

HỒ KHANG

# THE TẾT MẬU THÂN 1968 EVENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM



  
THẾ GIỚI

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Tết Mậu Thân*<sup>1</sup> historical event occurred nearly one third of a century ago, but it has not fallen into oblivion, it is always fresh in the minds of political and military circles, historians and journalists. Many scientific seminars, many books, monographs and studies still want to delve more deeply whenever this historical event is approached. They wish to understand, to evaluate, to determine the motives and the historical impact of this “Tết” on the White House. They desire to know why it happened and what caused it to have so strong an effect on the US itself.

However, all the questions about the Tết Offensive have not been clear. Scientifically speaking, *Tết Mậu Thân* is still a subject that arouses controversial views. Looking from one angle, some think they have had a comprehensive grasp of *Tết*, but looking from another angle, others are perplexed and unable to explain the event. Nevertheless, one thing is obvious: since *Tết Mậu Thân*, the military and leading circles of the US including President L.B. Johnson, National Security Adviser H. Kissinger, MACV Intelligence Service Chief Davidson, and other high-ranking officials of the Defense Department who were directly involved in the Vietnam War, have

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1. For convenience, the phrase “The general offensive and uprising during the celebration of the New Year of Mậu Thân 1968” is replaced by such familiar terms as “The Tết Mậu Thân event,” “Tết Mậu Thân,” or “Tết.”

never admitted in their memoirs that *the US armed forces had suffered a military defeat in South Vietnam*. According to them, *Tết Mậu Thân* was nothing more than a psychological or political victory for North Vietnam.

In his memoir *A Military-man's Testimony*, Gen. Westmoreland, former Commander of MACV in Saigon during the period of limited war (1965-1968), was of the view that in the course of *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968, *Vietcong* and North Vietnam had suffered a heavy military defeat on the battlefield. On the other hand, the US army was about to win a decisive victory, but the civilian leadership in the US Government forced it to give up.

It can be said that this is the relatively common view in the US and many Western countries regarding the examination, assessment, and explanation of *Tết Mậu Thân*. The reason is partly due to the fact that at the time of *Tết*, the US, the Saigon and US allied troops numbered over one million men. After being astounded at the beginning, they recovered and counter-attacked ferociously. Consequently, they took control of the cities and drove the South Vietnam (SVN) liberation forces out of the cities, the plains, the communication lines and the military bases.

It also stems from *the traditional military concept of the US and other Western armies*. According to this concept, a military victory or defeat should be defined on the basis of *the change of the front line between the opposing forces*. This concept was verified in World Wars I and II and in the Korean War. It is very clearly expressed by the fact that the US Military Command in Saigon *measured their victories by the statistics of the enemy casualties*, conceiving that it had to wage an irregular, guerilla war, in which the objects of its search-and-destroy operation were the now-appearing-now-disappearing liberation army units. By this concept, if the casualties of the liberation army were *equal or greater* than the troops reinforced from the North, then the US would have won military victory in the South Vietnam battlefield! Using this criteri-

on for measurement of success or failure, many US authors have come to the conclusion that “*Tết Mậu Thân*” was a military failure for the Vietnamese army and people.

*In Vietnam*, in the seminars and the press articles about the anti-US resistance war for national salvation, the prevailing view of most researchers was that: the Vietnamese army and people had won *a great victory of strategic importance*. However, comparing the objectives initially set for the offensive and the results of the campaign with the losses suffered by the Vietnamese side *during and after Tết*, some came to the conclusion that: “*Phase I was a success, Phase II was a failure, that was equal.*”<sup>1</sup> Others even affirmed that “*Tết Mậu Thân* 1968 did not bring forward the revolutionary war in South Vietnam.”

It did not change the situation of the battlefield in our favour, but made it worse than in 1968. It could be said that *Tết* caused a temporary setback of the war situation in South Vietnam and caused our army and people to face difficulties and hardships for the next three to four years before they gradually recovered.<sup>2</sup> According to the late Lieutenant General Trần Văn Trà, there still remained the persistent opinion that *Tết Mậu Thân* was a failure for Vietnam. Even our commanders of different levels in the front, who had to bravely cope with the enemy's counter-offensives, pacification campaigns, and the Phoenix Program after *Tết Mậu Thân*, did not fully realize the scope of our success. They suspected the

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1. Quotation from Gen. Hoàng Văn Thái. *Mấy vấn đề về chiến lược trong cuộc tiến công và nổi dậy Xuân 1968*. Military History Journal. Feb. 1988.

2. *Một số ý kiến về kết quả thực hiện Tổng công kích-Tổng khởi nghĩa*. Nguyễn nhân và những kinh nghiệm chính về chỉ đạo chiến lược (intervention by the Military Science Department at the conference to sum up the general offensive-general uprising, organized by the Institute of Military History, March 1986. Archives of the Institute of Vietnamese Military History).

explanations of their superiors.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, others proposed that *Tết Mậu Thân* should be evaluated only as a large-scale offensive, a strategic offensive that had won big success.<sup>2</sup>

So, the *Tết Mậu Thân* event has raised many questions still to be answered. The evaluations of this historical fact still differ and are sometimes opposed... The reasons are multiple: the authors have different standpoints and approaches when they examine the issue; documentary sources are limited from both Vietnam and the US. Neither side has yet carefully reviewed the event. Moreover, the various aspects of *Tết Mậu Thân* and the complication of the period preceding, during and after Tết are also causes that make the study of this historical event more difficult.

Making the “*Tết Mậu Thân* general offensive and uprising” as a study subject, I have no intention to make an extensive examination of the whole campaign and no ambition to find answers to all the questions, to describe the different phases of Tết or the progress of each battle front. I confine myself to the analysis and evaluation of the offensive during Tết (phase I), which is commonly referred to by press articles and studies as the *Tết Mậu Thân* General Offensive and Uprising. I shall try to understand deeply the subjective and objective causes that gave rise to the strategic ideas of the Vietnamese regarding Tết. I shall also describe the development of the offensive so as to analyse and evaluate the strategic effect of *Tết Mậu Thân* on the South Vietnam battlefield and on the US itself. I shall thereby contribute to assessing the great undeniable value of this Tết and to clarifying the concept of military success and failure in the war between the US and Vietnam (1954-1975). On this question, the views of the US political, military, and historical circles and their counterparts in the Western countries still differ. I have limited my study to the Tết phase, Phase I, from the beginning to

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1. Gen. Trần Văn Trà. *Thắng lợi và suy nghĩ về thắng lợi*. Military History Journal. Feb. 1988.

2. Trần Độ. *Tết Mậu Thân - trận tập kích chiến lược*. Military History Journal. Feb. 1988.

March 31st, 1968 not because of my own desire, or because the other phases (II and III) are difficult to deal with, or because our casualties in the phases of May and August 1968 were great, and therefore I want to avoid them. Nor is it because I am bound by the time of the event: Tết. Actually, it is due to the objective reality that after March 31, 1968, the war between the US and Vietnam had taken another orientation and shifted to another phase under the decisive effect of Tết Mậu Thân. In fact, the Tết offensive had broken down the US strategy of “limited war,” as evidenced by President Johnson’s speech on 31 March 1968. From that date on, “all the features and situation of the war had changed.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Comment by the writer of *The US Defence Department Secret Papers* on LBJ’s speech on 31 March, 1968, quoted from *The Pentagon Secret Papers* translated into Vietnamese by the Army Library, 1980. Archives of the Institute of Vietnamese Military History, code No. VL781-82, p. 569.

## Chapter I

# NEW SITUATION AND STRATEGIC AIM OF VIETNAM

### I. NEW SITUATION OF THE VIETNAM-US WAR

After ten years (1954-1964) replacing the French in South Vietnam and after four years (1961-1964) implementing the strategy of “special war,” the US was still unable to subdue the revolution in South Vietnam, although it had spent a lot of money and effort and resorted to many manoeuvres and measures. In mid 1965, having reached the climax, using theoretical calculations and initial plans, the US “special war strategy” in South Vietnam was still facing the danger of being completely defeated by the army and people of South Vietnam. In these circumstances, the US decided *to change its war strategy in order to win a decisive victory in South Vietnam*: shifting from the “special war strategy” to the “limited war strategy.” The overall objective of the US was to bring *large forces* from the US to launch “counter-offensives” to annihilate *the South Vietnam liberation main forces*, to escalate the destructive attacks against North Vietnam and to force the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government to *negotiate under US conditions*. However, to avoid the negative effects on the deployment of the US global strategy and on the domestic political, economic and



social situation, especially to avoid the direct involvement of big powers (the USSR and China) into the war, the Johnson Administration authorized the rapid introduction and rapid withdrawal of the US forces, in other words, it *wanted to win a decisive victory in a short period of time*.

That is why, in July 1965, President Johnson agreed to, and approved General Westmoreland's "search-and-destroy" strategic plan (Westmoreland was then Commander of MACV in South Vietnam).

Under the plan, the US would have completed all the strategic objectives of the "limited war" in South Vietnam within *two and a half years*.

The plan was divided into three phases:

- *Phase 1*: from July to December 1965, rapid introduction of US and allied forces into South Vietnam, completion of the development of forces, preparation for the activities in phase 2.
- *Phase 2*: from January to June 1966, launching "search-and-destroy" strategic offensives in priority regions to annihilate enemy main forces, to foil the guerilla war, *to seize back initiative on the battlefield*, and to reorganize the pacification activities in rural areas.
- *Phase 3*: from July 1966 to June 1967 (or December 1967), continuation of the "search-and-destroy" offensive against the remaining main forces and units of the Liberation Army, destruction of the resistance bases and the leading bodies of the revolution in South Vietnam, completion of the rural pacification program, and repatriation of US forces.

According to *the Pentagon Secret Papers*: "The basic meaning of the "search-and-destroy" strategy is bring war to the very land of the enemy, to make it impossible for the enemy to move freely in

their country... and to deal heavy blows to the enemy."<sup>1</sup> By the end of 1965, over 200,000 US and satellite troops (including 184,314 G.Is) had been introduced and deployed in the strategic regions. In early 1966, the US introduced an additional number of regiments and brigades, a divisional command and the 7th Air Corps into South Vietnam. The total of the US, Saigon, and allied forces amounted to 720,000 men. With this huge force, the US Military Command decided to launch the first strategic offensive (in the 1965-1966 dry season) aimed at *searching and destroying* the Liberation Forces, *wresting back initiative on the battlefield*, removing enemy pressure around the cities and clearing up the strategic communication lines, "pacifying" the important rural areas, stabilizing the Saigon Administration and army, and enhancing their efficiency.

