

THE OTHER SIDE

by Douglas Pike

As the year 1965 began, Ho Chi Minh, his Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and the other members of the ruling Politburo in Hanoi saw triumph ahead. The long-sought goal of unification of North and South under the Communist banner would be achieved during the next twelve months. Broadcasting the leadership's annual State message, Radio Hanoi did not say that 1965 would be a "year of victories," or of "moving toward victory." It said flatly "the year of victory."

This confident judgment in Hanoi, later confirmed by captured documents and prisoner testimony, was based on the Politburo's survey of the battlefield in South Vietnam and its interpretations of Washington's capabilities. All in all, it was not an unrealistic estimate.

Outside Saigon, Da Nang, and the South's other major cities, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (Viet Cong) regulars were chewing up, one by one, the South Vietnamese government's dozen mobile reserve battalions of paratroopers and marines as they were sent in with American advisers to rescue local garrisons under attack. Soon the Saigon regime, its faction-ridden military and political leadership in chronic disarray since the 1963 overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem, would have no reserves to spare.

At that point, the Viet Cong, evolving, under Hanoi's control, into regular regiments and divisions equipped with mortars, rockets, and automatic weapons, could begin a series of set piece assaults, first against one isolated city or base, then another. One by one, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) strongholds would be taken, and the demoralized Saigon regime and its widely dispersed forces would collapse.

That Washington might intervene was a strong possibility. But to the Politburo, it seemed that the rot had already set in in the South. Despite the presence of U.S. helicopters, aircraft, and 23,000 advisers, Communist battlefield gains were now too far advanced to be arrested by necessarily piecemeal injections of U.S. combat units. (Indeed, by mid-1965, Communist agit-prop cadres had a new slogan: "The Greater U.S. Intervention, the Greater U.S. Defeat.") The Viet Cong continued to hit U.S. advisers' barracks, airfields—and the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

Sporadic American air strikes had already begun (in mid-



North Vietnamese farmers, with water buffalo, wend their way home from rice fields. To wage war, Hanoi depended on massive Soviet aid.

1964) against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Lyndon Johnson ordered retaliatory bombing of the North in August 1964 after the Gulf of Tonkin encounter between North Vietnamese patrol boats and U.S. Navy destroyers. (Yet to come were the regular, but still limited, "Rolling Thunder" bombing raids that began in February.) As the North Vietnamese leaders saw it, provision by the Soviet Union of modern air defense radar and weaponry would blunt the impact of any U.S. air effort, although the North would still have to take heavy punishment.

Had the men in Hanoi adhered to this assessment, rather than losing confidence and switching strategy, the year 1965 might well have been the year of Communist victory.

However, by mid-March 1965, with the landing of 3,500 U.S. Marines to defend Da Nang air base, the ever-cautious Giap began to hedge his bets. He did not press for an all-out effort to win the war before the Americans were in South Vietnam in force, although he had already started moving regiments of the North Vietnamese Army (People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN) south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1964. Instead, he spent the first six months of 1965 in what, in effect, was a holding operation. His calculation was that he faced a new war against a new

enemy that required new tactics and a readapted grand strategy. This decision, coupled with the psychological lift given to Saigon by the American intervention, served to pull the South Vietnamese out of the jaws of defeat.

The actual onset of the sustained U.S. bombing of the North, despite confident-sounding Communist public pronouncements, engendered enormous apprehension in Hanoi. The French, during the 1945–54 Indochina War, had been able to employ only a feeble air arm (some 100 combat aircraft); the Americans had more than 1,000 fighter-bombers available, plus the B-52 bomber with its 30-ton bomb-load.

Yet the American bombing efforts during 1965–68 were (by Washington's orders) sharply delimited, confined mostly to roads, bridges, power plants, barracks, supply dumps. The B-52s were not used. Hanoi was off-limits. So were North Vietnam's major Mig fighter bases, such as Phuc Yen (until 1967), and the key port facilities of Haiphong.

