

9 THE TET OFFENSIVE, 1968

Key Issue

• Who won the Tet Offensive?

On 31 January 1968 70,000 Vietcong launched a massive attack on 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam. It was launched during the Vietnamese New Year or Tet holiday. The Americans and South Vietnamese were taken by surprise because half of the ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) were on leave for the Tet holiday. For the first time, the war came right into the cities. It was a war neither side was used to fighting. The Vietcong abandoned the guerrilla war style of fighting. Instead, they took on the United States and ARVN forces in a series of conventional battles.

This city war was also one which the VC were not equipped to fight. They found themselves forced to hold positions that they couldn't really defend. In the jungle they would simply have melted away. There they always avoided fighting battles where the odds were against them. In the Tet Offensive they couldn't do this and paid the penalty.

AIMS OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

The communist government in Hanoi had important political objectives for the offensive. They hoped that the local South Vietnamese population would rise up in support and help them overthrow the Saigon government. They also hoped that the United States would realise that they couldn't win the war and so begin to withdraw their forces. If nothing else happened, this at least would leave the South Vietnamese on their own.

There's no doubting the dramatic impact the attacks had on United States and world opinion. One of the most remarkable events was the attack by a 15-man suicide squad of VC guerrillas who fought their way into the American embassy in Saigon. They held out for six hours before being killed. American television showed film of the attack to 50 million homes in the United States. The American public was astonished by what they saw. The embassy was the symbol of the American presence in Vietnam and it wasn't safe from the enemy. If the embassy couldn't be defended, then what

could? American public opinion quickly began to turn against the war.

HORROR IN HUÉ

The National Liberation Front or communist forces (NLF) also attacked Hué, a major city further north. They held it for 25 days until ARVN and United States forces recaptured the city. Before this could take place, though, the VC executed about 3000 civilians. Their 'crime' was that they had links with the South Vietnamese government as officials or army officers. Basically, they killed anyone they considered hostile to the NLF. The NLF had taken its chance to get rid of a large number of its enemies. This massacre helped the case of those in the United States and Saigon who claimed that many thousands more would die if the communists won. This is why the war had to go on.

MILITARY CONSEQUENCES

In military terms, the Tet Offensive (which lasted less than a month) was a disaster for the Vietcong or NLF. Most of the 45,000 fighters killed were from the NLF and only a minority were from the North Vietnamese Army. American deaths came to 1500 and the ARVN lost 3000 dead. There were about 14,000 civilians killed. The offensive destroyed many of the finest fighters the Vietcong had and wiped out the NLF's organisation in the South.

These experienced southern communist leaders had to be replaced by men sent from the North. This meant that now the NLF was firmly under the control of the government in Hanoi. The NLF had finally lost its independence as a guerrilla organisation. Many resented the control of these northerners over 'their' movement.

A SOURCE

A modern historian on the Tet Offensive (from *The Vietnam War, 1956-75*, A Wiest, 2002).

The Tet Offensive had been a total failure for the communists. Of the 84,000 troops committed to Tet, nearly 58,000 had been killed, almost wiping out the Vietcong as an effective fighting force. The communists had expected that the ARVN would crumble, but it had fought hard and well. Tet had been a rash and demoralising defeat but surprisingly it would also turn the tide of the war in favour of the communists.

B SOURCE

A modern historian on the Tet Offensive (from *The USA and Vietnam, 1945–75*, V Sanders, 2002).

The North Vietnamese government dreamed that their great offensive would cause the government of South Vietnam to collapse. At the very least it hoped to demonstrate such strength that America would give up. The Tet Offensive was one of those rare battles lost by both sides. The communists had suffered serious losses.

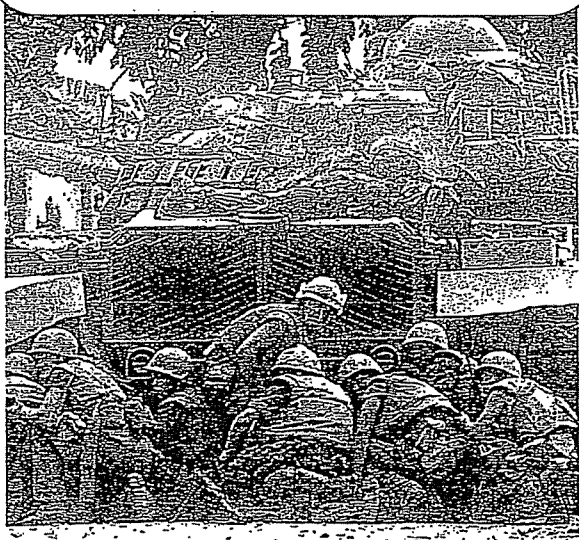
C SOURCE

A modern historian on the Tet Offensive (from *Guerrilla Warfare*, R Corbett, 1986).

While Tet weakened the communists militarily, the overall consequences were without doubt favourable to the North. The over-optimistic communist leaders who had expected the South Vietnamese government to collapse had been proved wrong, but the more cautious strategists who had hoped to weaken the Americans' will to fight were encouraged by the effects of Tet.

D SOURCE

A group of US troops shelter from enemy fire behind a tank during the Tet Offensive.