With such a considerable forces and using the achievements of US advanced military science, the leadership in Washington and the US Military Command in Saigon had full confidence that they would smash the adversary! Yet, on the basis of the people's war, which was built up and developed during the years of struggle against the "special war", the South Vietnamese main forces, local troops and guerrilla fighters closely combined their fighting and took initiatives in intercepting the enemy. They stopped the advance of the enemy, broke many offensives and search-and-destroy operations of the US and allied forces.

This was the situation of the *outer circle*. For the *inner circle*, task forces units, commandos, specialized mortar gunners, guerilla forces on the "anti-US snipers" rings attacked the US forces wherever and whenever it was possible to attack. They remained even in areas of great concentration of US troops such as Saigon-Gia Định.

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1. The US Defence Department secret papers about the US aggression war in Vietnam. Vol. 2. Translated and published by Vietnam News Agency. Hanoi, 1971; p. 137.

Taking advantage of the US troops being kept back on the spot and scattered in different directions, the Liberation Forces launched attacks and inflicted heavy losses on the US Division 1, Infantry Brigade 25 and Paratroop Brigade 173 in Cù Chi, Bến Cát, Nhà Đò, Bông Trang, Võ Xu, Bình Tuy, Dốc Bà Nghĩa, Provincial Road No 16, Núi Lát, etc. The main forces of Military Zone 5 caused great losses to the US marines in Đông Giáp, west Sơn Tịnh (Northern Quảng Ngãi).

So the US search-and-destroy pincer had been broken. As for rural pacification, which was carried out by Saigon troops, the situation was no better. Combining political and armed struggle, using the "three-pronged close combat" method (political, military, and work on enemy troops) the South Vietnam army and people recorded many achievements. The *plan for the pacification of 900 hamlets and the consolidation of 1,900 hamlets in 1966, which was mapped out in Honolulu by President Johnson and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu* on April 20, 1965, was completely shattered. In Military Zone 5, Trị Thiên, Tây Nguyên, over 2 million people recovered the control of their land. The liberated zone in Bình Định, Quảng Ngãi, Quảng Nam, Quảng Đà, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Đắc Lắc, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên was maintained. Guerilla bases and the system of fighting villages were increasingly expanded in rural areas and mountainous regions.

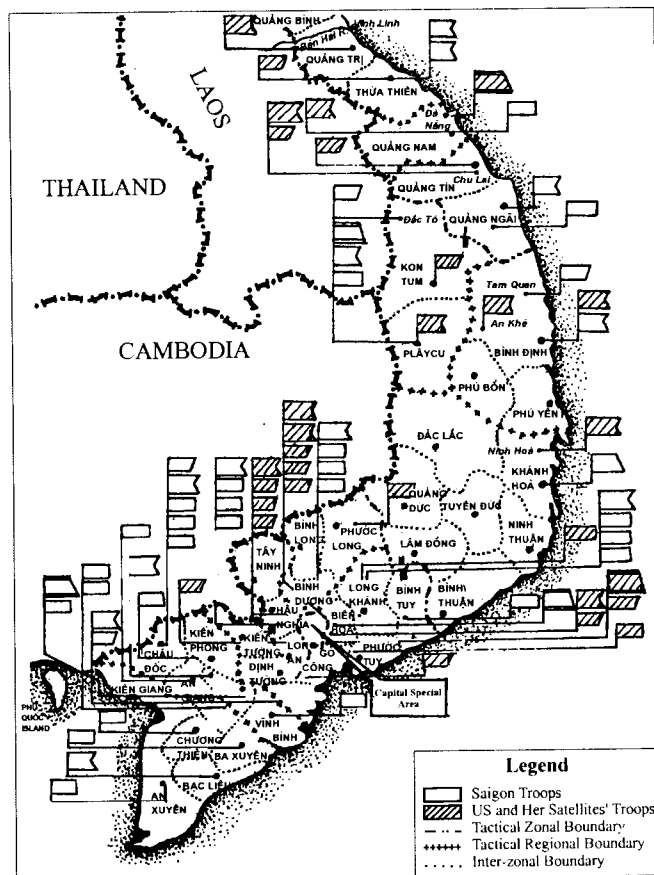
So, up to mid-1966, unable to search and destroy the Liberation main forces and to fulfil the pacification plan in key rural areas, the US MACV was obliged to wind up the first strategic counter-offensive ahead of schedule. The objective of stabilizing the Saigon Administration and army, clearing up the strategic communication lines, removing enemy pressure around the cities and the US military bases was also unattainable. Many big cities such as Saigon-Gia Định, Đà Nẵng, many highways such Highways No 1, Road 15 from Vũng Tàu to Biên Hoà, etc. were still threatened by the Liberation troops. What is more, from March to June 1966, the Saigon Administration and army were

deeply divided by the dismissal of Nguyễn Chánh Thi, Commander of the Corps 1. Only 24 hours after Thi's dismissal, officials and soldiers in Huế, Đà Nẵng declared their separation from the Saigon Administration. Students, Buddhist monks and believers in the cities of Central Vietnam *staged demonstrations against the US and Thiệu*. In mid June 1966, Thiệu and Kỳ re-established their control of Huế and Đà Nẵng. In spite of this, the effectiveness of the Saigon Administration had been seriously undermined and weakened.

With regard to North Vietnam, although a great quantity of bombs and shells had been used and many brutal air raids launched, many bombers were shot down, and many pilots captured, and the US airforce "rumbling thunder" campaign did not achieve results as expected. A number of US officials thought that the destruction or the threat of destroying North Vietnam's industry would force Hanoi to submit. Obviously, this was a wrong assessment. In Summer 1966, a secret conference of well-known US scientists was held under the aegis of the US Government to study the results of the war of destruction against North Vietnam. It came to the conclusion that "up to July 1966, the US bombing in North Vietnam had no considerable direct influence on the capability of Hanoi to help the military activities in South Vietnam". This situation caused US Defense Secretary McNamara to rethink the role of all the US bombing efforts which *gave no indication that Hanoi spirit was broken by the air raids*.

The US war efforts during the 1965-1966 dry season did not achieve the expected objectives. This was a surprise to the US, a failure of strategic significance of the US aggression in Vietnam. This failure made many high-ranking officials in the Johnson Administration, who had doubts at the beginning, clearly realize now that the *US military might could not quickly terminate the war and bring about victory* as expected earlier. However, in October 1966, Johnson convened a SEATO conference to encourage his Asian allies to participate more eagerly in the Vietnam War. In November 1966, the US Defence Department decided to increase

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US forces in South Vietnam to 469,000 men. By mid-1968, the US air force was ordered to intensify attacks on economic and military targets in North Vietnam.

In the 1966-1967 dry season, the US launched *the second strategic counter-offensive*, mobilizing a huge force comprising 20 divisions and 10 brigades of its main forces (including 7 divisions and 4 brigades of US troops), 4,000 aircraft, 2,500 tanks and armoured vehicles, 2,500 artillery pieces, and 500 warships. If the US troops on the 7th Fleet and in US bases in Thailand, Japan, the Philippines, Guam were also counted, the number of US combatants would far exceed the number of those participating in the first operation (nearly 1,200,000 US, puppet and satellite troops). The US and Saigon also mobilized tens of thousands of spies and hooligans and hundreds of pacification workers' teams for the offensive.

With this tremendous military effort combined with military, political and diplomatic manoeuvres, the US authorities hoped that the strategic counter-offensive would be victorious, that *it would change the situation on the battlefield by mid-1967 or by the end of that year in favour of the US*, when the year of presidential election 1968 began.

To that end, the US concentrated all its fighting forces available in South Vietnam to the destruction of the South Vietnam revolution bases in the North and East of Saigon. For this, seven divisions, five brigades of US, puppet, and satellite troops, including US crack troops, infantry such as Divisions 1 and 25, Paratroops Brigades 173 and 199 were mobilized. For six months, from October 1966 to April 1967, MACV carried out three successive large-scale military operations against the revolutionary bases in the North of Saigon.

On September 14, 1966, MACV launched the Attleboro Operation with 30,000 US and Saigon troops for a surprise attack against the Dương Minh Châu Base to destroy the main forces, bases, and logistic storehouses of the South Vietnam revolution.

Guessing the scheme of MACV, the Central Office and the Military Command of South Vietnam decided to mobilize Division 9, mortar units, commandos, local troops, guerrillas of Dầu Tiếng, Tây Ninh and office self-defenders to take the initiative in launching the Tây Ninh Campaign. The Liberation Forces were positioned in areas expected to be attacked by the US forces, forming front lines on which mutual assistance could be given between front and hind positions and between various categories of troops. With this disposition of the battlefield, the armed forces of the revolution base continuously intercepted and fought the marching formations of the US forces, causing them great casualties and material losses. After 72 days and nights of fighting in unfavourable battlefield conditions, on November 24, Westmoreland had to put an end to the operation and to withdraw all his forces out of the Dương Minh Châu Base as the objectives of the operation could not be reached.

After the Attleboro Operation, the US Military Command continued its activity by opening the Cedarfalls Campaign, the second army-corps-scale operation against Bến Súc, Củ Chi, Bến Cát, a spring-board area for the Liberation Army to put pressure on Saigon from the North. However, relying on the system of fortifications and tunnels, the army and people of Củ Chi, Bến Cát, Trảng Bàng stuck to their positions and ceaselessly attacked *the night encampments of the US troops*. While the US forces were busy coping with the armed forces on the spot, the Liberation Army main forces, in cooperation with the troops of the Saigon-Gia Định military region laid ambushes and attacked the US units *on their side or from behind*, causing them heavy human and material losses.

