, and the strategic aim of enticing Giap's divisions from the country west of the Black River had failed. In January-March 1953, Giap calmly sidestepped French resistance and entered northern Laos.

On May 8, 1953 General Henri Navarre had arrived and assumed command of all French forces in Indo China. At that time, French forces consisted of nearly 190,000 troops in the entire theater, of which over 100,000 were tied down in static defenses. Navarre estimated that Giap had over 125,000 full time, regular soldiers of the main force disposed in six divisions, at least six independent regiments, and possibly several independent battalions. Several adverse factors affecting morale were apparent to Navarre, not the least being the fact that the French government was not solidly behind him. The war was also unpopular with sections of the public--the French Communist Party for example, retained links with the Viet Minh, which they were able to do because a state of war did not exist. They, and other left wing groups did all they could to hinder. It was estimated, as an example, that up to 40 percent of some consignments of military equipment were sabotaged before they reached Indo China. The French press was free to bring almost anything it liked about the fighting, including facts and figures, thus providing Giap a ready made source of intelligence. Articles and reports, deliberately written to damage morale, were freely published in certain newspapers and periodicals.[15]

Navarre spent the first three weeks in Indo China in a series of inspection tours, then announced his strategy on June 16, 1953:

- Reconstruct the Expeditionary Force, and initiate major pacification in the Delta.

- Destroy Viet Minh forces in the southern highlands by means of Operation Atlante.

- Prevent Viet Minh offensives by smashing them before they were launched.

- Seek a major set piece battle, attacking Giap's rice granaries, reserves, and finally the main Viet Minh battle force.[16]

This strategy complemented Giap's war of contradiction, the pace quickened. Giap struck out across the north, the Highlands in the south, and in Laos, to draw the French out of the Red River Delta and cause them to disperse.

First, he left up to two divisions in the Delta itself, to harrass, cut communications lines, strike at border posts and interdict Route 5 between Hanoi and Haiphong. That tied down a minimum of five French battalions. In December 1953, the Viet Minh moved in five days from Vinh, on the coast, along mountain paths into Laos where they attacked the French at Thakhet and turned on Seno, the French air base, to which they did siege for five days. Navarre reacted by airlifting two more battalions; one from the Delta and one from Saigon--but by now Giap had moved

onto the Bolovens Plateau in Laos. Next he foiled Navarre's Operation Atlante--a landing on the coast along the "Street Without Joy" south of Quang Tri, by removing his regular units and bringing them north to reinforce at Dien Bien Phu, leaving only guerrilla units to harrass the French, who never managed to dislodge them. Meanwhile, he launched heavy attacks in the Central Highlands, taking Kontum and moving on Pleiku, where some of the fiercist fighting of the war occurred. Finally, he moved his 316 Division into Laos, toward Luang Prabang, and Navarre sent five battalions to block him. He merely turned the division away--toward Dien Bien Phu. The trap was set.

> . . . Everything might have gone all right if Navarre had guessed correctly that Giap had no artillery; it was beyond his occidental comprehension that Giap's coolies could pull artillery, even if Giap had any, up the steep slopes of the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. . . .[17]

At 1030, Paris time on May 7, 1954, following a final human wave assault by 308 Division and an inextricable melee which spread over the muddy, cratered landscape at Dien Bien Phu, a red flag was hoisted atop the command bunker, and the final act of the drama came to a close. History is replete with the tactics of the struggle, and in its aftermath the myths and "might-have-beens" prevail. The destiny of Dien Bien Phu probably had been determined when Giap closed the vise on the garrison in early January 1954 and it is unlikely that a solution could have been found even if the French had been more accurate in their assessment

1953-54
CONTRA-
DICTION
CHINA
CHINA
NORTH
VIETNAM
BURMA
HOUA
KHONG
LUANG PRABANG
HOUA PHAN
SAYABOURY
XIENG
KHOUANG
VIENTIANE
BORIKHANE
KHAMMOUANE
UDON THANI
THAILAND
SARAVANE
SOUTH
VIETNAM
UDON RATCHATHANI
ATTOPEU
CAMBODIA
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of Giap's artillery. In a larger, and more realistic sense, the more grevious French errors appear more appropriately to be:

- Their choice of fighting a decisive battle so far from the center of French strength.

- Placing excessive reliance on the capability of French air power to both interdict Giap's efforts, and supply their own forces.

- A gross underestimation of Giap's capability, principally in the logistics arena.

