

Vietnamese government.

Unfortunately, the program often was subverted by other interests. Some South Vietnamese used Phoenix to settle family feuds, wipe out debts, or eliminate personal enemies. An intelligence officer in the U.S. Army attached to Phoenix reported: "When I arrived in the district I was given a list of 200 names of people who had to be killed. When I left after six months, we still hadn't killed anyone on the list. But we'd killed 260 other people."

Phoenix's record is mixed. In some provinces, it was very successful in virtually eliminating the VCI. In others, it accomplished nothing. Leadership, commitment, and local conditions varied tremendously. Post-war interviews with communist leaders revealed that they considered Phoenix a very devastating program. Whatever the program's flaws, it is clear that in a revolutionary war, targeting the hidden infrastructure—counterinsurgency—is an essential element of strategy.

### *Counting the Enemy*

By the middle of 1967, the number of NVA soldiers in the south was less than three percent of North Vietnam's available manpower. One study in late 1968 showed that if enemy forces continued to sustain the unusually high level of casualties inflicted in the first half of that year, it still would take a minimum of 15 1/2 years to eliminate the enemy. In summary, the attrition strategy was doomed to fail.

However, Lyndon Johnson did not accept this logic. He believed that the U.S. could make the costs so heavy for North Vietnam that in time they would abandon the Vietcong, and then the guerrillas could be eliminated. Johnson and military strategists failed fully to appreciate the revolutionary dimensions of the conflict and continued to underestimate the indigenous strength of the Vietcong.

In late 1966 and early 1967, a debate raged among the CIA, military intelligence, and the Joint Chiefs over who should be counted as Vietcong combatants. Should part-time personnel engaged in auxiliary tasks be included alongside trained, armed guerrillas? From his study of captured enemy documents, CIA analyst Sam Adams argued that the number of Vietcong was much higher, in fact, almost double what MACV listed. If these higher numbers were correct, most of the claims of progress were invalid. This would be politically

damaging to support for the war.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, did not want these higher estimates released to the press. General Westmoreland concurred. After the war, a television documentary accused Westmoreland of covering up the higher numbers even from the President. General Westmoreland brought suit, but later dropped it in the middle of a widely publicized trial. Both adversaries claimed that their positions had been upheld.

In the fall of 1967, CIA, military intelligence, the ambassador to South Vietnam, and others agreed to accept the MACV estimates as official. Soon afterward Westmoreland reported to President Johnson that the tide of the war was shifting to the U.S. In a speech to Congress and the American people, the General professed to "see the light at the end of the tunnel" and predicted that the U.S. would start to withdraw troops in the next couple of years.

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## The War Turns Bad: 1968

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Within a few weeks there were indications of a major communist build-up around Khe Sanh, an isolated Marine outpost 14 miles south of the DMZ and six miles from the Laotian border. The siege of Khe Sanh began in late January. It lasted for 77 days and was the most controversial battle of the war. Johnson feared an American Dienbienphu and got a written "guarantee" from each member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the base would be held. He had a model built in the war room in the White House basement and studied the situation daily. The media also watched developments closely. Walter Cronkite called the battle of Khe Sanh a "microcosm of the war."

When it was over, an estimated 10,000-15,000 North Vietnamese had been killed, as contrasted to fewer than 250 Americans. Westmoreland called Khe Sanh "one of the most damaging, one-sided defeats among many that the North Vietnamese incurred." General Lewis Walt called it "the most important battle of the war." Westmoreland added that Khe Sanh "discredited" the "myth of General Giap's military genius."

General Dave Palmer disagreed. He saw Khe Sanh as a diversionary tactic that "accomplished its purpose



## Friendly Fire

I looked toward the spot where the fire fight had begun, and saw a dark figure running toward me. His rifle was pointed directly at me. I remember feeling fear deep inside that this Vietcong was about to kill me, and when he was almost on top of me, I raised my rifle, pointed it, and fired three times at his head and chest. The figure fell right in front of me.

Someone ran out and dragged the body back. He screamed, "Somebody has just shot the Corporal—" They said his name. I realized then that I had just killed one of my own men....