After nearly one month of fighting, losing thousands of combatants without destroying the staunch Liberation fighters who had great mobility thanks to a system of fortifications and tunnels, on January 26, 1967, MCV had to *put an end to the operations*; it herded 15,000 local inhabitants to Bình Dương Town. Meanwhile, the headquarters of the Saigon-Gia Định Military Command, and Regiment 16 of the zonal main force stuck to Củ Chi, 'the steel

land', close to Saigon-Gia Định. This was again a defeat for the US second strategic counter-offensive. In spite of all this, the US Military Command did not resign itself to abandon its aim of using a huge military force to attack the revolutionary bases in South Vietnam in order to annihilate the leading organs and the main forces of the South Vietnam Liberation Army. It hoped to change the situation of the battlefield and to create a turning point in the war in favour of the US in 1967. For this purpose, it mobilized 45,000 troops, 1,200 tanks and armoured vehicles, 250 heavy guns, 17 squadrons of aircraft to open the Junction City Campaign, the biggest in the whole US war of aggression in Vietnam. The target of the campaign was the Dương Minh Châu Base, its objective was to destroy the leading bodies of the Liberation Army.

In the US military map, Dương Minh Châu Base was called War Zone C. It was situated in a large region of the mountains and forests of Tây Ninh Province. It took shape during the resistance war against the French and continued to be consolidated during the anti-US war. Here were concentrated officials, personnel in government services, schools, factories, hospitals, storehouses, broadcasting stations under the Central Office, the National Liberation Front, and the Zonal Military Command. These centers built along dried streams, below the forest foliage, and at half underground level were connected to one another by a thick network of communication trenches. As early as mid-1966, anticipating the scheme of the US Military Command in the second counter-offensive, the Zonal Military Command elaborated a plan to organize the solid defence of the base under the guide-lines of sticking to the base and fighting the enemy on the spot. Then, after the Cedarfalls Operation, the Central Office and the Zonal Military Command organized the military, civilian, and party groups into guerrilla, local militia, and self-defense units. These forces were to remain in the area, to fight the enemy on the spot, and to create conditions for the main forces to annihilate the GI's. The Base was divided into 13 districts, each district was divided into communes and hamlets having their own

fortifications, tunnels, and trenches; they formed a closed front line able to help one another when necessary.

Applying the people's war methods in a sparsely-populated area, the Liberation Forces fought the enemy when they came, and attacked them when possible, anywhere in the Base, using every method of fighting. Thanks to this tactic, the units of *the main forces could take the initiative to assault the enemy where they were most vulnerable and exposed*, thus decimating them and destroying their war materials. In such conditions, on May 15, 1967, Westmoreland had to declare the end of his largest military operation.

So, after 50 days of making the utmost effort to attack a base area about 15,000 km<sup>2</sup>, losing 14,000 soldiers, nearly 1,000 military vehicles of various kinds, and 160 planes, once again, the US Military Command did not achieve its expected objectives. This defeat of strategic significance shattered the US hope that the army-corps-scale search-and-destroy operations might remove the obstacles faced by the US in land warfare and bring about a military victory in Vietnam. In other battlefields such as the Mekong Delta, Military Zone 5, the Central Highlands, and Trị Thiên, the US efforts did not yield any significant results. That was the reason why the US Military Command in Saigon *had to declare the termination of its second strategic counter-offensive* and to pull its forces back to strategic areas at Saigon-Gia Định and Trị Thiên.

We should add that in the above-mentioned US counter-offensives the strategy of two-pronged search-and-destroy attacks and pacification tactics were always used, but their significance and intensity differed. And this difference precisely reflected the *strategic subjectivism and error of the US Military Command*.

In the first counter-offensive, the "search-and-destroy" strategy was the main one, "pacification" was secondary. Saigon troops were in charge of pacification as the guardians of the house. In the second counter-offensive, due to the mechanical military concept of the US of measuring victory by "counting the bodies of *Vietcong*

and North Vietnamese soldiers," the US was confident that it had found and destroyed a major part of the Liberation main forces and the Zonal Command Headquarters, as well as, cut off their footholds in the plains. Therefore, it considered pacification offensive as important as the search-and-destroy onslaughts. Under this plan, the US and the Saigon Administration intended "to pacify" 3,500 hamlets in all the region, primarily in areas of "national priority." The primordial aim of pacification was to destroy the revolutionary bases in the countryside and to separate the armed forces from the support and protection of the people. This measure, in the view of Robert Komer, Johnson's envoy for pacification, was like a "dagger" thrust in the heart of *Vietcong*". To reach these objectives, the US and the Saigon Administration urgently trained "pacification workers" and sent them to rural areas, and they also mobilized almost all the Saigon troops to launch thousands of mopping up operations and repeated attacks against rural areas, in coordination with the security guards, the militia, and the police. The US airforce and artillery pounded the liberated zone (controlled by the National Liberation Front) and the areas of contention, using a huge quantity of ammunition and toxic chemicals to kill common people and to destroy their houses and crops. Violent measures were also used to force the peasants to leave their homes and lands and to settle in "new life hamlets," which were nothing but a modified form of the "strategic hamlets," in Ngô Đình Diệm time. In addition to the military actions, from 1967 the US and the Saigon Administration also developed economic, political, and cultural programs... to push forward the pacification activities.

These measures created no small difficulties in the struggle of the South Vietnam army and people against pacification. In this complicated and hard struggle, a number of farmers, even part of the cadres and Party members, who could not put up with privations and sacrifices, left for enemy-controlled areas or surrendered. But in general, the army and the people of rural areas abided by the guiding principles of sticking to the land, to the people, to the enemy to fight

them. They intensified the “three-pronged close combat” method to cope with the mopping up operations and the pacification campaigns by the US and Saigon troops; they punished the undercover spies, ruffians, and the teams of “rural builders”. They harassed and neutralized the base-level puppet administrations, maintained and expanded the NFL-controlled areas, *building them into a closed system of fighting villages and communes, into “political pockets,” guerilla zones, and “anti-US snipers” rings*. In this way, they surrounded the US military bases, the outskirts of the city and put pressure on key communication lines. As a result, during the 1966-1967 dry season, the South Vietnam army and people controlled 390 more communes, and hamlets, raising the number of liberated communes to 700, and 6,750 hamlets. On the other hand, the Saigon Administration controlled (to various degrees) only 5,400 hamlets out of the total 16,293 hamlets in all South Vietnam. According to an evaluation of the Saigon Administration, in 1967 the pacification program could achieve only 13% of its set target. Yet, in the view of Michael McLearn, this figure was greatly exaggerated, because in the regions claiming to have been completely controlled by the Saigon Administration, security was not guaranteed. The reason was that it was impossible to differentiate between a *Vietcong* and other Vietnamese moving in the villages, or to ensure that soya bean seeds or sewing machines reached the right people.<sup>1</sup>

In the regions under the US and Saigon control or in the areas of contention bombs and shells and the American way of life *shattered the normal, calm life and the lifestyle* of Vietnamese families, causing them suffering and death. Then, whatever effort the US exerted, whatever manoeuvre or measure it took, it could not create a “peaceful” atmosphere and a “quietude” of mind among the people. Many US authors then and later admitted this reality of the US pacification efforts.

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1. Quoted from Michael McLearn. *The War in the Countryside*. (In Vietnamese translation). Military History Journal. Sept.1988.

In these conditions, the *political struggle movement* in the areas under the control of the Saigon Administration developed with every passing day. In 1967, it had not yet reached its climax but it had gained in depth and grasped the common aims of the nation: opposition to the US and the Thiệu-Kỳ group. In the 1966-1967 dry season, over one million people staged demonstrations in the Mekong River Delta against the US mopping up operations. Artillery poundings, toxic chemical sprayings, people herding, and troop press-gangings increased the guerilla war activities. In big cities, Saigon, Huế, and Đà Nẵng, in the first months and in July, August, and September 1967, students, Buddhist priests and believers, government officials, tradesmen demanded *that the US send home the GI's*, that the national traditional culture be preserved, that the introduction of the US way of life be opposed, that Thiệu and Kỳ resign, that the war be ended and peace restored. In the course of these struggles, over 100 Buddhist priests declared that they would burn themselves in protest against the US and the Saigon Administration. The political activities of the people caused the socio-political situation in South Vietnam to become a shambles.

By bringing its fighting forces into South Vietnam, the US hoped to help the Saigon Administration and army consolidate and fulfil the political objectives of the “limited war” strategy. But contrary to US expectations, the latter became more and more dependent on the presence of US troops, and its social basis became narrower and narrower. The leaders of the South Vietnam Government could not avoid being labelled the stooges of the French first, then of the US. They were therefore considered extraneous to the nation, their existence and rule were associated with the US support.

In reality, the US “limited war” did not stop at using the two prongs “search-and-destroy” and “pacification.” To be successful, the US had at any cost to block the support from the North. That was why after failure in the South, the US fiercely escalated the air war against the North. This course of action, apparently logical, was full of strategic contradictions, because when the US spent material and human

resources in attacking the North to break its will to support the South, it also trapped itself in a hopeless game: escalation was difficult, yet escalation to what degree the US could not foresee. The US military potentialities were not boundless and North Vietnam was a sovereign country. The US had to reckon on the reaction of the USSR, China, and the socialist bloc at that time. On the other hand, without escalating the war, the US would have had to admit the failure of the "limited war" strategy. Therefore, *in the final analysis, the US escalation of the war was a test of the US will of aggression or the last card the US had for use in the Vietnam game.*

For that reason at the start of 1967, the US air force savagely attacked six categories of targets in the North: power stations, industrial bases, communication lines, fuel storehouses, air fields and air defense batteries and other military bases. In February 1967, Johnson approved the proposal by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to extend the area of air attack to surround Hanoi and Hải Phòng, to lay mines on river ways and estuaries, to strictly control the coastal waters from the 17th parallel to the 20th parallel. B.52 bombers and artillery from the southern bank of the Bến Hải River heavily pounded Hồ Xá and Vĩnh Linh. According to a number of US authors, up to the end of 1967, the US had dropped on North Vietnam 1,630,000 tons of bombs, several times *more than* the quantity of ammunitions used in Europe during World War II, *twice more than* the quantity of bombs dropped in Korea, and *three times more than* that dropped on the Pacific battlefield during World War II. On an average, each square mile of North and South Vietnam received 12 tons and each Vietnamese, including women and children whose weight was generally not that much<sup>1</sup> received about 100 pounds or 45 kilograms of explosives.

The US bombing raids caused heavy losses in North Vietnam. The CIA estimated that the "rumbling thunder" campaign killed 13,000 North Vietnamese in 1965, 24,000 in 1966, and about 29,000 in 1967, mostly civilians (80%). The statistics of the General Staff Operations Department of the People Army of Vietnam revealed that

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1. Don Oberdoipher. *Tết*. Op. cit., p. 55.

in four years (1964-1968), 14,000 soldiers and 60,000 civilians of North Vietnam were killed by US bombing raids.<sup>1</sup> Besides human losses, North Vietnam suffered great material losses, almost all communication lines, bridges, railway stations, storehouses, hospitals, economic bases, and public utilities were hit by US bombing; 25 out of 30 towns of North Vietnam were destroyed.