The notion that French intelligence had guessed that Giap had no artillery, is merely a notion. Each Viet Minh regiment was known to possess one battery of 75 mm pack howitzers, and one battery of four 120 mm mortars. It was also known that 351 Division could field three 105 mm artillery battalions, each with three batteries of four howitzers. More importantly, French intelligence estimated Giap could bring to bear from 80 to 120 howitzers at Dien Bien Phu. They actually faced 144 field pieces, plus at least 30 75 mm recoilless rifles, some 36 37 mm anti-aircraft guns, and in the final days of the battle, between 12 and 16 of the six-tube Russian Katyuska rocket launchers.

A far more fateful error involved estimates of Giap's logistical capability. Giap had prepared for the struggle for months, by mounting one of the most extraordinary logistical operations in history. Up to 1000 trucks were employed, largely undetected as they moved over primitive roads--but the backbone of the

logistics system rested with the coolies--with some estimates ranging their numbers to nearly 100,000. Each carried as much as 400 pounds on reinforced bicycles--or carried cargo on their heads--and they moved in an endless stream from China into the hills surrounding the valley. The French had estimated Giap's ammunition capability at a total of 25,000 rounds, and counted on French air power to prevent further sizeable amounts from reaching the battlefield. Giap actually consumed more than 100,000 rounds during the campaign, as it turned out, and additional quantities available to him are unknown. Hampered by bad weather and intense fire from Chinese gunners manning 37 mm anti-aircraft weapons, French airlift ironically aided Giap's efforts as parachute loads were inadvertently dropped into Viet Minh hands. On one day alone--April 15, Giap received 19 tons of artillery and mortar ammunition in this manner.[18]

Although French intelligence underestimated the numbers of artillery weapons Giap could bring to bear at Dien Bien Phu, and were grossly in error in their estimates of his logistical capability--the allocation of artillery by the French to the battle failed to recognize even the most meager estimates of Giap's capability. To face Giap's six regiments of artillery, the French allocated one quarter of this strength; while new American artillery pieces, still in their crates at Haiphong, could have tripled their firepower.

In terms of relative strength, Giap had nearly 50,000 combatants at Dien Bien Phu, a strength which remained relatively constant despite heavy losses. The French had about 16,000, which counted 17 battalions of infantry, but in reality the strength at any one time probably never exceeded 13,000. In any event, the ratio stood in Giap's favor about three to one, and remembering his earlier setbacks in assaulting fortified positions, he used his advantage to slowly strangle the garrison with a system of trenches and tunnels, burrowing under barbed wire which brought the Viet Minh to within yards of French defensive positions--then finally isolating and overwhelming them with his infantry as he shattered the garrison.

The systematic strangulation of the garrison was not the answer, however, at least in strategic terms--and there was something else at Dien Bien Phu, other than the professional competence of Giap, or the errors of Henri Navarre which bear a significance that should not be forgotten. Dien Bien Phu was not the whole of Indo China, or the whole of North Vietnam. It was merely a fortress that had cost France five percent of her total fighting strength in the theater. The flag that was hoisted atop the command bunker on May 7 was unmistakably red--not white--and Dien Bien Phu had fallen, but it had not capitulated. Giap had struck at the French where they were most vulnerable, and while French courage never failed, the political direction to give it meaning had.

Giap would now consolidate his gains, and turn to "face south, in the correct way." The day of the soldier in North Vietnam would slowly enter a period of siesta, rather than sunset, and at the early age of 42, Giap had a lot to look forward to.

AFTER GENEVA (1955-59)

Giap's career after Dien Bien Phu is difficult to follow, due to the water-tight secrecy of the Hanoi regime, but there have been sufficient leaks to indicate that his political career has not been as unchallenged as his military one. His main rival in the Hanoi leadership was Truong Chinh, son of a mandarin, who eventually became Leader of the National Assembly and the traditional leader of the extremist--Left, pro-Chinese faction. In the early thirties, Giap and Chinh wrote a book together called the Peasant Problem, but in 1947 Truong Chinh created a split by writing The Resistance Will Win, a treatise on guerrilla warfare plagarized almost directly from the works of Mao Tse Tung. In 1950, he had mounted a political campaign against Giap, accusing him of choosing unreliable subordinates and later that year organized the execution of Giap's Chief of Military Supply Service, Tran Chi Chau.[19]

Giap emerged during the years between wars as pro-Soviet, and, as much as his position allowed, anti-Chinese, despite his huge indebtedness to China for his early success. In Giap's view,

the relationship with China seemed fraught with perils which had to be offset by assiduous courting of the Soviet Union. From his student days, he was well acquainted with the earlier history of Vietnam as a client state, tributary and even province of China. It was Ho Chi Minh who decided to follow a policy of delicate compromise between his two major allies, and the long standing and better rivalry between two of his senior lieutenants would continue.