Among the North Vietnamese leaders the belief grew, and then became entrenched, that, aided by increasingly sophisticated Soviet-provided missiles and other weaponry, the North was absorbing the *worst* punishment that the United States could deliver. This view persisted until the shock of Richard Nixon's all-out "Christmas bombing" campaign of 1972, which was followed by the Paris peace agreement of January 1973.*

As 1965 wore on, and American ground strength grew in the South, Giap decided (despite contrary advice from some Politburo colleagues) to meet the United States head-on. No longer applicable, he later wrote, were the techniques which had worked for the Communists against the French (and the ARVN): the regimental ambush, the entrapment of mobile units, the isolation and destruction of enemy garrisons, the slow, steady gain of territory and population. The Americans had enormous fire-

*In my view, this sequence suggests that a similar "all-out" bombing effort in early 1965 could well have prompted Hanoi's leaders to negotiate an agreement, then sought by Lyndon Johnson, providing for a cease-fire and mutual withdrawal of Northern forces and U.S. troops from South Vietnam. Such an accord, of course, would not have ended Hanoi's quest for unification; it would simply have brought a change in tactics and a new timetable.

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power (fighter-bombers, artillery, helicopter gunships), superb communications, and the ability, lacked by the road-bound French, to move troops rapidly by helicopter and air transport.

For his part, Giap had some long-term advantages. Geography, the implications of which were usually overlooked by American pundits and politicians, was on his side. The Saigon government (and the newly arrived Americans) had more than 600 miles of open border to protect and more than 16 million people to defend in an area the size of Washington state, with 44 provincial capitals, 241 district towns, and upwards of 15,000 hamlets that were all vulnerable to terrorism and guerrilla attack. Jungle and mountains covered more than half the country.

Just Us Southerners

In such terrain, the Viet Cong had long enjoyed secure bases and rest areas: These in turn were linked to "sanctuaries" in southern Laos and eastern Cambodia, tied to the Ho Chi Minh Trail transit routes from the North. According to recent North Vietnamese accounts, it took cadres and military replacements six months to traverse the trail when it was first organized in 1959; its roadnet was steadily improved, despite U.S. bombing, after 1965 and soon accommodated well-organized truck traffic and, by 1972, tanks. The trail was the key to Giap's war.

To support Communist forces in the Mekong Delta and north of Saigon, Hanoi also secured (in 1966) secret permission from Prince Norodom Sihanouk of "neutral" Cambodia to use Sihanoukville (now Kompong Som) as a supply port.

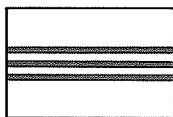
Lastly, the North ("the Great Rear") was bombed but not blockaded or invaded. Soviet freighters unloaded SAM missiles, tanks, Moltava trucks, and artillery at Haiphong. From neighboring China came light weapons, ammunition, and rice. U.S. air strikes could slow but not halt these goods—and North Vietnamese reinforcements—on their way to the battlefield.

The ruling Lao Dong (Workers') Party also had strong human assets. A decade after victory over the French, Ho Chi Minh, Giap, Party Secretary Le Duan, Premier Pham Van Dong, and their colleagues commanded a Spartan, highly organized party, purged of dissenters, led by a generation of cadres tested in war, and convinced that "unification" of North and South under Hanoi's rule was a "golden" objective worthy of any sacrifice.

There were periods in the North of low morale and discontent, of malingering and petty corruption, as party documents made clear. But the iron grip of the party cadres and the society's own strong discipline and ethnocentrism sustained the war

THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE

By Third World standards, the easygoing Saigon government of 1954–75 was as efficient as most, and far less repressive than many, notably the ruthless regime in Hanoi. Given a peaceful post-colonial decade or two, and some good leadership, the Republic of Vietnam might have developed into a fairly prosperous, stable nation like, say, Malaysia or Thailand.



But there was no peace. And neither Ngo Dinh Diem, the South's first Chief of State (1954–63), nor its last, Nguyen Van Thieu (1965–75), was a bold leader. Each suffered from personal insecurity, caution, and remoteness from ordinary South Vietnamese. Neither was able—or willing—to build broad-based political support outside the French-educated urban middle class. As a result, Army generals, themselves divided by rivalries, were the arbiters of South Vietnam's turbulent politics.