In spite of the fact that US planes and warships were mobilized to attack North Vietnam with the utmost violence, the people remained determined and unswerving in fighting back the US Air Force and Navy, while maintaining production and support of the front. The air defense by the regular army, local troops, and guerillas strongly riposted the US war escalations, shooting down or damaging 1,067 US aircraft in 1967. The artillery of the coastal forces also hit or set fire to 69 warships. *In the field of communication and transport*, the US took various measures to prevent or cut off, thereby reducing the railway and maritime transport. But, in compensation, road and river transport continuously increased the volume of freight and improved conveying methods; the volume of freight transported in 1967 was 6 times greater than that of 1965, meeting the increasing requirement of supplies and assistance to the battlefield.

In 1966 and 1967, 149,037 soldiers were sent by North Vietnam to South Vietnam, 360,000 were enrolled in the army and the vanguard youth,<sup>2</sup> meeting the increasing need in manpower of the war in the two zones.

So, up to 1967, the US air and naval war of destruction against the North as well as the land war in South Vietnam posed difficult problems for the US and it faced with an impasse that forced it to *suffer high costs in terms of finance and human lives.*

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1. Statistics of the anti-US resistance war (1954-1975). Archives of the Institute of Vietnamese Military History.

2. Institute of Vietnamese Military History. *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước*. Vol. 1. Sự Thật Publishing House. Hanoi, 1990; p. 253.

*Economically speaking*, during the years of the special war, the US only spent a small amount at most about US\$ 1,500 million while the annual US defence budget was US\$ 60 or 70 billion on training, equipment, and maintaining the Saigon army and the US advisers in South Vietnam. But during the limited war, the US war expenditures in Vietnam increased from US\$ 4.7 billion (fiscal year 1965-1966) to US\$ 24 billion (fiscal year 1966-1967) and over US\$ 30 billion (fiscal year 1967-1968). The war expenditures were rocketing but the US Administration could not make up the budget by increasing taxes. The reason was that it wanted to cover up and to deceive the public and the Congress about US involvement that was bogging down deeper and deeper in Vietnam. The above-mentioned figures clearly revealed how much the US war in Vietnam had engulfed the US federal budget. Reliable statistics from the US showed that before 1964, the federal budget had an average annual surplus of US\$ 3.6 billion, in 1966 it recorded a deficit of US\$ 6.2 billion, and US\$ 10.7 billion in 1967. In 1967, the budget of the US Government had a deficit of US\$ 25.3 billion<sup>1</sup>. In consequence of the budget deficit, inflation increased rapidly and became the most serious burden of the US during that time<sup>2</sup> causing the depression of the US economy in 1968. During that year, goods prices increased by 4%, production stagnated, people's living became difficult; 3.8 million US workers were jobless. "The war against poverty and hunger," Johnson had promised US voters, "became a war causing poverty and hunger." And the objectives of "the great society" program that Johnson promised during the electoral campaign for entering the White House in 1964 had been broken on the South Vietnam battlefield.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Quoted from Robert W. Stevens. *Utopic Hopes and Cruel Realities. Economic Consequences of the Vietnam War*. Vietnamese translation by the Social Sciences Information Institute.

2. Văn Tập. *Chiến tranh Việt Nam và kinh tế Mỹ*. Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1973.

3. Martin Luther King's words on February 25, 1967. Quotation from Joseph Amter: *Vietnam Verdict* (Vietnamese translation). People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1982: p. 196.

*In the social field*, the economic depression and the social problems (racial discrimination, unemployment, poverty and hunger, diseases, illiteracy among part of the US labouring people) were neglected because the federal government was concentrating its mind and finance on Vietnam and finally the increasing number of US casualties in Vietnam darkened the atmosphere of US society. Part of the US public changed their position from supporting to opposing the Johnson Administration's policy on Vietnam. Meanwhile, the US mass media, the channel that helped the US public, clearly realized that it was a bloody war on the other side of the ocean and changed its attitude towards the war. For instance, the *New York Times* that had been strongly and convincingly supporting the US efforts in Vietnam, changed its position. The turnabout of this prestigious newspaper caused a loss of confidence among the people and the political circles in the US. The opposition to the war on the street, in campuses, in the press, on television, etc. was no longer an expression of public opinion only but it was now also strong enough to change the position of many Congressmen representing the constituencies in different states of the US. The latter had realized that the Vietnam War had knocked at the door of each American family. Therefore, more and more Congressmen were opposed to the war policy and the way the war was waged by the US executive body. They demanded a reduction of US commitment and objectives in Vietnam and the search for *an early solution to get the US out of the war*. This change of position of the US Congress became an increasing political pressure on the US Administration and on President Johnson personally.

In March 1967 when the 1966-1967 dry season strategic offensive in South Vietnam was on the brink of complete failure, Westmoreland, the Commanding General in South Vietnam, who was strongly supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed to Washington to increase fighting forces in South Vietnam. In April 1967, Westmoreland was called back to Washington to expound on his request. In his meeting with President Johnson at the White



House, Westmoreland proposed two stages of reinforcement to South Vietnam. The *first step* was an increase of 100,000 troops, which, in his view, was the minimum force to cope with the increased strength of North Vietnam in the demilitarized zone and to maintain tactical initiative on the battlefield. The *second step* involved 201,250 troops to bring the US combat troops in South Vietnam to 671,616 men by mid-1968 in order to annihilate or to paralyse the Liberation main forces and to remove the “sanctuaries” long established in South Vietnam by the *Vietcong*. In the meantime, the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested to expand the land war to Laos, Cambodia, and the Southern part of North Vietnam, to escalate the air war against North Vietnam, including the destruction of river dams and the strict blockade of Hải Phòng Port; taxes would be increased and the reserves called up to remedy the shortage of troops in US military bases the world over, due to the concentration of forces in South Vietnam. However, acceptance of these requests would make President Johnson lose all hope of winning the coming election. That is why as soon as these proposals were known, *conflicting views broke out between the military and the civilians* within the Johnson Administration, and tension was such that the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that *they would resign if their proposals were rejected*.

Under these conditions, the US President had to choose the so-called policy of “*step-by-step escalation*” or “*gradual pressure*.” That was Johnson’s middle-level way: “escalation” or “pressure” was aimed at satisfying the *hawks*, while the term “step by step” or “gradual” was to soothe the *doves*!

And in autumn 1967, Johnson had to take middle-level actions to satisfy both the *hawks* and the *doves* by sending 55,000 more troops to South Vietnam (instead of 200,000 as proposed by Westmoreland), to accept the request of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to bomb 57 additional objects in North Vietnam). However the calling up of reserves proposed by the US military circles was considered by Johnson *a political fence he was not willing to climb over*.

The aforementioned developments showed that the US political circles were at a crossroad in looking for a new strategy for the South Vietnam battlefield.

So after two years of limited war, although many manoeuvres and measures military, political, economic, and diplomatic, had been applied, although the US had suffered great financial and human losses, it was always in *a passive strategical and tactical position*. The contradictions brought about by the introduction of US forces into South Vietnam could not be overcome. They became more acute instead. The US forces were thinned out on various fronts and pinned down in the Vietnamese people’s war. *The strategic plan* to win a decisive military victory *by mid or the end of 1967* mapped out by the US Military Command and accepted by Washington at the beginning of the limited war, was entirely shattered. At the same time, the massive and continuous bombing of North Vietnam and the Trường Sơn strategic supply line proved that the effect of the air war was as futile as the search-and-destroy and pacification program. They could not solve the US dilemma in its “limited war” strategy. The US could not hide its face, it was to uncover itself and to go deeper in the Vietnam War which took place at the other end of the earth. The US failure caused tremendous political, military, economic, and social difficulties not only in South Vietnam but also in the US.

The situation became increasingly volatile when the US was in a year of presidential elections. This was a very sensitive period in the US political and social life. For that reason, even though Johnson was influenced by the warlike military circles in increasing hundreds of thousands of troops into South Vietnam, in further intensifying the war of destruction against North Vietnam, he had to be cautious in calculating the US course of action in Vietnam so that a sudden upturn of the battlefield might be avoided, domestic public opinion might be soothed and the inner circles might be stabilized, thereby allowing him to enter the year of election campaign smoothly and successfully.

As for Vietnam, after two years of struggle against the limited war, the South Vietnam army and people firmly maintained and developed their offensive, breaking down the US war efforts, seriously damaging its strategic plans, taking the initiative on the battlefield, and enlarging the liberated areas in the mountainous, rural and plain regions, around the cities, bases, and communication lines under the US and Saigon troops' control.

The military and political forces of the South Vietnam revolution in 1967 developed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In South Vietnam, the Liberation main forces and the local troops increased from 115,500 in 1964 to 176,600 in 1966 and 277,000 in 1967. Moreover, the militia and the guerilla forces in all parts of South Vietnam also developed. The revolutionary forces were rationally disposed on the strategic fronts and adopted a flexible way of fighting. They decimated the enemy effectives, particularly assaulted a number of cities, bases, airfields, storehouses, and strategic communication lines of the US and its allies in South Vietnam. At that time, political forces and various forms of political struggle in areas controlled by the Saigon Administration, particularly the towns, were also strengthened and widespread.

*With regard to North Vietnam*, although the US air and naval war of destruction was expanded in both scale and intensity, causing great material and human losses, North Vietnam remained a stable and solid rear area. This stability and solidity constituted a very important factor for North Vietnam to continue production while fighting to defeat the escalations of the US air force and navy and fully meeting the increasing needs of the battle fronts.

The Vietnamese people's anti-US resistance war won more and more sympathy, support, and assistance from world public opinion and from many governments.