On the military side, while the strength of the revolution had been in the north, the Viet Minh had enjoyed some success in the south. In the period of truce following the Geneva Conference of 1954, the Viet Minh had, in obedience to the military protocols for disengagement, regrouped some 90,000 people to the north--most of them southerners, and most of them soldiers. Still, below the 17th parallel, there had remained thousands of Viet Minh cadres, local guerrillas, and their sympathizers.

In 1959, Hanoi's strategy for the south began to unfold. Truong Chinh was actively espousing a Maoist line of full support for the south, based on the theme of a general uprising, and argued that with appropriate encouragement and assistance, the people of South Vietnam would rise up in a body and eject the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Giap, on the other hand, believed that ultimate victory could only be achieved by proceeding carefully through each of the three phases of revolutionary war. The theory of

general uprising was to become the mainstay of northern strategy until 1963, when the fall of Diem failed to produce the uprising and seizure of power that had been anticipated. Only then would Giap have the latitude necessary to pursue his protracted war of attrition.

CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE (1960-65)

> . . . Personnel of the NLF was, with few exceptions, southern. Northern troops did not enter the south until just before US troops arrived in strength. If the north was indeed trying to conquer the south, it was doing so less by force than by politics. . . .[20]

The National Liberation Front (NLF) was probably formed in March 1960. Its formation was in some ways a signal, coming from the South, that was to force the government of the North to assume its responsibility. With its birth, the machinery itself had been created; now the machine must be made to run. The degree to which Hanoi was responsible for founding the NLF is debatable, but by 1964, about half of the 40,000 civilian cadres were pure northerners.[21] Between 1957 and 1959, terrorists of what later became the Viet Cong, the military arm of the NLF killed 10 government soldiers, 28 civil servants, 70 village officials, and more than 50 civilians in carefully planned assassinations designed for psychological effect, much as Giap's mission with his platoon of 34 men had been on Christmas Eve in 1944. But by now, the

Viet Cong was turning its attention from subversion to attacks on entire villages and formations of government troops. By 1964, the scale of warfare had advanced to that of full regimental attacks, and General Nguyen Chi Thanh had been sent south by Hanoi to command the Viet Cong. The amount of supplies and equipment needed to sustain this level of warfare was not to be had merely from captured South Vietnamese stocks, and the flow of aid increased from the north. In addition to the foregoing, it is probable that the conclusion was reached rather early in the game, that if the NLF were ever to win in South Vietnam, northerners would have to assume the mantle of power; and their subsequent decisions would be based on Hanoi interests, rather than southern interests--and thus the strategic initiative on the Communist side passed at some point, directly to Hanoi.

Plans for an assault on Saigon had been considered for some time, and in 1964 three Viet Cong divisions had been formed within 50 miles of the capital, based in Phuoc Tuy Province and in War Zones C and D. Given time, it was hoped by Giap that these divisions would gradually isolate Saigon from the countryside, following which an assault on the city would cause the collapse of the government. In late 1964, the timetable accelerated. The battle of Binh Gia, which raged during the last weeks of December 1964 and early January 1965, in Phuoc Tuy Province, saw Viet Cong units maul a number of South Vietnamese infantry battalions in an engagement in which the initiative rested entirely with the

Communists. In the Central Highlands, a thrust from the Central Mountain Chain toward the coast in the vicinty of Pleiku and Au Khe, apparently designed to geographically cut the south in two was launched. Whether the initiative was that of General Thanh--who was eager for a quick decisive victory--or that of Giap, matters little. While Giap maintained emphasis on a war of long duration as a strategy, it was unlikely that he was not prepared to exploit whatever opportunity arose. And it should be remembered, that just 10 years prior the scene in the Central Highlands had been strikingly similar, and that was at the hand of Giap.

Had Viet Cong success been more rapid, it is possible that the commitment of American troops would have come too late; however, this was not to be, despite the fact that Giap had hoped to achieve "unification" without provoking a direct confrontation with United States forces. It is unlikely that Giap ever hoped that with intervention, the United States would shun, as the French did, the use of conscripts in Vietnam, but even with conscription, he probably reasoned that an army no greater than 600,000 could be fielded against him. Adding 500,000 South Vietnamese to this, the balance was still tolerable. There were nearly 200,000 Viet Cong under arms, and he could field at least 100,000 regulars from his own army. Thus, he had to cope with a numerical superiority of only three to one, a ratio more than adequate for sustaining a protracted guerrilla war particularly

in view of the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia for his logistic system. Satisfied, his regiments began moving south.[22]

THE PATH AHEAD (1965-66)

> . . . US imperialists launched their attacks in two main directions--north of Saigon, and on the high plateaus, where they believed the Liberation troops were concentrating their main forces. Contrary to the desires of US imperialists, both these attacks failed. . . .[23]

Late 1965 and early 1966 saw a gradual receding of the Communist victory tide, and the war reached equilibrium, if not in fact turning against Giap--as the introduction of large American ground forces deprived him of victory that was within his grasp. Giap's offensive plans apparently called for a continuation of the large scale attacks that had been so successful the previous year. The campaign opened with such attacks on the Michelin Rubber Plantation and the Ia Drang Valley, but as the dry season wore on, the disruptive effect of American search and destroy operations became more and more evident. They denied Giap's commands one of their most important weapons--planning.