In October, I went out on a patrol. I'd killed the corporal and had to make up for it. As we were crossing a rice dike, we were suddenly hit by a tremendous burst of automatic fire. It went on for an hour, and a strange feeling of relief and excitement—and victory—swept over me. But it turned out that we'd been attacked by the South Vietnamese, the ARVN. "They thought you were the Vietcong," the major told me. And then he put me in for a medal....—Ron Kovic, "On the Eve of the Tet Offensive." In Lynda Rosen Obst. *The Sixties*. Reprinted in *The New York Times Magazine*, November 13, 1977.

magnificently." Indeed, Giap later revealed that the North Vietnamese did not regard Khe Sanh as important, let alone another Dienbienphu. In his view, the Americans made Khe Sanh important because they felt their prestige was at stake. However, as soon as the battle was won, Khe Sanh was evacuated. As for Giap, diversion, indeed, was his game. During the 77 days of battle in the wilderness, the communists launched their biggest coordinated offensive of the war—and it was in the cities.

At dawn on January 30, 1968, the first day of the annual Tet (lunar New Year) truce, the Vietcong, with NVA support, attacked 36 of the 44 provincial capitals, five of the six largest cities, 64 of the 242 district capitals, 50 hamlets, and 23 military bases and airfields.

The fighting during Tet was intense. It was a decisive military victory for the U.S. The assault was beaten back and the attackers suffered enormous casualties. Although probably inflated, MACV estimated 40,000 enemy deaths at a cost of 1,000 Americans killed. Many of the Vietcong infrastructure surfaced and were killed. The people's uprising for which the communists hoped did not occur. The Vietcong were so badly damaged that the NVA was forced to assume the major burden of the fighting from then on.

On the other hand, the communists scored a significant psychological victory in the offensive. Despite the heavy price in lives, they definitely called into question the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments' ability to protect their own people. The attack on the U.S. Embassy and size and coordination of the whole assault impressed many war weary Americans and Vietnamese and dealt a severe blow to public support for the pacification program.

After years of optimistic reports, people were shocked at the boldness and scale of the enemy offensive. Moreover, much of the action took place in Saigon and other major cities where film crews could cover it without the interference of MACV. The result was more scenes of combat, disorder, and violence than the public had ever seen. Many more Americans expressed concern over the large and growing number of American casualties. While small when compared to that of the communists, they were much larger than the U.S. public was prepared to tolerate in a war with unclear objectives and of questionable morality. As it turned out, 1968 was the peak year for U.S. casualties in the war—14,615 killed and 46,800 wounded.

## **The U.S. Destroys Hue to Save It**

Cronkite: "If the communists' intention was to take and seize the cities, they came closer here at Hue than anywhere else, and now, three weeks after the offensive began, the firing still goes on, here on the new side of the city, and across the Perfume River to the old side, the Citadel."

"Probably, a week before this offensive began, the army of North Vietnam, with Vietcong support, began moving into the mountains south of here, one day's march away. And then the day before the offensive began, January 30th to 31st, they began that march toward the city. Meanwhile, another regiment of the NVA were moving in from the north, into the city, the old Citadel, from the north, and they swept quickly through it, too, except for a small corner in the northeast of the Citadel held by the South Vietnamese Army headquarters."

"It was a tough fight. It was house-to-house, door-to-door, room-to-room. They found they couldn't get into the doors and the windows; the North Vietnamese Army held them too tightly and had booby-trapped them as well. They had to blast their way in with plastic charges placed against the sides of the houses. It was such a tough fight that although the American Army hoped not to use heavy weapons and air strikes against this old city, they finally had to bring them in to win the battle."

"The destruction here was almost total. There is scarcely an inhabitable building in the city of Hue. Whatever price the communists paid for this offensive, the price to the allied cause was high, for if our intention is to restore normalcy, peace, serenity to this country, the destruction of those qualities in this, the most historical and probably serene of all South Vietnam's cities, is obviously a setback. Now, a job no one dreamed we were going to have to undertake. It is now the rebuilding of an entire city, and the lives of the people in it"—CBS Television, "Who, What, When, Where, Why: Report from Vietnam by Walter Cronkite." February 27, 1968.





Abrams salutes his departing predecessor, General Westmoreland, during a brief farewell ceremony at Tan Son Nhut airbase.

