

Vietnam War

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Tet 1968

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The most tragic example of U.S. media aid to the cause of North Vietnam was the reporting on the major Communist offensive launched on January 30, 1968 during the truce for the Tet (Vietnamese New Year) celebrations.

An overly eager North Vietnamese General Giap had sold his superiors on the idea that the South was ready for a Viet Cong-led uprising. So the North abandoned its patient guerrilla strategy, which had initially so frustrated conventional U.S. units, in favor of massing their forces in a major confrontation against U.S. strength. In this go-for-broke strategy, enemy forces managed to achieve substantial surprise and create tremendous devastation and death. In an attempt to achieve their popular uprising, they engaged in widespread assassinations and executions, particularly in the former imperial capital of Hue, portions of which Communist forces managed to hold on to for several weeks.

Yet Communist forces paid dearly for their gamble and General Giap's ill-conceived idea. From that point forward, the main force Viet Cong were literally wiped out as an effective force in the South. And after sustaining tremendous losses, what was left of the North Vietnamese Army retreated to its sanctuaries to lick its wounds.

Incredibly, with the help of the U.S. Establishment media, this major Communist defeat was turned into a propaganda victory for the Communists. Without an opportunity to learn the truth, the American people were sold on the false notion that this escalation of the war proved that America, like the French, could not win in Vietnam — that we were involved in a hopeless quagmire. Communist atrocities were covered up while American and South Vietnamese Army actions were vilified. The Communists were thus able to achieve through a traitorous, anti-American media what they could not achieve on the battlefield.

Most Americans to this day have little appreciation for this tragic deception. What were the facts? Here is a sampling of the virtually unanimous perspective on this travesty by the combat veterans who were there:

"While in Vietnam, American forces didn't lose any major campaign or battle. The enemy was able to inflict tragic losses on small groups of American troops at platoon and company level, but Americans devastated whole regiments and divisions of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Even the 1968 Tet offensive was only an illusory victory, one that was measured in days and hours for the Communists and which cost them horrendous losses. In fact, after that offensive, the enemy's ability to wage a major campaign was destroyed and the Viet Cong ceased to be a viable force throughout most of South Vietnam." ([Schneider, Ches](#); 262)

"During the Tet offensive in 1968, eighty-four thousand Viet Cong attacked sixty-four district capitals of South Vietnam, including the former imperial capital, Hue. Many of the North Vietnamese troops had bivouacked in the A Shau and struck out on that offensive in several different directions, avoiding American and South Vietnamese units. They took control of Hue, then embarked on an unbelievable orgy of death and destruction. The communists had prepared lists of enemy targets, which included just about anyone with even the slightest connection to the South Vietnamese government, including school teachers, artists, businessmen, students, and political leaders. Many people were killed on the spot; others were marched to isolated areas where they were clubbed to death and buried in mass graves. An estimated six thousand civilians were killed by "their own" VC." ([Chambers, Larry](#); *Death*, 11)

"When the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive on 30 January 1968, most U.S. forces

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were caught by surprise. However, their response was both quick and deadly. Everywhere, enemy forces were rapidly swept from the battlefield, and the survivors were driven back into sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. Only in I Corps were the North Vietnamese able to hold out for any length of time. It was there, in and around the Imperial City of Hue, the U.S. forces had to face their greatest threat. And it was there that a number of long-range patrols from the 1st Cavalry division had to face their greatest challenge." ([Linderer, Gary](#); *Phantom*, 198)

"Late in the Vietnam War, especially in I Corps, booby-traps were seldom encountered by long range reconnaissance patrols. There were a couple of reasons for this: booby-traps are primarily a weapon used by guerrillas like the Viet Cong, and by 1970 few Viet Cong were left to carry on the war against the Americans and the South Vietnamese; and the NVA were somewhat reluctant to booby-trap their own backyard unless they knew of or suspected that enemy units were operating in those areas." ([Linderer, Gary](#); *Six*, 233-234)

"It is also interesting to note that almost every man on Rocky's heavy team returned from that last mission even more convinced than before that the Tet Offensive had gone so seriously awry for the enemy that the poor b*****s were pulling back to Laos to lick their wounds, and now was the time to hit them in *their* rear area and finish them off." ([Miller, Kenn](#); 53)