Historians may fix the major turning point of this phase of the war however, at the battle of the Ia Drang Valley, fought for seven bitter days from Plei Me down the valley corridor to the Cambodian border. Giap had decided to test the newly arrived US First Cavalry Division with his 66th Regiment, attacking selected

units and laying in ambush for those who came to reinforce them. When it was over, nearly 1400 of the 2000 men of the 66th Regiment died, or were permanently disabled at Ia Drang. Americans counted 240 dead, most of whom were lost in the first hour of the first day of battle. In a month long compaign in the Ia Draug Valley, the Americans had moved their artillery by helicopter 67 times, while battalions were moved 47 times. Thirty three thousand shells were fired by the American force, about one third the total amount fired by the Viet Minh during the entire Dien Bien Phu campaign. That represented mobility and firepower the French never had, and a search for new strategy and doctrine began.[24]

By the end of 1966 the bankruptcy of orthodox guerrilla warfare was obvious to all, and painfully apparent to the Politburo in Hanoi, whose hands by now fully controlled the reins of the war. Differing views as to whether the initiatives in the south were controlled by Giap or General Thanh were resolved with Thanh's death in a B-52 strike in 1967 and dissension in Hanoi grew over Giap's "no win" policies. Communist forces had not won a single battle of significance in two years. American firepower was eating deeply into their reserves of men and supplies, and more and more troops were required from the north, as the burden of the war steadily shifted from the shoulders of the NLF to Giap's troops. In addition, a sense of impotence was developing among the Hanoi leadership as American planes continued to

pound at transportation and communication centers in the north. Giap himself, it is reported, became preoccupied with the possibilities of an invasion, and he mobilized all civilian inhabitants to work with the military in making the whole country a huge entrenched camp--which detracted further from their ability to keep the machine in the south functioning. The moment of decision, the point at which it was clear that things could no longer go on as they had, probably came in the summer of 1967--as Giap reasoned that a purely military victory was no longer attainable.

He elected to wage a protracted guerrilla war of attrition and mount a parallel political offensive armed at the American democratic system, which he reasoned could not bear a long and inconclusive war for an extended period. It was in seeing and attacking this weakness that Giap made a major innovation in the strategy for the south.

THE WINTER-SPRING CAMPAIGN (1967-68)

Following an analysis of the 1966-67 dry season, Giap clearly hoped to improve his position on the southern battlefields in the months ahead. He called for greater coordination among the various types of forces, and insisted that the key strategic task was the improvement and expansion of guerrilla forces, an indication that as early as September 1967, plans were being laid for the TET Offensive. In the broadest of terms however, the grand strategy of the Winter-Spring Campaign went beyond Giap's military

contributions. It was to be a two-salient pincer movement, one military and one political. Taken together, it was the familiar fighting-negotiating technique that formed the pattern in 1954 at the end of the war with the French, and Korea as well. Recalling the experience with the French--in September 1953--the Politburo met under the chairmanship of Ho Chi Minh to approve Giap's operational plans for a Winter-Spring Offensive; and from November 19 to 23, the senior military committee worked out the details. On November 20, while the planning was underway, Ho sent a sensational reply to a cable from a Paris correspondent of the Swedish newspaper EXPRESSEN--a public offer to begin negotiations with the French on a cease-fire and settlement of the war. The French picked up the peace bid, and on March 13, 1954, while diplomatic negotiations were underway, the assault on Dien Bien Phu began in earnest. It ended on May 7, the day before the international conference at Geneva was to begin. This was what the Vietnamese have come to call a "decisive" victory, one which might be limited militarily, but whose psychological and political consequences would be decisive. The pattern was to repeat itself.[25]

Militarily, Giap was concerned with the size and firepower of American units, and he experimented with ways of neutralizing their effectiveness. He moved into Con Thien with a division, and with continued pressure, drew a sizeable American reaction. In October 1967, the battles of Loc Ninh and Dak To, which seemed

so senseless now appear to have been a deliberate effort to test his forces against heavily defended positions--and although he lost heavily--he again saw American units react in force. As the plans for the TET Offensive neared completion, Giap maneuvered his forces into the western end of the DMZ against Khe Sanh in December and he drew a reaction once more. In his view, he was pressing his war of contradiction, much as he had done against Navarre.