All these objective factors were closely scrutinized and assessed by the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Vietnam and the Central Military Commission to come to the following conclusion that: *A new opportunity has appeared, Vietnam can and should*

*find ways to put it to full avail and to change the situation of the war. The problem is that: the US has been bogged down and embarrassed in its strategic scheme because its military could not secure victory on the Vietnamese battlefield, but it is not yet prepared to deescalate the war. It still wants to use military strength to force the opposing party to negotiate on US conditions. In the meantime, although Vietnam has won success and defeated the US strategic aims through two counter-offensives, it is not yet strong enough to drive 50,000 US and its allied troops out of South Vietnam.*

To grasp a favourable opportunity and to create a decisive turning point of the war while the balance of force on the battlefield was still tipped on the side of the US and its South Vietnam ally, a series of questions regarding the *art of conducting the war* strategically had to be solved to secure a rapid, strong, and timely effect on the US will of aggression, and to oblige it to accept military defeat and to deescalate the war.

So, that was the moment for the Vietnam army and people to carry out their strategic scheme mapped out *as early as January 1967*: "It is necessary to be active, prompt, resolute and flexible in exerting the utmost efforts to implement the policy of winning a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time, at the same time to create conditions and a solid basis for fighting the enemy successfully in case of a protracted war."<sup>1</sup>

## II. STRATEGIC SCHEME OF VIETNAM

Early in 1967, the Central Military Commission and the People's Army High Command observed: "Our victories in winter

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1. Directives of the Central Military Commission Standing Committee to the Central Office, the Zonal Military Commission, the Zone 5 Party Committee, the Party Committee of Trĩ Thiên (January 21, 1967), quoted from the *Message Guiding the Strategic General Offensive of 1968*. Archives of the Institute of Vietnamese Military History.

and spring 1966-1967 have created a new situation in our favour and to the enemy's disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> The strategic plan for winter and spring 1967-1968 was immediately elaborated to make full use of the new favorable situation and to continue developing the anti-US resistance war."

In May 1967 shortly after the end of the US second counter-offensive, the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Vietnam met *under the chairmanship of President Hồ Chí Minh* to evaluate the situation, and to examine the draft of the strategic plan for winter-spring 1967-1968. Then in June 1967, a meeting of the Politburo was convened for the careful consideration of this strategic plan. The meeting evaluated that the victories in North and South Vietnam were great and comprehensive. They had fundamentally defeated the US strategy of limited war and driven the US into embarrassment and into strategic and tactical passivity.

The meeting also judged that Vietnam's strength and standing became better, *allowing the Vietnamese army and people to make utmost efforts and to win a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time, on the basis of the guiding principle of a protracted war.*<sup>2</sup> But how long would be the "relatively short time"? In spite of careful and detailed discussion on the balance of force, the Party Politburo could not envisage *that a decisive victory might be won in 1968* by means of large-scale battles. For this purpose, the Liberation Forces must destroy part of the US troops, deprive them of their offensive strength and at the same time, annihilate and disintegrate a major part of the Saigon troops so that they were no longer an offensive and defensive force on which the US relied to continue the war.

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1. Quoted from General Văn Tiến Dũng. *Bước ngoặt lớn của cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ*. Sự Thật Publishing House, Hanoi, 1989; p. 192.

2. Quoted from *Lịch sử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*. Vol. 2. National Political Publishing House. Hanoi, 1955; pp. 384, 385.

Regarding the mode of struggle, the Politburo indicated that while fighting the enemy in all fields, military, political and diplomatic, we must prepare for large-scale battles, effective enough to create conditions for stepping up the political and diplomatic struggle.

Thus, up to June 1967, the guiding principle of the strategy for the revolution in South Vietnam was to make full use of the favorable opportunity, but in fact, it consisted of developing strongly the popular fighting movements and continuing to intensify guerilla warfare all over South Vietnam, in the plains, mountains, and urban areas. At the same time, the main force units were concentrated to launch battles and destroy the enemy's main force units, the tactical units at first (company, battalion), and then gradually try to destroy units of campaign and strategic level (brigade, division of US forces, regiment, division of Saigon troops). The strategic intention of the Party was to carry out battles by main force units in mountainous regions. This was the traditional way of fighting of the Vietnamese main forces during the resistance war against the French colonialists (1945-1954).

However, after two years of direct struggle against the US forces and through the reality on the battlefield, Vietnam had realized that *the complete destruction of a US military unit of company/battalion level so as to control and remain in an area was very difficult.*

This was the difference from the war against the French (1945-1954). The General Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam sent officers to guide the Liberation main forces units in staging experimental battles to destroy whole US units, but with no satisfactory results. That is why the People's Army of Vietnam General Staff, when elaborating strategic combat plans for 1968, clearly saw that the old fighting mode could not bring about a drastic change on the battlefield. Or in other words, the good tactics could not be put to full use and the war could not be brought to a decisive turning point.

In July and August 1967, the drafting of the operational plan for 1968 became pressing. It should be parenthetically added that for the elaboration of the secret military plans, the Operation Department of the General Staff set up a "planning team" under the direction of the Department Chief. The planning team was authorized to work directly with the key members of the Central Military Commission and the Party Politburo so that it might receive their views and directives and present its recommendations on military matters, thereby helping the General Staff finalize the plans before submitting them to the supreme echelon for approval. In the summer of 1967, or at the end of July 1967, when preparing materials for drafting military plans for 1968, General Văn Tiến Dũng, Chief of the General Staff, gave instructions for the "planning team" to think over the change of fighting methods to be more effective. And when the "planning team" was still pondering over the question, Party First Secretary Lê Duẩn, after repeated discussions with General Văn Tiến Dũng and other key members of the Politburo and the Central Military Commission, pointed out a new solution: *It is necessary to suddenly shift to the orientation of the strategic offensive of the South Vietnam revolution to all the cities and towns of South Vietnam.* In fact, so far no one had thought of this bold solution, even the planning team had not thought of it. As a matter of fact, by mid-1967, although a number of revolutionary bases, commando and crack troop units had been deployed in cities and suburbs, no one could imagine a general offensive all over South Vietnam against the cities and towns, particularly when the US war efforts were reaching a climax.

Upon this new idea of the First Secretary, the "planning team" urgently mapped out the military plan for 1968. Throughout the progress, the People's Army of Vietnam General Staff continuously exchanged views with the military commands of various war zones in South Vietnam on the troops' capability of action in case of inside-city fighting, the uprising possibility of the people, and the possible war opposition by the Saigon troops...

The headquarters decided "*to direct the brunt of the revolutionary war onto the cities, towns, market places, and the leading departments of the enemy*"<sup>1</sup> all over South Vietnam. *Stringent Secrecy* was kept over the strategic intentions and the fighting plans. The Central Military Commission directly gave instructions and supervised the preparations in both North and South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

For five days from 20 to 24 October 1967, the Politburo held a meeting to thoroughly discuss the objectives and strategic plans of 1968. This was a very important meeting to finalize the bold plan for the historic *Tết Mậu Thân* event. The Politburo assessed that the US was suffering big defeats because a further increase of troops would not solve any problem, the impasse would become more serious, the US isolation would be deeper and its contradictions more acute. Nevertheless, the US was still obstinate though its inner ranks were torn by conflicting views. The US was trying to prevent the situation from worsening and to avoid still deeper isolation. The Politburo also judged *that our victory was that of a small country successfully fighting a giant imperialist power.* Grasping the good opportunity, the Politburo decided to apply a new, highly effective fighting method aimed at *bringing about a strategic change of the war situation* in South Vietnam and strengthening our people's anti-US resistance war for national salvation. This was a daring decision of Vietnam indeed because if we had simply considered the balance of military force at that time (October 1967), we would not have taken this audacious decision. Moreover, at its meeting, the

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1. General Văn Tiến Dũng. Op. cit., p. 194.

2. More precisely, we can see that, in August 1967, when comrade Phạm Hùng was sent to South Vietnam to replace comrade Nguyễn Chí Thanh who had just died (July 1967), the intention of *attacking the cities* had taken shape. So the plan for winter-spring 1967-1968 was revised. Thereafter, the commanders of various fronts were called to Hanoi to report on the situation and to discuss *new fighting methods*: Lê Đức Anh (September 1967), Trần Văn Trà (November 1967), Cao Văn Khánh, Nguyễn Năng, Lê Chương and so on.

Politburo assessed that after assaulting a city or town, we would not be able to hold it and that our capacity of launching annihilating combats was still weak. It was a question of opportunity, audacity, and creativeness in fighting. The August 1945 Revolution was another example of grasping opportunity. Later, in the spring 1975 victory was still another one. On the basis of the evaluation of the balance of force between the belligerent parties and the US embarrassment, as expounded above, the Politburo was clearly of the view that *the strategic opportunity had presented itself*. To seize it, we had to urgently increase our strength and our offensive force. We would like to mention here our *Party's perception of strength and the balance of force between the two sides in South Vietnam*. In his article published in the *People's Army Newspaper* (March 1967), First Secretary of the Party Central Committee Lê Duẩn pointed out: "The people's war is an *all-out offensive* of the South Vietnam revolution against the ruling foundations of the US and its agents and not simply a military offensive. Its strength is not merely military strength (particularly during the first period, essentially it is not a military strength); it is a combined force of political, moral and military factors, of the posture and strength of the people and the country (...). When comparing the two sides, their strength and weakness should be considered in specific conditions, chiefly the actual effectiveness of strength in action and in the confrontation. A strength in action should be considered in certain material conditions, human dynamism (resolution, capacity, resourcefulness, creativeness), which are very decisive factors."<sup>1</sup> In his letter to the Party Committee of Saigon-Gia Định in July 1967, Lê Duẩn emphasized "Considering the balance of force of the two sides on the battlefield, we should consider the material and moral factors of the military, political, economic, and cultural forces that one side mobilizes

1. Lê Duẩn. *Về chiến tranh nhân dân Việt Nam*. National Political Publishing House. Hanoi, 1993: pp. 295, 297.

to oppose the other. It is not something abstract but it is concrete; it is not an invariable proportion but a changing comparison as a result of dialectic development, both quantitative and qualitative of the aforesaid factors and forces."<sup>1</sup>

Evaluating the strength and the relation of force from this standpoint, drawing experience from the August 1945 General Insurrection, from the Anti-French Resistance War,<sup>2</sup> and from the general uprising in 1960, the Communist Party of Vietnam advocated the general offensive and uprising. Moreover, at the October 1967 meeting, the Politburo wanted to create a great surprise from a strategic point of view. Secrecy and surprise also constituted a great material force in the war. So, to create a strategic surprise, the Politburo decided to begin the general offensive and uprising at *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968.<sup>3</sup>

Envisaging the success, it pointed out that "*we should try to win the greatest success possible, yet the result might be moderate.*"

1. Lê Duẩn. *Thư vào Nam*. Sự Thật Publishing House, Hanoi; p. 177.

2. For example, around the end of 1951, the French Command attacked Hoà Bình. President Hồ Chí Minh and the Party Central Committee decided to fight the enemy frontally. At the same time, two divisions were dispatched to open a new front, deep inside the enemy-controlled areas, intensifying the war in the enemy's rear. History has proved that this decision resulted in the great victory of our forces in the Hoà Bình Campaign, which made the French lose all hope of defeating Hồ Chí Minh, as Mac Lear remarked in his book *Vietnam - the 10,000-day War*.