"Unknown to us, the rest of Vietnam was embroiled in a major enemy attack that came to be known as the '68 Tet Offensive. Twenty-two major cities were captured by the enemy across South Vietnam. The security of the U.S. embassy in Saigon was breached, but the intruders were soon recaptured by elements of the 101st Airborne. The city of Hue would be in enemy hands for over three weeks. The enemy paid a heavy price: the Tet Offensive dearly cost the National Liberation Front (Vietcong); it was almost totally annihilated and ceased to be an effective fighting force for the remainder of the war. The U.S. and South Vietnam military won a very decisive victory in Vietnam during the '68 Tet Offensive, but we lost the war back in the United States. It was the start of the long slide downhill and the eventual loss of the Vietnam War for the United States." ([Martinez, Raynel](#); 336)

"The blame for erroneous body counts should not rest on the military services. We tried everything we knew to get some coverage of the battle. There were thirty NVA corpses in a secure perimeter - all staked uniformed, and tabulated as to rank - ready for the camera. And out at the ambush site, there were about three hundred more - all obviously NVA, and just as obviously killed by Americans. By then, we'd heard from news media that the Tet offensive had been a disaster, and that we were supposed to be losing. So our commanders decided to set up the proof and let reporters come out and count the bodies themselves. Not one news reporter or cameraman showed." ([Zumbro, Ralph](#); 200)

"The score: NVA - approximately three hundred killed; Americans - one. This took place on 10, 11, and 12 April 1968, about fifteen kilometers west of An Khe on Highway 19E. On the last day, NVA Regiment 95B ceased to exist as a fighting force. It did not make the television news." ([Zumbro, Ralph](#); 201)

"I got a letter off to Karen, my wife, elated about the blow we had dealt the enemy and about the victory which had been won by our side all across the country. We had met the b*****'s (expletive) nose -to-nose all over Vietnam, and we had whipped them soundly. The war was as good as over, and I had visions of getting home before my full tour was over.

And then the press and the politicians took over, the former making it sound, somehow, as if we had been defeated, as if the fact that the communists had infiltrated the towns and cities under the cover of a truce - only to be rooted out and slaughtered in unprecedented numbers - meant, somehow, that they had won a great

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victory. And the latter - the politicians - joined their ill-informed constituents in clamoring for a withdrawal from the war, and refusing us the authority to invade the enemy's cross-border sanctuaries, to which they had crept to lick their terrible wounds. And so the communists were given a morale boost by their enemy's institution of a free, if not always accurate or responsible, press. And that institution's own defenders were, meanwhile, being demoralized by its insanely inverted assertions.

For the communists, there was new life from the propaganda victory; new resolve. And the opportunity to refit, regain strength, and return." ([Burruss, Lt. Col. L.H.](#); 95-96)

"Later, lying wrapped in my poncho liner, mindlessly listening to the faint sounds of the rock band, I found myself mulling over Sergeant Sullivan's comments.

What did he mean by "turning sour"? Why worry about a bunch of mindless politicians? S*** (expletive), we've turned the corner, Charlie has finally come out to play and is sorely sorry for having done so! We're tearing him apart!

After pondering these tactical realities, I dismissed my first sergeant's concerns as but another example of his tendency to overreact to minutiae and misinterpret the facts.

I was remiss in doing so. The Bull was far more politically astute than his commander. A short time later, while lying in a hospital bed in Silver Springs, Maryland, I would find myself utterly bewildered by what my country had done to its soldiers, its allies, and itself in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive. Indeed, I remain just as bewildered now, over twenty years later." ([Estep, James L.](#); 213-214)

"In the meantime, as the war in Vietnam continued at an ever-heightened pace, the antiwar crowd back in the U.S. was becoming louder and more obnoxious all the time. The American news media had transformed the devastating military defeat the Communists suffered during their Tet offensive into a huge, psychological victory for the enemy. Back home, more and more U.S. civilians were thinking the war was a mistake.

To me, it seemed the U.S. media had always been on the side of the enemy. They never appeared to be bothered much by Communist atrocities, which happened often. But when our side occasionally screwed up, our newsmen were always anxious to spread it across the front pages." ([Wade, Leigh](#); *Assault*, 21)

The VC/NVA had wanted the people of the South to rise up and join them in their fight against the government troops. But if that was so, why in the hell did they try to burn every town and city in the country? That just didn't seem to make any sense. But as time went on, I was to find out that most of the things about the damn war didn't make any sense. ([Meacham, William](#); 82)

1968: We didn't know it yet, but during the previous night the combined forces of Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had attacked every major population center throughout South Vietnam. They had attacked American and ARVN forces with an intensity and determination never before seen from the enemy. Major combat bases were hit hard, and many of them had been overrun. Countless small outposts had been overwhelmed, many completely wiped out. Large segments of Saigon, Da Nang, Hue, Quang Tri and other large cities throughout South Vietnam were now suddenly under the complete control of enemy forces. After many years of being the elusive prey, the VC and NVA now seemed to be saying that *they* would hunt for a while. ([Warr, Nicholas](#); 33)

By March 1968 we were north of Hue, and Bravo Blues were not seeing the type of action that we were used to.