To stay in power, Thieu, himself a general, felt compelled to pick senior commanders on the basis of loyalty first, honesty and competence second. As one ARVN officer told the *New York Times* in 1975, "The generals amassed riches for their families, but the soldiers got nothing and saw no moral sanction in their leadership." In one year (1966), more than one-fifth of ARVN's soldiers deserted—not to the Viet Cong but to go home.

Land reform did not come until 1970. The war ravaged entire districts, notably in Quang Ngai and Hau Nghia provinces; overall, 1.2

effort, allowing General Giap repeatedly to suffer enormous losses (perhaps 900,000 dead by 1973), then to rebuild PAVN units for yet another battle. "The North Vietnamese," observed Laos's French-educated Premier Souvanna Phouma in 1967, "are the Prussians of Southeast Asia."

What drew most attention in Washington during 1961–65 were the guerrillas in the South, whose early local cadres were Viet Minh veterans of the French war. One of the myths fostered by Hanoi and accepted by many Westerners was that the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong, was an independent creation set up by Southerners in 1960 to combat the injustices of the Diem regime and allied to, but independent of, Hanoi.

In fact, Hanoi decided in May 1959 at the 15th Party Plenum to reunify the North and the South by force. The 559 Unit was established to develop the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam through "neutral" Laos and Cambodia for southbound political and military cadres; by Hanoi's own recent account, some

million refugees were generated between late 1965 and mid-1967 alone. And each year, the Viet Cong kidnapped or assassinated thousands of village chiefs, schoolteachers, relief workers.

Yet, despite official corruption, lackluster leadership, and severe hardships, the South Vietnamese people never went over en masse to the revolution. No ARVN unit defected to the foe. According to political scientist Samuel Popkin, the Communists' costly 1968 Tet Offensive (and their massacre of civilians in occupied Hue) discredited two Viet Cong propaganda themes: inevitable victory and a happy future under Communist rule. After Tet, Saigon belatedly organized more than two million civilians into local armed self-defense groups. By war's end, more than 220,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and militiamen had died to defend their country.

The massive U.S. presence from 1965 to 1973 both helped and hindered the South Vietnamese. American troops, advisers, and firepower offset Hanoi's advantages and staved off defeat—but encouraged Saigon's psychological dependence on the Yanks. Washington decried Saigon's shortcomings but did not insist on solutions. The unilateral withdrawal of their powerful but war-weary ally in 1973—and later U.S. aid cuts—demoralized Thieu, his troops, and his best commanders. Left alone to face the Northerners, the South was fated to succumb.

"We small nations can end up losing high stakes [by counting on U.S. pledges of support]," observed Bui Diem, former Ambassador to Washington, on the 10th anniversary of the Paris peace accords. "You can . . . say 'Well, it is an unhappy chapter [in] American history.' But that is not the same . . . for the South Vietnamese."

20,000 men moved South during the first few years to help organize and lead the Viet Cong insurgency.

The NLF changed after Diem's overthrow in 1963. Northerners took over the organization with unification under *Hanoi's* leadership as the main aim. The NLF's public face was Southern; it issued its own communiqués, had its own representatives abroad. Hanoi always refused to admit it had troops in the South. But, remembering the 1954 division of Vietnam, Hanoi kept a tight leash on the NLF. Northerners, or northern-trained Southerners, directed most major military operations and held the key political party posts. (Hanoi kept similar control over the Communist Pathet Lao forces in Laos.)

Reviving the old Viet Minh techniques—propaganda, indoctrination, "selective terrorism," and tight organization—drew rural recruits and cowed local government officials. With its networks of agents, tax collectors, and porters, the Viet Cong was stronger in some provinces (usually those where the Viet

Minh had been active during 1945–54) than in others. It was unsuccessful in enlisting significant support from dissident Buddhist factions, urban workers, the ethnic Chinese or the *montagnard* (hill) tribesmen. Even so, thanks to the administrative chaos that followed Diem's ouster, the NLF was able to make steady progress, recruiting and sustaining 85,000 well-armed regulars and 115,000 paramilitary local troops by 1966.