3. Also at this important meeting, the Politburo discovered the great confusion of the US, which was like an obsession about a Điện Biên Phủ that might occur to the US in South Vietnam. However, this obsession was expressed by the US firm remarks which sounded now like self consolations: "In the near future, Vietnam is not yet strong enough to wage a Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, it will keep on the line of protracted war." We are inclined to think that the US confusion and self-consolation pushed the perspicacious Vietnamese organ of strategic direction to deploy a number of main force divisions around the Khe Sanh Base. This action immediately attracted the US attention, a major part of the US forces were concentrated in the mountainous region west of Quảng Trị like a whale stranded on the beach, when *Tết Mậu Thân* broke out and a series of towns and cities all over South Vietnam were assaulted violently.

After the October 1967 meeting of the Politburo, preparations for the *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968 general offensive and uprising were made in all war zones.

In January 1968, the Plenum of the Party Central Committee was convened in Hanoi to approve the December 1967 resolution of the Politburo regarding the “*shifting of the revolutionary war to a new period, the period of winning decisive victory.*”

The Politburo assessed “We are facing good prospects and a great strategic opportunity; the US imperialists are in a strategic dilemma.<sup>1</sup> Compared with the US political and military objectives in South Vietnam, the war effort of the US and its heavy losses in Vietnam have reached the climax. Therefore, the situation of the country as a whole in 1968 is that *the enemy is more and more in a defensive and passive position.*<sup>2</sup> As for us, we have won success both strategically and tactically. Our strength and position are better than ever.<sup>3</sup> Although we still have a number of weaknesses, concerning recruitment of troops, our capability of destroying big US units, the building of our political forces, and the direction of popular movements in urban areas. At the same time, we have difficulties in logistics, inadequate communications and transport, and our propaganda among enemy ranks leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, *the essential feature of the situation is that we are in a winning posture; we are holding initiative and conditions are in our favour. The enemy is in a losing, passive, and difficult position.*”

After careful analysis of the situation on our side and on the enemy's, of the situation in Vietnam and in the world, the Party Politburo was determined to shift the revolutionary war in South Vietnam to a new front, that *of an offensive and uprising and*

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1, 2 and 3. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

*securing a decisive victory.*<sup>1</sup> Putting in practice this strategic determination, “the great and urgent task of our people is to mobilize the most strenuous efforts of the whole Party, the whole army, and the whole people in both North and South Vietnam so as to bring our revolutionary war to the highest development, using the method of general offensive and general uprising to win a decisive victory<sup>2</sup>. *The strategic aim of the general offensive and uprising is to annihilate and to break up a greater part of the Saigon troops, to overthrow the Saigon Administration at all levels, to ensure that the people have all the power and to destroy a major part of the US effective strength and war means, so that the US can no longer fulfil its political and military tasks in Vietnam.*”

“On this basis, the US will of aggression shall be broken and it is obliged to accept defeat in South Vietnam, to end all its war acts against North Vietnam. As for us, we can safeguard socialist North Vietnam and achieve the immediate objectives of the revolution in South Vietnam, namely independence, democracy, peace, neutrality and eventually national unification.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968). According to General Văn Tiến Dũng, as early as 1966, the Party Central Committee precised that winning a decisive victory was to achieve a fundamental success in a concrete situation; it was not a complete victory. In his speech at the seminar on the 30th Anniversary of *Tết Mậu Thân* organized by the Institute of Vietnamese Military History, in cooperation with the Party Committee and People's Committee of Hồ Chí Minh City, Văn Tiến Dũng presented a paper titled *Thành công nổi bật về chỉ đạo chiến lược, sáng tạo tuyệt vời của tư duy quân sự Việt Nam*. It should be added that after *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968, a meeting of the Politburo and the enlarged Central Military Commission with the participation of the representatives of the Central Office of South Vietnam, chaired by Lê Duẩn (from October 25 to November 3, 1968): further differentiated the concepts “*decisive victory*” and “*complete victory.*”

2 and 3. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

The Politburo was of the view that: "We launch a general offensive and uprising not in the conditions of the enemy having been exhausted, but while it still has over one million troops and huge war potential, yet its forces have suffered strategic and tactical failures. The number of troops is big but their morale is the lowest. Politically, the enemy is faced with numerous contradictions and has fallen into a general and serious crisis. It can no longer rule over the South Vietnamese people and the latter are no longer resigned to living under its rule. For our part, we are in a victorious position, we are holding initiatives in all the battlefields; our armed and political forces have been strengthened in all aspects and have become powerful; the greater part of the population have been tempered through many years of tenacious and staunch struggle, demonstrating very high revolutionary determination.<sup>1</sup> Our action is not only to carry out a general offensive but also a general uprising to destroy and disintegrate the enemy forces, to overthrow the ruling machinery of the puppet administration, to upset and fundamentally paralyse the US and Saigon war machinery, to turn the enemy rear and strategic reserves into ours, to rapidly change the balance of force in our favour and to secure a decisive victory."<sup>2</sup>

"The coming general offensive and general uprising will be a complicated process of strategic offensive, whether this process is long or short depends on our own efforts and on the enemy's reaction."<sup>3</sup>

However, when the enemy has fallen into a passive and defensive position and when it is in a strategic dilemma, "our subjective efforts and our art of conducting the war will have a direct decisive effect"<sup>4</sup> on shortening the duration of the general offensive-general uprising, in which the choice of the direction of strategic offensive is very important. The Politburo decided: "To use our military

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1, 2, 3 and 4. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

forces to stretch the enemy forces to all the battlefields... to attack them at the important war fronts, to give mighty punches to knock down the main force of the enemy, at the same time to be capable of launching counter-offensives to annihilate the enemy and to break its counter-offensives."<sup>1</sup>

"This is the main strike of the general offensive and the orientation for our main forces' attacks. Another main strike is aimed at the major cities, where the assaulting forces' military actions are combined with the political actions of the populations of the towns, the surrounding rural areas, who will rise up and smash the leading bodies of the US and Saigon troops, to destroy their rear bases, logistic support, information centers, strategic communications and transport means which are factors closely related to the US regular and modern army. At the same time, the enemy troops will be called upon to stand up and oppose the war and to join the people's insurrection. *This is the most violent and most dangerous strike* against the enemy nerve center. This is also the best way to combine the three prongs of offensive on all the three strategic regions to destroy as many enemy troops as possible, to break down their political prop and to smash their will of aggression."

Carrying out the general offensive-general uprising, the Politburo foresaw that there might be three possibilities:

1. We may win great success on the major battlefields; the offensives and uprisings may finally succeed in big cities. The enemy is defeated to the extent that it can no longer recover its strength. Its will of aggression is shattered and it is resigned to defeat. It is obliged to negotiate an end to the war in accordance with our aims and conditions.
2. We are successful in many places, but the enemy concentrates its forces and receives external reinforcements. It

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1. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

seizes back and keeps the important positions, stabilizes the major cities, chiefly Saigon-Gia Định, and relies on its large bases to continue fighting us.

3. The US mobilizes and increases forces; expands the limited war to North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, hoping for a change of the war situation and a retrieval of its position from defeat.”

The Politburo was of the view that we should make the utmost efforts to mobilize all our energy and intelligence to achieve success according to the first possibility. At the same time, we should be ready to cope with the second possibility; the third possibility is small but we must be vigilant and take precautions to cope with it.

The Politburo pointed out concrete tasks for the army and people of both North and South Vietnam in every aspect of the struggle:

*“In the military field, we must closely combine the general offensive and general uprising, coordinate various battlefields; attract the enemy mobile forces to outer circles and destroy them; carry out strong assaults against the cities, chiefly the big ones, while starting offensives and uprisings in all battlefields and launching simultaneous offensives against the sensitive positions and logistic bases of the enemy, and paralyse all possible resistance of the US and Saigon Administration.*

*In the political field, we must mobilize the masses to stand up (in combination with the general offensive) until victory to overthrow the puppet administration and the reactionary organizations, to set up the revolutionary government and to develop rapidly the political and armed forces of the people.”* The central slogan of the uprising is “independence, freedom, peace, food and clothes, land, an end to the aggression war, repatriation of US troops sovereignty for the Vietnamese. A second popular front should be founded beside the North Vietnam Liberation National Front with a broader

platform and an independent attitude vis-à-vis the South Vietnam Liberation National Front.”<sup>1</sup>

*“Regarding the work among enemy troops (US and Saigon troops), we should strive to disintegrate the Saigon troops and launch a war-opposition movement among them, to put in practice the slogan “let workers, farmers, and soldiers unite.” At the same time, to raise also a war-opposition movement among the US and satellite troops.*

*In the diplomatic field, we should apply an appropriate method and form of action against the enemy while it is in a passive and defensive position; we should also open a way for it to engage negotiations in our best interests”<sup>2</sup>*

*The North “should strengthen the work of consolidating the big rear to support South Vietnam,” “endeavour to help the Lao people win new victories, and strongly assist the Cambodian people in opposing all aggression schemes of the US imperialists and their agents.”<sup>3</sup>*

The Politburo entrusted the task of urgently finalizing the plan of the general offensive and general uprising to the Central Military Commission and the High Command of the People’s Army of Vietnam.

On the basis of the resolution of the Politburo that was approved by the 14th Plenum of the Central Committee; the Central Military Commission and the People’s Army of Vietnam High Command completed the detailed plan of the general offensive-general uprising: Along with the offensive of the main forces against the principal battlefield, which was *Highway No 9 – Khe Sanh*, aimed at attracting and pinning down the enemy strategic forces, another *strategic offensive would be launched against the towns and cities all over South Vietnam*, in coordination with the uprising of the population of urban and rural areas, which would begin the

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1, 2 and 3. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee. Op. cit.



general offensive-general uprising. The principal battlefields would be Saigon, Nam Bộ, Trị Thiên, Huế, and the priority points would be Saigon, Huế and big cities. *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968 was chosen for the timing of the general offensive-general uprising. Only on the 21st January 1968 was *the eve of Tết* determined as the time for opening fire to start the general offensive-general uprising.

