

The Truth About Vietnam's Tet Offensive

The Lies of Tet

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On January 30, 1968, more than a quarter million North Vietnamese soldiers and 100,000 Viet Cong irregulars launched a massive attack on South Vietnam. But the public didn't hear about who had won this most decisive battle of the Vietnam War, the so-called Tet offensive, until much too late.

Media misreporting of Tet passed into our collective memory. That picture gave antiwar activism an unwarranted credibility that persists today in Congress, and in the media reaction to the war in Iraq. The Tet experience provides a narrative model for those who wish to see all U.S. military successes -- such as the Petraeus surge -- minimized and glossed over.

In truth, the war in Vietnam was lost on the propaganda front, in great measure due to the press's pervasive misreporting of the clear U.S. victory at Tet as a defeat. Forty years is long past time to set the historical record straight.

The Tet offensive came at the end of a long string of communist setbacks. By 1967 their insurgent army in the South, the Viet Cong, had proved increasingly ineffective, both as a military and political force. Once American combat troops began arriving in the summer of 1965, the communists were mauled in one battle after another, despite massive Hanoi support for the southern insurgency with soldiers and arms.

By 1967 the VC had lost control over areas like the Mekong Delta -- ironically, the very place where reporters David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan had first diagnosed a Vietnam "quagmire" that never existed. The Tet offensive was Hanoi's desperate throw of the dice to seize South Vietnam's northern provinces using conventional armies, while simultaneously triggering a popular uprising in support of the Viet Cong. Both failed.

Americans and South Vietnamese soon put down the attacks, which began under cover of a cease-fire to celebrate the Tet lunar new year. By March 2, when U.S. Marines crushed the last North Vietnamese pockets of resistance in the northern city of Hue, the VC had lost 80,000-100,000 killed or wounded without capturing a single province.

Tet was a particularly crushing defeat for the VC. It had not only failed to trigger any uprising but also cost them "our best people," as former Viet Cong doctor Duong Quynh Hoa later admitted to reporter Stanley Karnow. Yet the very fact of the U.S. military victory -- "The North Vietnamese," noted National Security official William Bundy at the time, "fought to the last Viet Cong" -- was spun otherwise by most of the U.S. press.

As the Washington Post's Saigon bureau chief Peter Braestrup documented in his 1977 book, "The Big Story," the desperate fury of the communist attacks including on Saigon, where most reporters lived and worked, caught the press by surprise. (Not the military: It had been expecting an attack and had been on full alert since Jan. 24.) It also put many reporters in physical danger for the first time. Braestrup, a former Marine, calculated that only 40 of 354 print and TV journalists covering the war at the time had seen any real fighting. Their own panic deeply colored their reportage, suggesting that the communist assault had flung Vietnam into chaos. Their editors at home, like CBS's Walter Cronkite, seized on the distorted reporting to discredit the military's version of events.

The Viet Cong insurgency was in its death throes, just as U.S. military officials assured the American people at the time. Yet the press version painted a different picture. To quote Braestrup, "the media tended to leave the shock and confusion of early February, as then perceived, fixed as the final impression of Tet" and of Vietnam generally. "Drama was perpetuated at the expense of information," and "the negative trend" of media reporting "added to the distortion of the real situation on the ground in Vietnam." "The North Vietnamese were delighted.

On the heels of their devastating defeat, Hanoi increasingly shifted its propaganda efforts toward the media and the antiwar movement. Causing American (not South Vietnamese) casualties, even at heavy cost, became a battlefield objective in order to reinforce the American media's narrative of a failing policy in Vietnam. Yet thanks to the success of Tet, the numbers of Americans dying in Vietnam steadily declined -- from almost 15,000 in 1968 to 9,414 in 1969 and 4,221 in 1970 -- by which time the Viet Cong had ceased to exist as a viable fighting force.

One Vietnamese province after another witnessed new peace and stability. By the end of 1969 over 70% of South Vietnam's population was under government control, compared to 42% at the beginning of 1968. In 1970 and 1971, American ambassador Ellsworth Bunker estimated that 90% of Vietnamese lived in zones under government control.

However, all this went unnoticed because misreporting about Tet had left the image of Vietnam as a botched counterinsurgency -- an image nearly half a decade out of date. The failure of the North's next massive invasion over Easter 1972, which cost the North Vietnamese army another 100,000 men and half their tanks and artillery, finally forced it to sign the peace accords in Paris and formally to recognize the Republic of South Vietnam.

By August 1972 there were no U.S. combat forces left in Vietnam, precisely because, contrary to the overwhelming mass of press reports, American policy there had been a success. To Congress and the public, however, the war had been nothing but a debacle. And by withdrawing American troops, President Nixon gave up any U.S. political or military leverage on Vietnam's future. With U.S. military might out of the equation, the North quickly cheated on the Paris accords. When its re-equipped army launched a massive attack in 1975, Congress refused to redeem Nixon's pledges of military support for the South. Instead, President Gerald Ford bowed to what the media had convinced the American public was inevitable: the fall of Vietnam. The collapse of South Vietnam's neighbor, Cambodia, soon followed.

Southeast Asia entered the era of the "killing fields," exterminating in a brief few years an estimated two million people -- 30% of the Cambodian population. American military policy has borne the scars of Vietnam ever since. It had all been preventable - - but for the lies of Tet.

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