#### *Reassessment After Tet*

In the wake of Tet, Johnson realized he lacked the support to continue the war indefinitely. When Westmoreland requested 206,000 more troops to join the 525,000 already in Vietnam, Johnson ordered a review of U.S. Vietnam policy by a group of experienced statesmen he called "the wise men."

Headed by the new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, the group heard reports by the Departments of Defense, State and others that the Vietcong numbered many more than previously reported. Some intelligence organizations estimated that North Vietnam had so many young people in its population that, if necessary, it could send more than 100,000 men to war each year forever. The International Security Agency of the Department of Defense concluded, "Even with the 200,000 additional troops requested by MACV, we will not be in a position to drive the enemy from SVN or destroy his forces."

A key memorandum to Johnson advised against the increase because the Saigon leadership showed no willingness or ability "to attract the necessary loyalty or

support of the people." As such, a large U.S. troop increase would only "intensify the belief of the ruling elite that the U.S. will continue to fight its war while it engages in backroom politics and permits widespread corruption."

Johnson denied Westmoreland's request and began turning more of the war over to the ARVN. As explained by Secretary of Defense Clifford on July 15, 1968, "We are interested in doing all we can to accelerate the development of the ARVN. We intend to give preference to the ARVN forces, even at the expense of our forces." This was to be the beginning of the Vietnamization program later concluded under President Richard M. Nixon.

#### *Johnson's Peace Proposal*

On March 30, 1968, two months into the Tet Offensive, President Johnson made a startling address to the nation. He announced that he would not seek his party's nomination for re-election so that he would not be an obstacle to successful peace negotiations. He stated further that he was limiting bombing to the southern part of North Vietnam as an inducement for peace talks. With bad weather forecast, Johnson really wasn't giving much away. In fact, he advised U.S. ambassadors abroad that they "should make it clear [to U.S. allies] that Hanoi is most likely to denounce the project and thus free our hand after a short period."

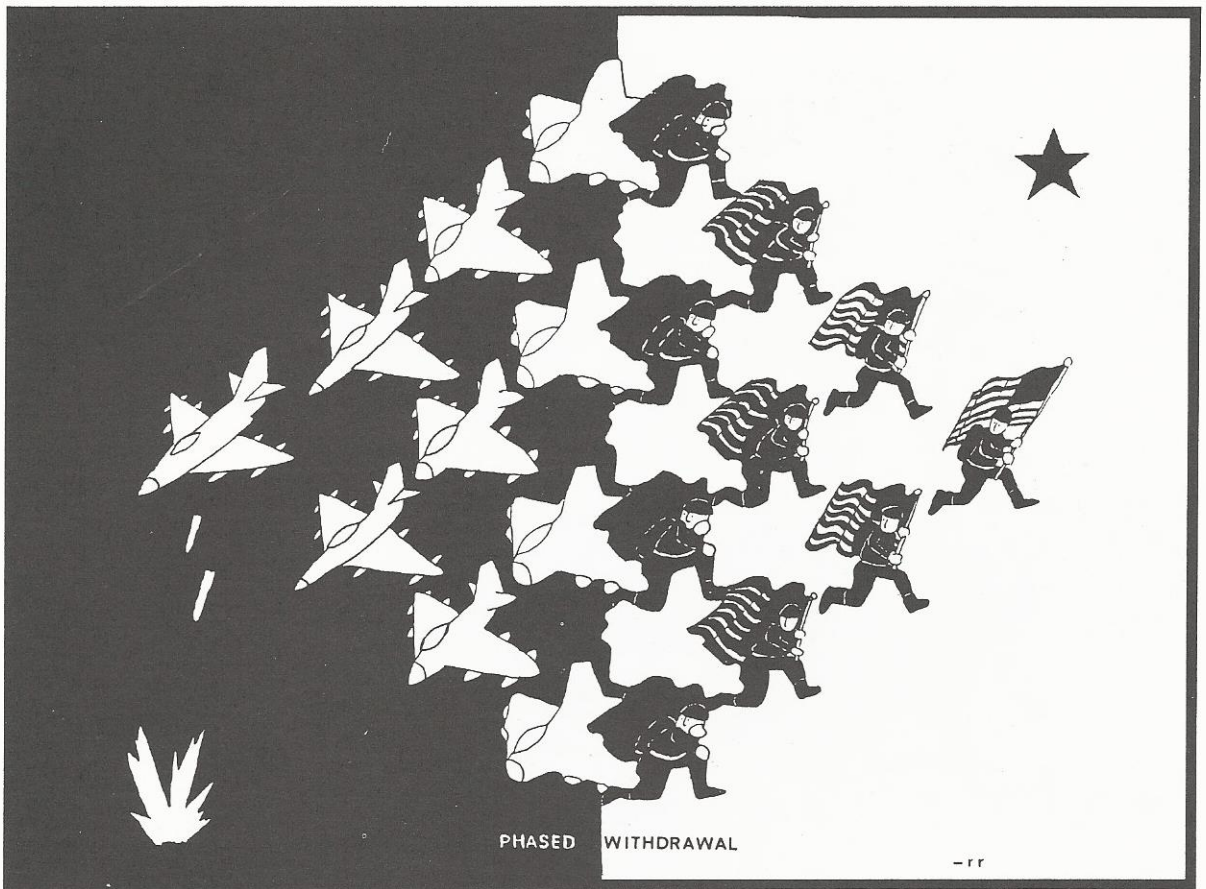
To Johnson's surprise, Hanoi accepted the offer. Late in October 1968, Johnson halted all bombing over the north and entered into negotiations with North Vietnam. He hoped this gesture would help his Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, win the November election for President. However, Richard Nixon, whose campaign advertised a "secret plan" to end the war, was elected.