Giap used all these assets as he experimented with PAVN thrusts against U.S. units in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 and below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) against the Marines in 1966–67, with a view toward devising a winning strategy. At the same time, he used Viet Cong battalions to fight allied forays into contested areas and to raid allied outposts and district towns. These tactics variously eased or interrupted the growing allied pressures against the elusive local Viet Cong and inflicted losses, but they did not end the steady attrition of the guerrillas. Nor did Giap, taking heavy casualties, succeed in overrunning a U.S. defensive position or destroying a major U.S. unit.

America As Domino

By mid-1967, Giap had completed his strategic experimentation. He then launched the most important campaign of the war, the winter-spring campaign of 1967–68. Giap combined "coordinated fighting methods"—set piece battles with his main force regiments, usually on battlefields close to his bases in Cambodia or Laos—with "independent fighting methods"—simultaneous small-scale attacks all over the country—to launch a "continuous comprehensive offensive." After his usual lengthy build-up of men and supplies, he combined these assaults with a major political effort. The chief aim was to collapse the Saigon regime's administrative apparatus and its 650,000-man armed forces, thereby undermining the whole U.S. effort.

The climax neared as two PAVN divisions lay siege to the U.S. Marines' outpost at Khe Sanh, near Laos. Then, in what is now called the 1968 Tet (or lunar new year) Offensive, Saigon, Hue, and 100 other places were hit on January 30–31. Some 84,000 troops, mostly in Viet Cong units, were committed in the first assaults. Agents were sent to urban areas to promote a "general uprising" by the inhabitants against the Thieu regime.

Just as the allies underestimated Giap's boldness, so Giap overestimated the Saigon government's weaknesses and the popularity of the Viet Cong; his intelligence agents may have erroneously equated urban complaints against the Thieu regime and the Americans with pro-Viet Cong "revolutionary" senti-

ment. In any event, no general uprising occurred. ARVN fought back. Khe Sanh held. Even as Washington was shaken, the Saigon regime, buttressed by U.S. aid and advisers, coped with one million new refugees and muddled through. And in and around the cities, the Viet Cong lost heavily, exposed for the first time to the full weight of allied firepower. Truong Nhu Tang, one of the NLF's founders now in exile, observed: "The truth was that Tet cost us half of our forces. Our losses were so immense that we were simply unable to replace them with new recruits."*

This military failure was followed up by a weaker "second wave" attack in May, coinciding with the onset of peace talks in Paris. North Vietnamese regulars and local Viet Cong battalions struck at Saigon and several other points. This effort failed, too, although Saigon was penetrated, with heavy urban damage.

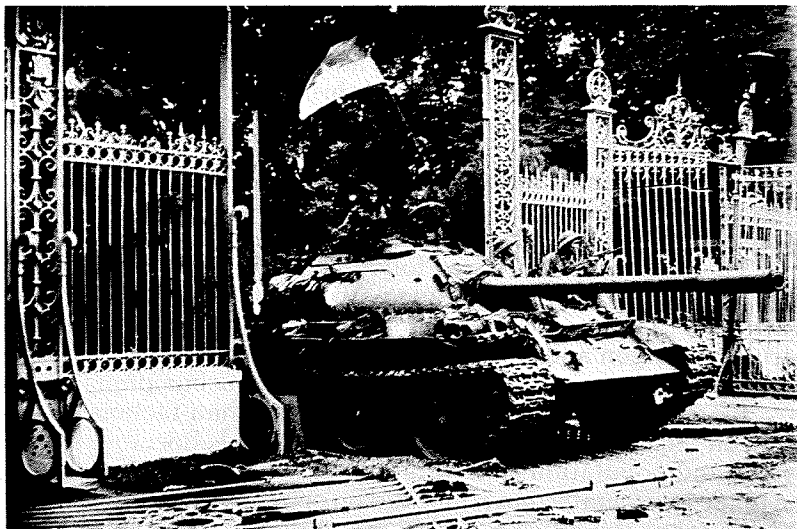
By mid-1968, Giap, a better logistician than tactician, was back on the defensive. Against the strong allied effort to take territory and population away from the now-weakened Viet Cong, he made few countermoves. He did on occasion, during 1969-71, launch what the allies called "high points"—simultaneous attacks by sappers and rocket teams against several dozen bases and towns—but these employed mostly local forces. He launched a few thrusts in border areas. But he usually kept his big units in base camps in, or close to, eastern Laos and Cambodia, as his engineers kept developing the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