On December 29, 1967, the final maneuver was ready. As in 1953, a bid for negotiations would be made on the eve of a military contest. This time, Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh set up the peace signal, announcing on December 30, a willingness of the Hanoi regime to "hold talks" following a cessation of the bombing of the north. The statement was passed to a French news agency reporter, whose story made headlines around the world. And just to insure the United States got the point, Hanoi radio broadcast the Trinh declaration over its international shortwave facilities--in English. The stage was set.

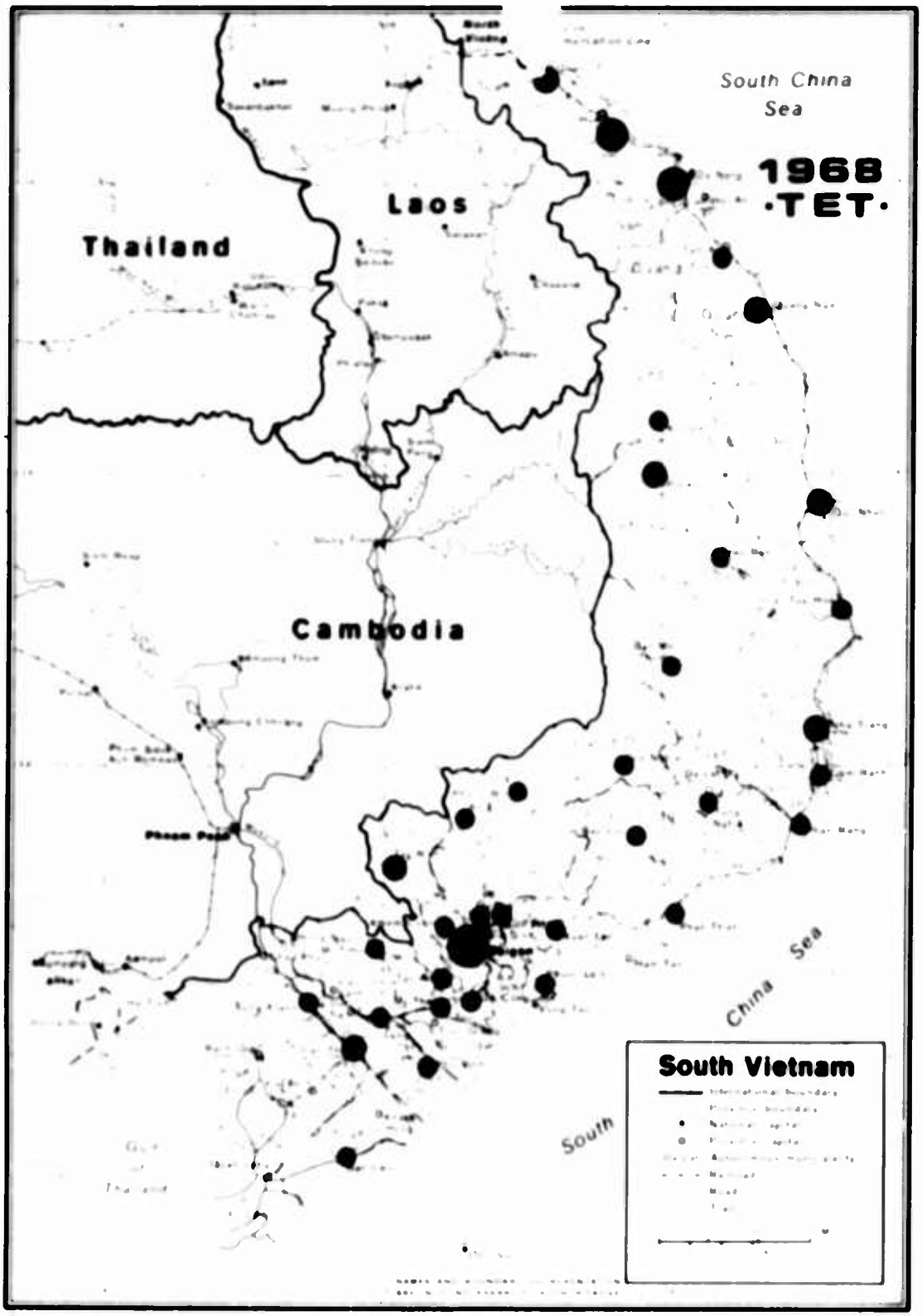
> . . . If intentions of the offensive were limited, then the failure was a limited one; if more ambitious, then the failure was a major one. And if the enemy intention was a knock-out punch, then quite obviously, the failure was monumental. In short, intentions are a continuum. . . .[26]

A half hour into the Year of the Monkey--12:30 on January 30, 1968, two small motorized carts pulled up to a pagoda in Nha Trang and discharged passengers, wearing government uniforms.