#### *Vietnamization: 1969-1973*

Once in office, Nixon extended Johnson's plan to train ARVN troops to take the place of U.S. ground troops in the field. He called it "Vietnamization." Despite reservations, U.S. advisors organized a crash training program for the ARVN, complete with massive supplies of equipment and matériel. For the first time, all ARVN were issued the M-16 rifle, the weapon of U.S. forces since 1966.

In 1970, Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown in a *coup d'état* led by General





Lon Nol and supported by the U.S. In May, Nixon ordered an “incursion” into Cambodia as part of the search for the communist party headquarters for South Vietnam (COSVN). While COSVN was never found, the incursion was judged a military success. U.S. forces killed more than 2,000 enemy troops, cleared 1,600 acres of jungle, destroyed 8,000 bunkers and captured huge weapons and munitions caches.

On the other hand, the Cambodian incursion further undermined support for the war. College campuses erupted in protest over the widening of the war. Four students were killed by National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio in early May. Congress began to put funding restrictions on the war. Moreover, a disastrous February 1971 incursion by the ARVN into Laos dampened enthusiasm for the Vietnamization process.

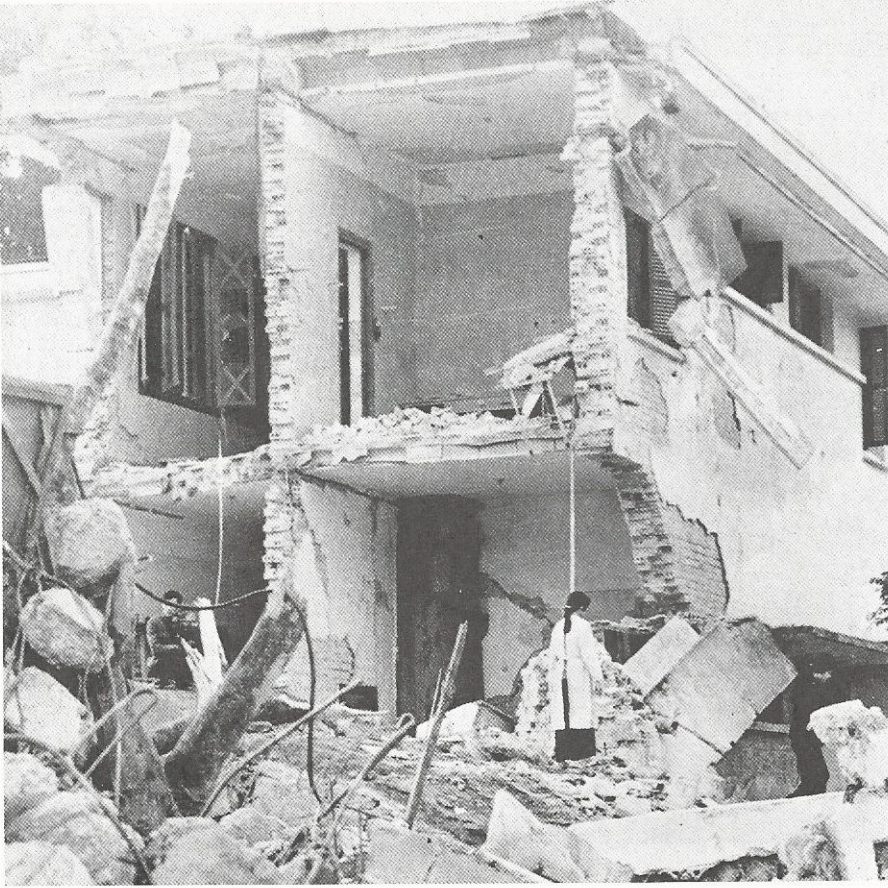
There also were long-term consequences of the assault on Cambodia that eventually proved disastrous to the people of that tiny country. The incursion was preceded by about 3,600 secret B-52 bombing raids