He did not abandon the Viet Cong; as they slowly gave ground, he sent in North Vietnamese "fillers" to sustain their local battalions, and tried to keep the supply lines open. Even so, by U.S. estimates, the Viet Cong guerrilla strength dropped by 50 percent between 1968 and 1972.† In some districts, the surviving Viet Cong simply stopped fighting.

However, by mid-1969, even as the Communists lost ground in the South, from Hanoi's point of view, the "contradictions" in the enemy camp promised new gains. Thanks to U.S. domestic political pressures, Hanoi had already achieved two major concessions, gratis: first, Lyndon Johnson's pre-Election Day total halt to the bombing of the North in 1968 and a "cap" on U.S. troop strength (549,500) in the South; then, Richard Nixon's mid-1969 decision to start withdrawing U.S. troops unilaterally from Indochina. If American antiwar sentiment had been under-

**The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 21, 1982.

† Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. Few Viet Cong "hard-core" cadres surrendered or rallied to the Saigon side. However, even before Tet 1968, thousands of Viet Cong wearied of life in the bush, on short rations, far from home. In 1967 alone, there were some 27,000 *chieu hoi* (ralliers), mostly rank-and-file guerrillas, porters, and the like.



A Soviet-built PAVN T-54 tank flying a Viet Cong flag crashes through the presidential palace gates in Saigon on April 30, 1975.

estimated before Tet, it became an important part of Hanoi's political *dau tranh** strategy during 1969–72. At the Paris peace talks initiated by LBJ, Hanoi's Le Duc Tho stalled for time; the North Vietnamese periodically hinted in public of possible "breakthroughs," thus stirring new clamor in Washington, then held firm in secret talks with Henry Kissinger.†

By early 1972, after mauling an ill-fated ARVN thrust against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos a year earlier and surviving the allies' 1970 Cambodia incursion, General Giap was ready to return in force to the South. He would launch not a "people's war" but a conventional assault. He sought to re-establish his regular units back inside the South, upset Richard

* *Dau tranh* was a strategic concept meaning "struggle," with both military and political emphases. See Douglas Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, MIT, 1969.

† In a February 1969 interview, Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci said to Giap: "General, the Americans also say that you have lost half a million [men]." Giap replied: "The exact number." Fallaci: "Exact?" Giap: "Exact." Assigning responsibility for the failed 1968 Tet Offensive to the NLF, Giap went on to say that the Americans would lose eventually: "The Americans will be defeated in time, by getting tired. And in order to tire them, we have to go on, to last . . . for a long time. That's what we've always done." Fallaci, *Interview with History*, Liveright, 1976, pp. 82–84.

Nixon's "Vietnamization," and lend succor to the remaining Viet Cong guerrillas. Giap and the Politburo felt that Nixon's rapprochement with Beijing and détente with Moscow threatened to isolate the North Vietnamese over the long term. Hanoi's leaders, thinking of Tet 1968, believed that a spectacular success during a U.S. election year amid pervasive antiwar sentiment would force Nixon to agree to the replacement of the Thieu regime by a pro-Communist coalition in Saigon.

A Decent Interval

Giap failed to anticipate the resilience of the South Vietnamese, the vigor of the U.S. response, and the lukewarm backing of Hanoi's allies, China and the Soviet Union. Neither Mao nor Brezhnev cancelled his scheduled summit with Nixon.