Moments later, the slam of 82 mm mortars was heard, and the TET Offensive was underway. While some estimates indicate more than 36,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers joined in the general offensive, other figures range as high as 67,000. With one surge, they struck more than 100 cities and towns, Saigon, 39 of the 44 provincial capitals and 71 district capitals. No target was too large or small, as tactics of both coordinated and independent fighting prevailed.[27]

Precisely when the offensive ended is perhaps unknown, and unimportant. February 25 is regarded as the day the last Communist force was cleared from the city of Hue, and the TET Counteroffensive ended by official Army order on April 1. In reality no one was the victor--for Giap had lost tens of thousands of his soldiers in a battle, and the United States lost the resolve of its people at home.

When viewed in a purely military sense, the TET Offensive can be regarded as a failure. If the strategy had been one designed to incite a general uprising, it failed to produce the intended result. Despite evidence to the contrary, it is doubtful that the overall strategy from Hanoi seriously embraced this objective. Giap in particular, had opposed any strategy for the south based on a theory of general uprising or classic urban revolution as early as 1959, and saw his views substantiated in the failure of the population to rise up with the demise of Diem.


South China
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If the strategy embraced the destruction of American forces and seizure of key cities, it belied the theory that both Giap and Thanh had concluded in 1967 that a pure military victory was unattainable[28]--and if the TET Offensive was only phase two of a three phase strategy which would culminate in a Dien Bien Phu of sorts at Khe Sanh, then phase three never materialized, and the ground relief of the Marine garrison at Khe Sanh was accomplished in April 1968 against only light opposition. Khe Sanh, in all likelihood, had served as a diversion to draw American forces away from the cities in preparation for the TET Offensive.

To measure victory or defeat as resulting from loss of human life would declare Giap a tragic loser, but would also attribute a degree of compassion to the little man that is not warranted. Time and time again, accounts reveal Giap's willingness to sacrifice what many believe to be some of the world's finest light infantry in the face of overwhelming superiority. As early as 1947, Giap had remarked to an observer that "every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world. The life and death of a hundred, a thousand or of tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represents really very little."[29]

When the political dimension of the TET Offensive is considered, the strategy takes on more meaning. The experience with the French left deep marks on Vietmanese Communist thinking, and

the Viet Minh did not encircle cities to win wars, they sought the "decisive victory." Certainly it would be an exaggeration to maintain that the TET Offensive alone turned a great nation around, deposed a President and brought sweeping changes in military policy. But it was one of the vital ingredients in the process, having shattered previous claims of stability and success in Vietnam, at least in the view of the American public. In its aftermath, utterances of "peace with honor" became public--and it should be remembered that Henri Navarre arrived in Indo China in 1953 to bring about peace, with honor. TET 1968 may have been Giap's finest hour since Dien Bien Phu.

THE FINAL ACT (1972)

If the TET Offensive of 1968 had achieved a degree of success for Hanoi, the tide quickly reversed itself. From then through 1971, American and South Vietnamese troops broke up almost all large Communist units, and under these favorable conditions, the program of Vietnamization that was initiated in 1969 proceeded in satisfactory manner. By the end of 1970, South Vietnam had added some 400,000 men to its armed forces, bringing the total towards 1,100,000 and the modernization of equipment was accelerated. In April 1970, American and South Vietnamese troops crossed the Cambodian border, where in a two month period, thousands of tons of North Vietnamese equipment and supplies were destroyed. A second border crossing took place--in February 1971--when a