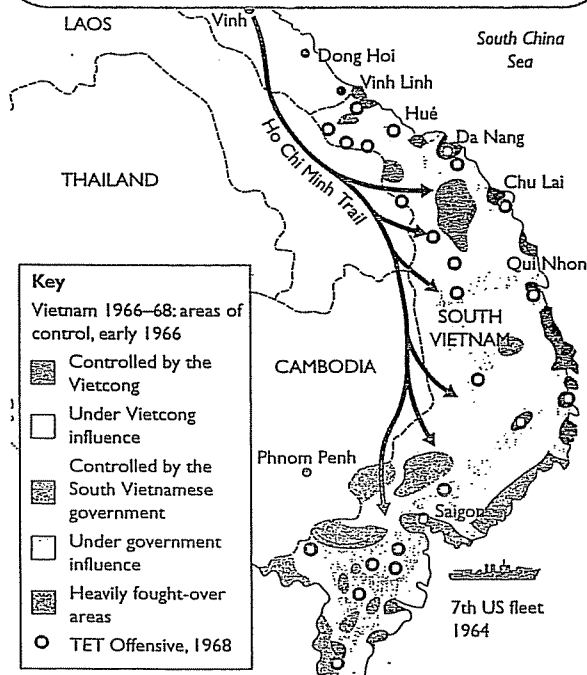
E SOURCE

Huong Van Ba was an artillery officer in the NVA. He was involved in the Tet Offensive and told this to his American interviewer (from *Vietnam – A Portrait of its People at War*, D Chanoff and D Van Thoai, 1996).

When the Tet campaign was over, we didn't have enough men left to fight a major battle, only enough to make hit-and-run attacks on posts. So many men had been killed that morale was very low. We spent a great deal of time hiding in tunnels, trying to avoid being captured. We experienced many desertions. We heard that in the North there were more young people trying to avoid the draft.

F SOURCE

A map showing the Vietcong attacks during the Tet Offensive.



Questions

- What can you learn from Source A about the Tet Offensive?
- Does Source C support the evidence of Sources A and B about the Tet Offensive?
- How useful are Sources D and E as evidence about the Tet Offensive?
- 'The Tet Offensive was a disaster for the communists.' Use the sources and your own knowledge to explain whether you agree with this view.

Key Issue

- Did the media affect the war's outcome?

To begin with, the American newspaper and television journalists (the media) were in favour of the war. The chief editor of *Life* magazine in 1965 wrote that 'the war is worth winning'. Gradually, though, attitudes began to change. Two years later, in October 1967, that same editor wrote that the United States was not really threatened by the communists in Vietnam and that the war was not worth the lives of young Americans.

THE CREDIBILITY GAP

In December 1966 the North Vietnamese finally permitted an American journalist to visit North Vietnam. Harrison Salisbury was from the respected *New York Times*. He reported on the destruction to civilian areas and the many civilian casualties caused by American bombing raids.

The United States military had always denied that their bombs hit civilian targets. If there were civilian casualties, they claimed, then there weren't many of them. The journalist's reports widened still further the 'credibility gap'. This is the difference between what the American military and government said and what the American people believed. The wider the gap, the less the people believed.

By 1968 the United States military in Vietnam had become very suspicious of the role of the American media. They were convinced that they were turning public opinion in the United States against a war that the American and South Vietnamese forces were winning. The commander of the forces in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, had claimed in 1967 that he could see the light of victory at the end of the tunnel.

It is more likely that journalists were only reflecting a change of opinion among the people of the United States. In August 1967, for the first time, an opinion poll showed that more Americans (46 per cent) thought the war was a 'mistake' than those who thought it was right (44 per cent). It is worth pointing out, though, that this poll was taken just after President Johnson had announced an increase in taxes to pay for the war. The war was costing Americans \$20 billion a year at this time.

THE IMPACT OF TET

The news film of the Tet Offensive had a dramatic effect. Especially stunning was film of the Vietcong guerrillas fighting in the grounds of the United States embassy. Walter Cronkite, America's most respected television journalist, saw the news film. 'What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war,' he said. Cronkite's opinion would influence millions of Americans. 'If I've lost Walter, I've lost Mr Average Citizen,' President Johnson said. He decided not to stand for re-election as president in 1968.

The next day saw the most dramatic television film of the offensive and perhaps the war. An American news cameraman filmed a tied-up VC suspect being led by a group of ARVN troops. As he was filming, the Chief of the Saigon Police walked up to the suspect and took out his pistol. He shot him once in the head. The VC suspect collapsed, a fountain of blood gushing from the side of his head.

To American viewers, the incident was shocking. The Chief of Police had clearly shot the man without a trial, on the spot, and not in self-defence. To them the victim was just a man wearing a checked shirt and shorts. In fact, it was discovered later that the victim was a member of a VC assassination squad which had been killing opponents of the communists in Saigon. At the time, though, it just looked like a brutal execution. Was this the sort of behaviour the United States was defending in Vietnam?



A 15-man VC suicide squad fought its way into the American embassy in Saigon. Within six hours they were all dead, like the ones shown here. But the political effect of this daring attack was much more important than the military result.

A SOURCE

General Westmoreland commanded the United States forces in Vietnam until June 1968. In 1979 he gave his views on the role of the American media in the war.

Actions by opponents of the war in the United States were supported by the news media. The media, no doubt, helped to back up the message that the war was 'illegal' and 'immoral'...

Then came the enemy's Tet Offensive of early 1968. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong suffered such a military defeat that it took them four years to recover. Despite this, reporting of the Offensive by press and television in the United States gave an impression of an endless war that could never be won.

B SOURCE

A modern historian on the role of the media during the war (from *Vietnam – A History*, S Kamow, 1994).

But public opinion surveys conducted at the time made it plain that the Tet episode scarcely altered American attitudes toward the war.

Public 'support' for the war had been slipping steadily for two years before Tet. This was a trend caused by the increasing casualties, rising taxes and, especially, the feeling that there was no end in view. For a brief moment after the Tet Offensive began, Americans rallied behind the flag in a predictable display of patriotic fervour. But their mood of despair quickly returned as the fighting dragged on, and their support for the conflict continued to fall.

C SOURCE

The execution of a Vietcong suspect by the Saigon Chief of Police during the Tet Offensive.