Seeking once again to shatter the South Vietnamese, Giap massed his new Soviet-supplied tanks and artillery at three points: the DMZ, the Central Highlands near Kontum, and An Loc north of Saigon. For the first time, he committed 14 regular North Vietnamese divisions, virtually his entire army, to battle in the South. The initial gains were considerable: The green Third ARVN Division broke at Quang Tri, and other ARVN units retreated. But nowhere did Giap deploy enough forces to score a breakthrough. American C-130 transports shifted ARVN's paratroops and marines from crisis to crisis. Although most of the 95,000 U.S. troops still "in-country" eschewed combat, American advisers coordinated firepower, helicopter support, and logistics. And Nixon quickly reinforced U.S. air power and naval gunfire in the South, resumed bombing the North, and mined the supply port of Haiphong. General Creighton Abrams was able to use 129 B-52s to strike hard whenever the North Vietnamese regiments massed to attack. As at Tet 1968, Giap's forces were unable to exploit initial gains; once again the ARVN, despite its heaviest casualties of the war, and the Regional and Popular Forces militia muddled through. This time, the Viet Cong played almost no military role. The Easter Offensive stalled by June, then receded slightly, leaving behind prisoners and scores of wrecked tanks.

At a price of an estimated 100,000 dead, Giap did score some significant gains. His PAVN regulars were back inside the South and, here and there, in good position to threaten ARVN units, or to ease the pressure on surviving local Viet Cong guerrillas. As he began to rebuild his decimated forces, Giap was well positioned for another drive, and his foe, as events would show, was badly overextended.

But to his colleagues in Hanoi, the Easter Offensive did not count as a glittering success. The decision was made to embrace a "talk-fight" strategy, resuming the Paris peace negotiations, putting reliance on war-weariness in the United States and on Nixon's quest for a quick ending.

When Hanoi obstructed the talks in November and took advantage of a U.S. bombing halt to rebuild its defenses (and resupply its troops in the South), Nixon unleashed the Navy and Air Force and for the first time sent B-52s over Hanoi (and Haiphong). During a 12-day campaign (interrupted by a Christmas cease-fire), the U.S. bombers left the North Vietnamese capital largely unscathed but smashed up both air defenses and transport, leaving North Vietnam open to further attack. A peace agreement was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973.

In dealing with Henry Kissinger, Le Duc Tho succeeded in securing an American withdrawal, coupled with a continued North Vietnamese presence in the South and in Laos and Cambodia. Soon, Hanoi realized that Saigon could not count on further American support. PAVN commanders prepared for a final offensive in 1976. Their chief worry, the possible return of American B-52s, eased after Washington failed to react to the PAVN's seizure of Phuoc Long, a border province north of Saigon, in early 1975, in a clear violation of the Paris cease-fire accords. Even more surprising to the Politburo was the failure of ARVN, poorly deployed and badly led, without direct American support, to fight effectively, as they had in 1972.

Hanoi sped up its timetable. General Van Tien Dung's Great Spring Offensive, with Soviet artillery and tanks, began in March with a push through the Central Highlands; the ARVN defense turned into a rout. Saigon was captured on April 30, 1975. Thieu fled into exile, and the war was over. Hanoi quickly abandoned any pretense of autonomy for the Viet Cong. By 1976, the NLF was dissolved, and the South was part of the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Liberation brought tens of thousands of South Vietnamese, including former critics of the Thieu regime, into Communist "re-education camps," and eventually sent hundreds of thousands more escaping by sea—the "boat people." More than 425,000 Vietnamese are now in the United States. Their children speak English and attend local schools. In Washington, D.C., in Los Angeles, in San Francisco, Vietnamese names are cropping up with increasing frequency on lists of National Merit Scholars and high school valedictorians. Meanwhile, back home, General Giap's forces, supplied by the Soviets, are still at war, this time to prop up a friendly regime in Cambodia.