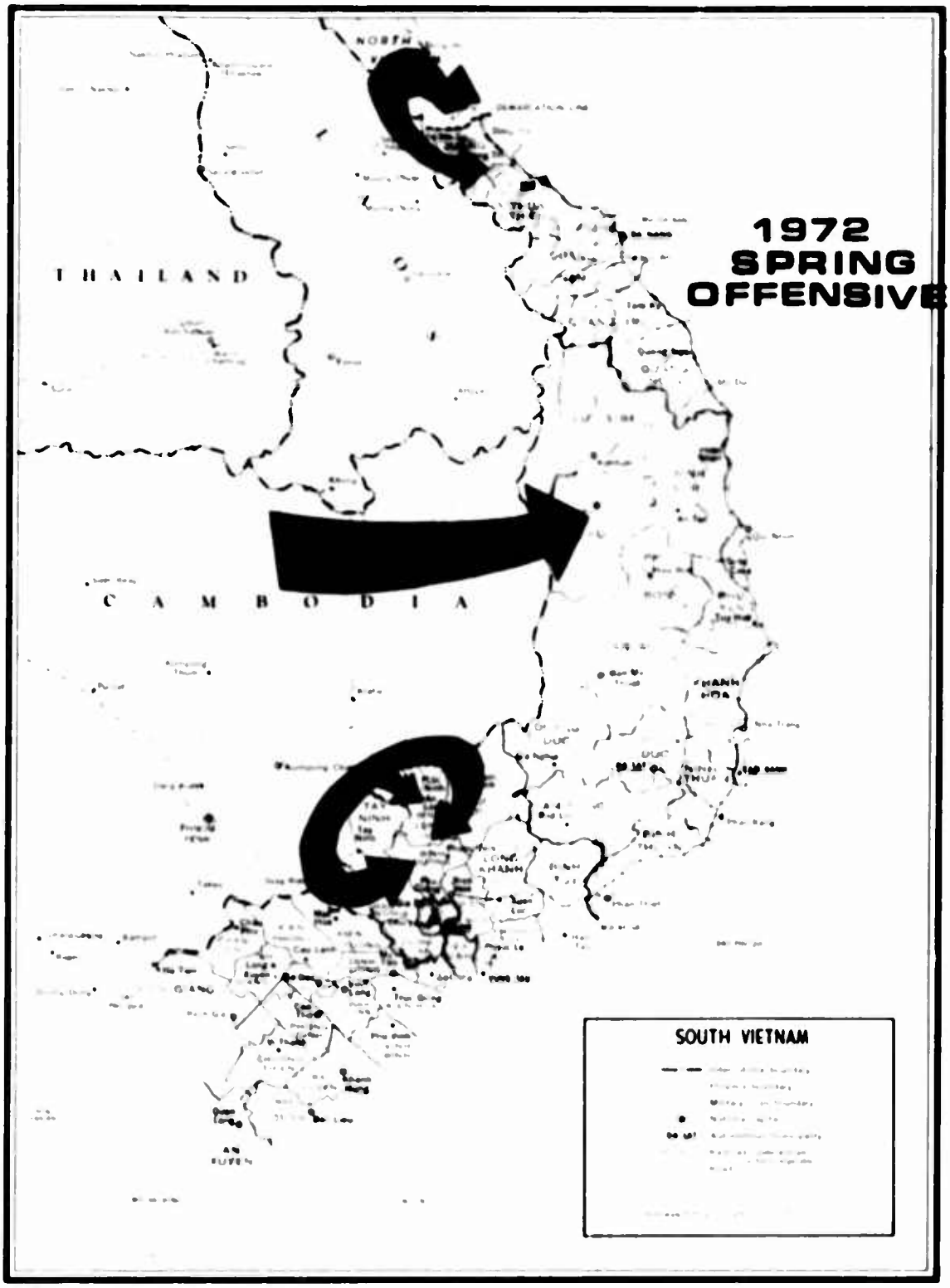
force of 16,000 South Vietnamese launched an operation into Laos, under an umbrella of American air power, but took heavy casualties in a less decisive effort. In the early conception of the Vietnamization program, it had been realized that it would ultimately be put to test, and as 1971 drew to a close, with American ground forces being withdrawn in ever increasing numbers, it was obvious that the test was imminent.

Giap now had 14 of his 15 divisions deployed beyond the borders of North Vietnam, and it appeared that elements of at least 10 divisions were committed to South Vietnam. Some 35,000 North Vietnamese were present in the provinces south of the DMZ in Military Region 1; there were perhaps 25,000 in the Central Highlands; 1(000 in the provinces around Saigon; and some 6000 in the Mekong Delta. Counting Viet Cong troops, Giap's total strength in South Vietnam stood at over 100,000 men, the highest total since TET 1968.[30]

In March 1972, just before the offensive was launched, a Communist official reportedly explained to the Viet Cong that "our general offensive is designed to defeat the enemy's Vietnamization plan, force the enemy to acknowledge his defeat, and accept a political settlement on our terms."[31] In an election year in the United States, with troop withdrawals resulting in the lowest level of American presence since 1965, and negotiations for peace growing in intensity, this would appear to be a very realistic strategy, indeed.