over the period March 1969 to May 1970. The bombing triggered a low-level communist insurgency along the eastern frontier. The rebels, called Khmer Rouge, gained in size and determination. The bombing also drove nearly two million people from the countryside into Phnom Penh where they later became victims of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot’s forced exodus. The “secret bombings” eventually led to the “killing fields” of Cambodia.

#### *Bombing Widens*

While Nixon was winding down the ground war, he widened the air war. Not wanting to destroy his new image with the American public as a peacemaker, Nixon said the air war would be essentially defensive in nature. Under this plan, reconnaissance planes were to be sent out and, when fired upon, backed up by other American war planes. U.S. planes flew 37,000 such “protective reaction strikes” against North Vietnam in 1969. What was unknown to Congress and even much of the military was that this apparent reduction in the





Ruins of a section of a hospital in Hanoi, hit by a B-52 bombing attack during the 11 days of Linebacker II



North Vietnamese delegates resume secret peace negotiations with U.S. representatives in January, 1973.



U.S. war effort was linked to secret bombing campaigns over Cambodia, already discussed, and over Laos.

Two different air wars were fought over Laos from 1968 through 1972. The first, called "Barrel Roll," was over a north plateau region called the Plain of Jars. It was directed at encampments of the NVA and Pathet Lao, a guerrilla force of about 35,000 men who were the Laotian equivalent of the Vietcong. Some villages also were bombed. The second bombing campaign was carried out in southern Laos against the Ho Chi Minh Trail used by the North Vietnamese to move men and supplies into South Vietnam. Over the course of this campaign U.S. forces dropped a total of 2.2 million tons of bombs.

On March 31, 1972, North Vietnam launched the largest offensive since Tet 1968, a conventional invasion across the DMZ by 120,000 NVA troops led by Soviet tanks and artillery. The U.S. had only 100,000 military personnel, including 6,000 combat troops, left in Vietnam. Nixon responded with the largest bombing campaign of the war (code named Linebacker), the mining of Haiphong Harbor, and a naval blockade of North Vietnam.

Almost all oil storage facilities and 70 percent of electrical power generating capacity in the north were destroyed. The new laser-guided smart bombs smashed

many bridges and railroads. Interdiction reduced overland imports from 160,000 to 30,000 tons a month. Mining the Haiphong Harbor cut seaborne imports from 250,000 tons a month to nearly zero.

Air power alone took 120,000 North Vietnamese lives. Truong Nhu Tang of the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government explained that as the summer went on, it was obvious that the losses were more than could be sustained and that the territorial advances could not be held. Negotiations to get the Americans out of the war were imperative.

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## U.S. Disengagement: 1972-1973

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By October 1972, the negotiating teams in Paris produced a peace treaty agreeable to the U.S. and North Vietnam. South Vietnamese President Thieu charged the U.S. with betraying his government and opposed the agreement. After his re-election, Nixon instructed Kissinger to address Thieu's concerns. On November 20th, Kissinger presented Hanoi's Le Duc Tho with sixty-nine amendments to the agreement demanded by Thieu.

