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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Winning the Battle, Losing the War

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THIS winter is the 40th anniversary of the Tet offensive, which proved to be the turning point of the Vietnam War. By the time it was over, the American strategy in Vietnam switched from pursuing victory on the battlefield to finding a way to disengage. It is instructive to recall that the American and allied armies actually turned back the attackers and inflicted heavy casualties.

In the latter months of 1967, after more than two years of bitter fighting in Vietnam, many Americans believed that the war had degenerated into a bloody stalemate. Gen. William Westmoreland, the senior commander, did not see it that way; by his primary metric — the body count — American and allied forces were making significant headway. Under criticism by the growing antiwar movement at home, President Lyndon Johnson decided to make General Westmoreland's optimism the focal point of an information campaign to convince the American people that we were winning the war.

In mid-November 1967, he brought the general home to make the case. Upon arriving at Andrews Air Force Base, General Westmoreland told waiting reporters that he was "very, very encouraged" by recent events. At an appearance on "Meet the Press" two days later, he said American troops would be able to begin withdrawing "within two years or less." During an address at the National Press Club, he claimed that "we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view." He consistently gave an upbeat account of how things were going in the war, clearly believing that a corner had been turned.

Even as Westmoreland spoke, however, the Communists in Vietnam were preparing a countrywide offensive designed to "liberate" South Vietnam, which was set to begin at the start of Tet, the lunar new year.

In the early morning hours of Jan. 31, 1968, Communist forces struck suddenly and with a fury breathtaking in scope. More than 80,000 soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong guerrilla force launched nearly simultaneous attacks against major cities, towns and military installations from the Demilitarized Zone south to the Mekong Delta. They attacked 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five of the six major cities and 64 district capitals. They seized and occupied Hue, the ancient imperial capital, and sent 11 battalions into Saigon to strike six targets, including the United States Embassy.

With a few notable exceptions — at Hue, Khe Sanh and Cholon — most of the fighting of the opening phase of the offensive was over in a few days as the American and South Vietnamese forces overcame the initial surprise and responded with superior firepower. The citizen uprising that the Communists had been counting on failed to materialize. The Communists suffered horrendous casualties; some estimates ranged as high as 40,000 killed. Their losses continued to grow as subsequent fighting extended into the fall months. By the time the offensive had run its course, the Vietcong had been crippled; the major fighting for the rest of the war would be done by the North Vietnamese Army.

The Americans had won a tactical victory. But the sheer scope and ferocity of the offensive and the vivid images of the fighting on the nightly television news convinced many Americans that the Johnson administration had lied to them, and the president's credibility plummeted. Perhaps more important, the offensive shook the administration's own confidence and led to a re-evaluation of American strategy. When General Westmoreland asked for an additional 206,000 troops to "take advantage of the situation," the president balked.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson went on national television to announce a partial suspension of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and call for negotiations. He then stunned the audience by announcing that he would not run for re-election. The following year, President Richard Nixon began the long American withdrawal from Vietnam, paving the way for the triumph of the Communist forces in 1975.

Historians are often reluctant to draw comparisons between historical events, and this has been especially true for Vietnam and Iraq, because the two wars have more differences than similarities. That being said, however, American military actions today can be informed by one general lesson from the Tet offensive, and that is the importance of not putting the best face on a military situation for political reasons.

To dampen antiwar sentiment, Johnson and Westmoreland encouraged what turned out to be false expectations about our prospects in Vietnam, and this colored Americans' perception of the Tet offensive, stretching the president's credibility gap to the breaking point. A tactical victory became a strategic defeat and led to the virtual abdication of President Johnson. General Tran Do of North Vietnam acknowledged that the offensive failed to achieve its objectives, but noted that the public reaction in the United States was "a fortunate result."

Gen. David Petraeus, commander of coalition forces in Iraq, is a student of the Vietnam War whose doctoral dissertation at Princeton was titled "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam." Clearly, he internalized those lessons, because in discussing the surge and the progress of the war in Iraq he has studiously avoided building undue expectations and has repeatedly said that there will be tough times ahead. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was likewise careful in his recent comments about re-evaluating troop reduction plans this summer. The wisdom of their approach will become especially evident if insurgents in Iraq engage in any Tet-like offensive this year — especially with a presidential election looming and the future of the American military commitment in Iraq hanging in the balance.

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