The preparations for the general offensive-general uprising were hasty; the enemy's air and land attacks were fiercely intensified, the operations were kept in absolute secrecy and started in surprise, and the battlefields were instructed to do their utmost to put the existing materials and forces to the fullest and efficient use.

## Chapter II

# GENERAL OFFENSIVE AND UPRISING OF *TẾT MẬU THÂN* ON THE BATTLEFIELD

## I. PREPARATIONS AND STRATEGIC DIVERSION

The preparations for the general offensive and uprising of *Tết Mậu Thân* was a whole series of efforts to overcome difficulties and hardships of all those who were closely involved with the strategic planning including leading government bodies, leaders at various levels, and battlefield commanders *of the army and people* of both North and South Vietnam.

As early as May 1967, after the victory over the US second strategic counter-offensive in the 1966-1967 dry season, on the basis of the draft strategic operation plan approved by the Politburo of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission and the Defence Ministry directed the battlefields in stepping up the fighting in the 1967 rainy season, and, at the same time, urgently prepared for *large-scale operations* in the general offensive and uprising of 1968. Thus, as *early as mid-1967*, the army and people of the two zones had begun preparations for the general offensive and uprising of 1968.

In North Vietnam, in late July 1967, the Central Military Commission opened training courses for all high-ranking and middle-level cadres to understand the new situation and new tasks. In August 1967, the people's armed forces launched a large movement "to enhance their quality and to develop their fighting capability, and to be determined to defeat the US aggressors". The strategic reserve Divisions 308, 304, 320, 312 were urgently consolidated organizationally, in man power, composition, armaments and equipment. Combat training was diligently carried out for raising the level of the fighting coordination between different arms. The air defence, coastal defence, communication and transport forces, the army engineering corps, all were improved organizationally, strengthened in terms of both quantity and quality. They fortified their positions, so as to firmly defend the North, and to maintain supply lines to the front in the South.

Compared with 1965, at the end of 1967, the number of anti-aircraft tank regiments and battalions increased by 2.5-4.7 times, that of missile regiments by 5 and surveillance radar installations by 2. The air defense forces made up of militiamen and self-defence corps were increased and equipped with more machine guns and anti-aircraft guns. Transport forces of the Defence Ministry and the military zones were also strengthened to coordinate closely with the civilian communication. In September 1967, the Government Council held a *conference of people's air defence* to draw experience on the protection against US air raids, the clearing of the consequences of destructive bombings, and the maintenance of normal life and production under the threat of air attacks. From the experience drawn by various localities, the Conference pointed out measures to increase the effectiveness of the air defense and the assurance of normal life and production in the coming period, to take precautions against the US war escalation and the new air raid tactics of the US Air and Naval Forces. The Central Military Commission and the Defence Ministry scrupulously directed the

preparations for plans to fight back enemy troops landing by sea or air in the southern part of Military Zone 4. The plans were widely and carefully expounded to the army units and the population of this military zone.

To meet the requirements of the new situation, troop recruitment was stepped up in various localities of North Vietnam. In a short time, tens of thousands of young men and women were mobilized into the armed forces and teams of vanguard youths. In 1967, the number of troops leaving North Vietnam for the Southern front increased by 1.5 times as compared with 1966. From the second quarter of 1967 to the first quarter of 1968, 155,000 troops were introduced into South Vietnam.

On the strategic supply line of *Trường Sơn*, Army Corps 559 rapidly developed a network of roads, increased transport means and manpower, and improved transporting methods and freight preservation.

Although the enemy used every means to prevent the movement of convoys, by the end of 1967, the communication lines were prolonged further southwards to the war fronts. The transversal road network was 800 km, the longitudinal one 3,000 km, the round-about road was 500 km long. The system of military stations, storehouses and parking hidden under the tree foliage of *Trường Sơn* was greatly increased. As a result, during the last six months of 1967, the volume of supplies conveyed from North Vietnam increased six times compared with 1965 and the number of persons transported from the North to the South and vice-versa amounted to hundreds of thousands.

After the 1966-1967 dry season, the war fronts envisaged that the general offensive and uprising would occur in mid-1968 and began to prepare for it according to that timing. But in October 1967, the Politburo of the Party Central Committee decided to launch it at *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968. Within the remaining three months before the start of the offensive, all the battlefields and localities had to expeditiously complete the plans of attack, the mobilization and deployment of troops, the preparation of popular political forces

for work on the enemy, and the division of battlefields. They also organized the system of logistics and liaison from the bases to the outskirts of the city. They looked for places to hide the troops and armaments, and the staging areas for them to initiate the onslaught. The time available was too short and the work to be done was too great. To overcome this difficulty, the *preparations were carried out simultaneously and were well-coordinated by each unit and each battlefield.*

In *Eastern Nam Bộ*, in October 1967, the Central Office of South Vietnam decided to dissolve Military Zone I in the East, and the Saigon-Gia Định Military Zone IV, to set up the *key zone* that included Saigon-Gia Định and a number of bases in the surrounding provinces such as Long An, Hậu Nghĩa, Bình Dương, and Biên Hoà. The key zone was divided into *six sub-zones*. Five of them in the outer circle were established with a view to taking Saigon, Chợ Lớn and Gia Định as targets of attack and the surroundings as staging areas. From the point of view of the terrain, they were composed of *rural and suburban areas and a number of inner-city districts, sub-zone 6 included*, which was not a geographical division. It was only responsible for the military and political forces operating in the city. The five surrounding subzones included:

- *Sub-zone 1* in the north and north-west of Saigon, taking war zone Bồi Lồi of Bung Công region as a staging area to start the offensive.
- *Sub-zone 2* in the west and southwest, taking Vàm Cỏ Đông as a base to advance to the targets of attack in Bà Quẹo (west of Saigon) and in Phú Lâm.
- *Sub-zone 3* in the south, taking southeastern Bến Lức and the bank of the Nhà Bè River as staging areas to advance to the targets: Letter-Y Bridge and Khánh Hội district.
- *Sub-zone 4* in the east taking Giồng Ông Tố and Hiệp Bình as staging areas to advance to the target areas of Xa Lộ and Bình Lợi Bridges.

- *Sub-zone 5* in the northeast, taking north-western Tân Uyên as a staging area to advance to the targets of attack in west Thủ Đức, Xa Lộ and Bình Lợi Bridge.

The Central Office of South Vietnam designated a Party committee and a military command for each sub-zone. Each sub-zone Party Committee was composed of two sections, one for the direction of activities in the countryside and the other for the direction of activities in the urban areas relieving the sub-zone. All the sub-zone committees were put under the leadership of the Party Committee of the key zone with Nguyễn Văn Linh<sup>1</sup> as Secretary.

In *the military field*, the Central Office of South Vietnam decided two front-line commands. The first one was headed by Trần Văn Trà<sup>2</sup> who was in charge of the eastern and northern prongs and the units of the zonal main forces. The second one was headed by Võ Văn Kiệt<sup>3</sup> who was responsible for the southern, and south-western prongs and the inner city forces.

The armed forces fighting on the Saigon-Gia Định battlefield were divided into three blocks:

- *The city commando forces* including 100 persons (officers and men). They were organized into three groups, each group further divided into sections. The tasks of the commandos were to launch simultaneous attacks against and to occupy the Saigon Army General Staff, the Independence Palace, the Broadcasting Station, the Command of the Naval Forces, the US Embassy, the Capital Special Quarter, the Chí Hòa Jail, and the General Department of Police. According to plans, after seizing the targets, the commando

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1. Nguyễn Văn Linh: General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1986 to 1997.

2. Trần Văn Trà: Lieutenant General of the People's Army of Vietnam.

3. Võ Văn Kiệt: Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Government from 1991 to 1997.

were to remain there for *half an hour to two hours* to wait for the arrival of the rescue troops including the spearhead battalions, the youths and the students.<sup>1</sup>

- *The spearhead battalions and the commando forces* of sub-zones 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Each sub-zone had 2 – 4 spearhead battalions or commando battalions. These battalions were equipped with light arms and they started from their staging bases, moved quickly and made deep thrusts into the city to support the commandos, to oppose counter-offensives and to enlarge their controlled areas. Other spearhead commando battalions were entrusted with the task of attacking Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the Bình Lợi and Xa Lộ Bridges, and the war material storehouse at Gò Vấp....

- *The zonal main forces* were reinforced with one infantry regiment of the Tây Nguyên battlefield and a number of units of different arms from North Vietnam: three infantry divisions, one artillery division, one infantry regiment, many units of the engineering corps, commandos, communication, and anti-chemical warfare... These units were deployed in suburban regions in the North and North-West of Saigon with the task of intercepting the US and Saigon main force divisions to prevent them from rescuing the inner city.

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1. According to the plan, after seizure of the targets, the commando units would be reinforced as follows:

- The Saigon Army General Staff: two spearhead battalions and 5,000 students and youths.
- The Capital Special Quarter: one spearhead battalion and 1,000 students and youths.
- The Chí Hoà Jail: one spearhead battalion and 1,000 students and youths.
- The Police General Department: two spearhead battalions and 1,000 students and youths.
- The Independence Palace: one spearhead battalion and 200 students and youths.
- The Broadcasting Station: one spearhead battalion and 200 students and youths.
- The Naval Command: one battalion and 200 students and youths.

Besides, the armed forces, the inner city political bases were also urgently developed. By the end of 1967, there had been 19 political bases composed of 325 families. The greater part of these families were in the vicinity of the targets of attack by the commandos. Four hundred hiding places had been found for the soldiers and the armament in the cities and the surroundings areas. *Party organizations and revolutionary mass organizations* (trade unions, youth, women, peasants. ..) were set up in the inner and suburban districts of the city. Generally speaking, when compared with the requirements of the tasks, the political forces and the popular struggle movements were still weak. Guerilla and political forces were in-existent in many areas that were recaptured by the enemy, especially in Củ Chi, Hóc Môn, Gò Vấp.