When the offensive came, more than 10,000 of Giap's regulars drove straight through the DMZ to join thousands of others already in place, and the provincial capital at Quang Tri crumbled. The second blow fell a week later as three divisions swept out of Cambodia to attack in Binh Long Province 50 miles north of Saigon. The third major assault came in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands on April 24, from across the border in Laos. All attacks were supported by tanks numbering in the hundreds, and scores of anti-aircraft weapons. By the end of April it looked as though Giap had a rout underway, and that indeed, Vietnamization could be destroyed. With massive air support however, the South Vietnamese held and fought bitterly at places such as An Loc, and north of Hue, and by late May, the offensive was checked.

An understanding of the reasoning behind such an unprecedented and seemingly foolish effort on the part of the North Vietnamese has to begin with an understanding of their thinking in regard to a negotiated settlement of the war. Hanoi leaders have an irrational distrust, if not fear of the conference table, even though they fully appreciate its utility, and are keenly attuned to the political dimension of warfare. With the exception of Ho Chi Minh, the leaders in 1972 were the same leaders who ruled North Vietnam during the 1954 Geneva Conference--a memory which haunts them--for they have convinced themselves over the years that they had won all of Vietnam on the battlefield, only to lose half of it at the conference table. Hanoi's strategy at the conference in


1972
SPRING
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THAILAND
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1954 was to hold that no military cease-fire agreement could be written until the various political issues were solved, that is, a political settlement reached. In the end, this strategy was nullified, and Ho Chi Minh lost on every major point: a military cease-fire and political settlement occurred simultaneously; the country was divided, and half of it denied him; and he was maneuvered out of virtually all leverage then, or in the future, against the French. With this perspective, Giap's offensive in 1972 was a final, desperate drive for leverage.[32]

The strategy, for whatever role Giap had played in it, had been underpinned with some damaging miscalculations. It had miscalculated the fibre of an American President who would override the anti-war sentiment, both in the United States and abroad, and resume bombing the north; nor had it been expected he would order the mining of the harbors, risking not only the fortunes of politics, but the possible intervention of China or the Soviet Union as well; nor had they correctly reckoned with a man who would do what had to be done in releasing the awesome power of the B-52's which were to exact such a terrible tool in 12 dark days of December--or correctly calculated the courage of the South Vietnamese who stoodfast and fought bitterly amid the rubble of their cities.

The United States was to find an exit with honor, and for Giap, the struggle was again, a political one.

IN PERSPECTIVE

Bernard Fall, in his preface to Hell in a Very Small Place, observed that "only Vo Nguyen Giap is truly qualified to write this book"[33]--which certainly has full application to this article. Much of what has been attributed to Giap may not rightfully be his; and his real contributions or failures may rest forever in the omissions in the accounts. Many observers maintain that the North Vietnamese strategy--particularly the TET Offensive of 1968 and the Spring Offensive of 1972--were not willingly Giap's but were forced on him against his better judgement. Voluntarily or not, the concepts, execution, timing, shifting of forces and the launching of logistics clearly bore his hallmark.

Allied with intellect, and in possession of practical skill, his military campaigns have shown his competence and his ability to learn from mistakes, both his own and those of others, more so than his strategic brilliance. Of all the lessons that are to be learned from studying Giap, perhaps the most significant is his successful fusion of political and military power, the separation of which is carefully orchestrated in western societies. It is the constant intermeshing of these two threads that has facilitated his success and furthered his influence. Repeatedly, Giap was not able only to protest more effectively against any military task for which he lacked sufficient means, but he was

able to organize backing for those policies which he felt were required by the military situation. Few generals have ever enjoyed this luxury.

Giap is not a fanatic, or an automatist blindly following a predetermined course of action. He is subject to changes of mind, sudden anger, and errors in judgement. He has recorded huge successes and tragic failures, and his strategies have required human sacrifice on a scale that would be unacceptable in western society. In the cases of Dien Bien Phu and TET 1968, he has shown unquestionable mastery of the strategic situation--and yet in 30 years as a field commander, there seems to be little display of the outstanding qualities that made Napoleon, whom he emulated; or Mao, to whom he is indebted. He is an intelligent, resourceful and stubborn adversary--but he is not ten feet tall.

While there are great differences in the two great conflicts of this century in Indo China, there are also striking similarities--and although the legend of Vo Nguyen Giap is not untarnished--it is the single military thread in the fabric connecting the two.

DOUGLAS M. EYE
LTC ADA

FOOTNOTES

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3. Ibid., p. x (preface)

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14. Edgar O'Ballance, The Indo China War, 1945-1954, p. 162.

15. Ibid., pp. 195-198.

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21. Douglas Pike, War, Peace, and the Viet Cong, p. 10.

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25. Don Oberdorfer, TET, p. 50.

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