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The regular strength NVA units seemed to have disappeared into the air. Of course, the massive numbers killed by arc lights (B-52 strikes) around Khe Sanh had reduced an estimated 40,000 NVA regulars by about 75 percent. It seemed that the war was finally starting to wind down. Our bombing above the DMZ and along the Ho Chi Minh Train was so effective that the troops, supplies, and just about everything else from the North were not getting through. We were starting to encounter NVA regulars who seemed to be too young and too small to be packing AK-47s. ([Brennan, Matthew](#); *Hunter*, 86-87)

February 1968 came in breathing fire over the length and breadth of South Vietnam. General Giap, disregarding casualties, pulled the biggest disaster in the military history of Vietnam. Yet he became a hero to his people, and even some Americans believe him to be a great tactician. I'll bet my last dollar that one generation of Vietnamese wouldn't think so. But because he had them exterminated, their opinions will never be known. ([Craig, William](#); *Team*, 163)

The Tet offensive was a disaster for the NVA. They got the living hell kicked out of them, but for some reason, we didn't pursue them and bring them to their knees. I thought that was a big mistake and that it would come back to haunt us. By the time I arrived, most of the NVA had pulled across the border to regroup and lick their wounds. ([Garner, Sgt. Maj. Joe](#); 188)

Lieutenant Commander Wilbur "Pat" Patterson, USN (Ret.)

I knew a first class Bosun's mate who got it with a hand grenade a kid handed him wrapped like a birthday present. He opened it and that was it. So this eight-year old kid could kill a man.

In Tet '68, what the VC used then were the children in Da Nang that they had built up and just gave them a grenade and told them to go get it. That's the way they were. They didn't care. Orphanages, they'd go in and kill everybody, children, nuns, didn't matter.

But none of that was put in the news here. The media only went after stories that were sensational. That was not sensationalism. ([Fawcett, Bill](#); 53)

Captain Rick Woolard, USN

Though the '68 Tet offensive was a resounding defeat that decimated the ranks of the Viet Cong, it was somehow misinterpreted back in the United States. To the American public, it was reported as a loss for the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. But no individual unit was more successful in defeating the Viet Cong during Tet than the SEALs. ([Fawcett, Bill](#); 233)

Vietnam, 1969-1970: As my landing gear retracted up into my fuselage, I glanced down at these POWs. They were mostly North Vietnamese. Personally, by now I believed most of the Viet Cong guerrillas were killed, except for a few holding out in the jungles waiting for the North Vietnamese to take South Vietnam. ([Stoffey, Col. Bob](#); 153)

Intelligence reports continued to clarify the magnitude of the victory American and allied forces achieved during the Tet Offensive. *Tens of thousands* of casualties were confirmed. Viet Cong forces had been decimated. We truly believed we may well have broken the back of the North, and winning the war was only a matter of time. The VC and NVA had failed to obtain their military objectives, and their losses in personnel and hardware had been substantial.

Their extensive onslaught of personnel was designed to overrun American positions, take over our significant

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stockpiles of military hardware and assets, and hand the Americans a stunning defeat. ([Constance, Harry](#); 214)

SEALS in Vinh Long piled hundreds of bodies on a funeral pyre in the center of town and burned them. Many, many Viet Cong and NVA were slaughtered in the Tet Offensive. For a while, it appeared it might succeed for them. Fortunately for us – and unfortunately for them – they just had the Vietnamese version of Pickett’s Charge, the famous death charge of the Confederacy at Gettysburg. Perhaps with just a few more men, a little more strategic direction, or just a little more luck, they might have overrun us all. As it was, they gambled and lost.

Also of interest was the fact that the *only* three provincial cities in the delta not overrun were the three bases of operation for SEALs – My Tho, Can Tho, and Vinh Long. ([Constance, Harry](#); 210)

After Tet, North Vietnamese regular units began appearing in the Mekong Delta, since Tet had virtually destroyed most of the Vietcong main force units. SEALs were mostly unaffected. We figured we’d just have more to shoot at as the NVA infiltrated our hunting grounds. The NVA did, though, bring more sophisticated weaponry than their southern cousins had been allowed to have. ([Gormly, Robert](#); 101)