To ensure supplies (food and weapons) to the armed forces, the General Office and the Zonal Command organized five logistic regiments. Besides these units, armament transportation was operating in the surroundings of Saigon. The population of the city suburbs was mobilized to man the teams of nurses, first-aid medics, and supplies. Tens of thousands of persons participated in the transport of materials from the resistance bases to the city suburbs.

*In the provinces of the Mekong River Delta, Military Zones 8 and 9* urgently finalized plans for the general offensive and uprising, taking provincial capitals, towns and district headquarters as main targets. The military and political forces were reorganized and strengthened to handle the attack plans. Recruiting manpower on the spot, the military zones formed new main force units directly under the zones, provinces, or districts, cadres (political and military) were dispatched to reinforce places where the movement was still weak.

*In Military Zone 6*, where the enemy's mopping-up operations and attacks were most violent, the liaison between the Central Committee and the Military Command of the zone received from superior echelons directives regarding the offensive plans and tasks.

However, they immediately held a meeting to discuss measures to be taken and decided to choose Đà Lạt and Phan Thiết as key points for the onslaught.

*In Military Zone 5*, four directions were chosen for the start of the offensive: Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, Bình Định (including An Khê), the Central Highlands, and Phú Yên-Khánh Hoà. The Zonal Command decided that Quảng Đà would be the main battlefield and Đà Nẵng City the key point. In July 1967, the Zonal Command set up four battlefields to unify the military command of all the units fighting. At the founding moment, Battlefield 4 included the units of the Quảng Đà provincial forces, the Đà Nẵng City forces and a number of complementary units from the zone. Before the start of the general offensive and uprising, the battlefield received reinforcements from North Vietnam, namely two artillery regiments and one infantry regiment to be used for the seizure of Quảng Ngãi town. From November 1967 onwards, all units throughout the zone were ordered to maintain their routine activity and at the same time, to complete and readjust their ranks. A spearhead battalion was created, and commando companies were increased and trained in city warfare. At the start of the offensive, *political forces participating in the uprising* in the cities and towns, numbered about 200,000 people. Most of them were the population of the base areas, the liberated areas and the city suburbs. They were organized into companies or battalions under the command of members of the local Party Committees. When the offensive broke out, these forces would enter the cities and towns and, together with the urban population, would rise and seize power.

According to the plan of the Party Committee of Zone 5, the offensive and uprising in this zone would apply the appropriate mode of attack depending on the conditions and capabilities of each place. For instance, Đà Nẵng, Nha Trang, and Quy Nhơn would mainly use insurrections, the cities in the coastal plains would

simultaneously launch military offensives and insurrections, the Central Highlands towns such as Pleiku, Kon Tum, and Buôn Ma Thuột would launch military offensives.

*Trị Thiên* prepared for the general offensive and uprising as early as May 1967. The Party Central Committee approved the reorganization of the leadership and military commando to meet the military requirements of this important battlefield. Accordingly, the Provincial Military Command and Party Committees were dissolved, the district Party Committees were put under the direct leadership of the Zonal Committee. Militarily speaking, for each direction of attack, a military corps was created with clear specific tasks for each level of command. The corps were directly led by the Zonal Military Command.

*Corps 4* was in charge of Phú Lộc area.

*Corps 5* was in charge of Huế City and 3 suburban districts Hương Trà, Hương Thủy, and Phú Vang.

*Corps 6* was in charge of Phong Điền and Quảng Điền districts (Thừa Thiên Province).

*Corps 7* was in charge of Triệu Phong and Hải Lăng districts (Quảng Trị Province).

*Corps 31* was in charge of the area from Road No 9 to the provisional demarcation line, and put under Road No 9 – North Quảng Trị (or B5).

In December 1967, the Zonal Party Standing Committee and Military Command were determined to launch an offensive and uprising in *Trị Thiên*, Huế City *being the key battlefield*, Quảng Trị and Phú Lộc were coordination battlefields. The general direction of the whole zone and Huế battlefield was ensured by the Zonal Party Standing Committee and Military Standing Committee. According to the military plan, the Huế battlefield was divided into two parts by the Perfume River. The Northern part was the main direction of the attack, the Southern one was the important direction

of attack and the principal direction for breaking enemy counter-offensives. The *uprising plan* foresaw that the population of the city and rural areas would carry out the armed uprising during the first night of the offensive and the following day, to seize Huế and the countryside. To ensure logistics, a zonal command of the rear areas was set up for the whole zone.

From November 1967, the people and army of Trị Thiên completed all aspects of the preparations. Before the start of the offensive, the military zone had four infantry battalions, four commando battalions, 15 groups of city commandos, and a number of specialized units (engineering, artillery, etc.). Each district of the military zone had a whole company of troops and hundred of militiamen and guerrillas. To mobilize the masses for the uprising, the Zonal Party Committee opened training courses for 700 cadres and grass-roots revolutionary people in enemy-controlled cities and rural areas. After attending the courses, the trainees returned to their place of residence to organize activists and to be the core in future uprisings. For the supplies, through purchase and the people's contributions, nearly 2,000 tons of food had been mobilized in the plain and 1,000 tons in base areas.

So, in a very short period and in conditions of the battlefields being cut piece-meal by over one million US and allied troops with their garrisons and control posts built everywhere and their close network of spying agents, the *preparations for the offensive could still be kept secret*. This situation was made possible because of the increasing development of the people's war in all the three strategic regions (city, countryside, and mountains), liberated areas being imbricated with enemy-controlled enclaves; our organizations and people intermingled with those of the other side. On the other hand, throughout the process, we relied on the protection, assistance and participation of the population of all regions (liberated, contentious, enemy-controlled). People's warfare and people's consciousness allowed quick completion of a huge volume of complicated and difficult work, all over South Vietnam.

Along with these preparations, the *1967 autumn-winter military operations* were initiated. They made up *Phase 1 of the Strategic Operations Plan*. Their objectives were to prepare conditions for "Tết Mậu Thân", obliging the enemy to widely scattered its forces, diverting its attention, and facilitating our preparations.

In *urban suburbs, rural areas and the plain*, local troops were ordered to maintain their routine activities; cutting off communication lines, attacking military stations, logistic bases, and some inside-city targets, intercepting US-Saigon mopping-up operations, and liquidating quislings and spies.

In *Nam Bộ*, our local troops attacked the enemy on Road No 4, and cut communication lines from Mỹ Tho to Tân An. The troops of Military Zone 9 set on Trà Nóc Airfield (Cần Thơ), broke mopping-up operations in the area north and south of Road No 4 (Mỹ Tho). Local armed forces and commandos ran over the commanding post of the US Parachute Division 10 in Hóc Môn, attacked the military district of Cần Thơ, and hit the base of the US Brigade 1, Infantry Division 25 in Củ Chi, Tịnh Biên (Châu Đốc) and Cao Lãnh (Sa Đéc).

In *the coastal plains of Central Vietnam*, local forces of Military Zone 6 and Military Zone 5 maintained their activity against enemy mopping-up and pacification operations, cut off communication lines, countered the joint offensive by the US and Saigon troops in Bàu Ốc, 30 km away east of Phan Thiết town, and assaulted the district town of Tuy Phước (north of Quy Nhơn), Đập Đá township (Bình Định), and a number of US bases in Quế Sơn, Tiên Phước, Tam Kỳ (Quảng Nam).

In *Trị Thiên*, throughout January 1968, the local forces stepped up their activities in the North and South of Huế City to pin down enemy troops and for diversion and purposes (direction of Quảng Trị) and to hamper their provisioning (direction of Phú Lộc). In the meantime, in the surroundings of Huế, local forces continued to make away with wicked quislings and spies, to neutralize Saigon agents, to harass small targets such as Mỹ Xuyên (Phong Điền),

Thủ Lệ (near Sịa) hamlets to cut the road from An Lỗ to Sịa, and to foil two mopping-up operations by Saigon troops against the Hương Trà mountain region.

While maintaining routine activities in urban suburbs and in the plains, the Liberation Main Forces continuously opened *relatively large-scaled campaigns in the mountainous regions to attract or to pin down a major part of US forces in the outer circles.*

From 27 October to 10 December 1967, the Zonal Military Command used Infantry Divisions 7 and 9, Artillery Division 69 and the local forces of Bình Long and Phước Long provinces to launch the *Lộc Ninh-Road No 13 Campaign* in the main battlefield of the US for the previous two dry-season strategic counter-offensives aimed at annihilating the zonal main forces units. They ceaselessly attacked the detachments of the US Infantry Divisions 1 and 25 and Saigon Army Division 5, destroying a large number of their effectives and war material. Remarking on our activities during these two months, after *Tết Mậu Thân*, the other side still thought that the main objective of the *Lộc Ninh-Road No 13 Campaign* was only *“to make a resounding action in the world opinion and to be able to withdraw safely and easily across the border.”*<sup>1</sup>

Early in November 1967, the Central Highlands armed forces opened the *Đắc Tô Campaign* aimed at forcing the enemy to dispatch their strategic mobile forces to the Central Highlands, annihilating, disintegrating and intensifying the preparations of the general offensive and uprising in suburb and plain areas. In fact, when the campaign was opened, the US MACV had to send US Division 4 and Parachute Brigade 174 from Gia Lai, Đắc Lắc, and Phú Yên to Đắc Tô. For nearly one month, *“many bloody battles”*<sup>2</sup> took place, causing great human and material losses for the US.

Remarking on the *Lộc Ninh-Road No 13 Campaign* and the *Đắc Tô Campaign*, the US Military Command in Saigon subjective-

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1 and 2. Military History Department, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces General Staff. *Cuộc Tổng công kích-Tổng khởi nghĩa của Việt cộng, Mậu Thân 1968*. Saigon, Jun. 1968; p. 358.

ly thought that “the adversary had suffered such great losses that the main efforts of the *Vietcong* and the North Vietnamese troops are now limited to the border region of South Vietnam.”<sup>1</sup> The Saigon Administration, for its part, was of the view that “in general the above-mentioned battles represent despaired actions of the enemy (the Liberation Army) aimed at making weak echoes.”<sup>2</sup>

Along with activities on the battlefield in the autumn-winter of 1967, the body of strategic planning took measures to divert the attention of the adversary military command. In November 1967, the General Staff of the People’s Army of Vietnam *directly expounded* to the commanders of various battlefields the plan of strategic diversion. For this purpose, a *plan of false battles* was sent to the commanders at all levels of South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

In his memoir *Testimony of A Soldier*, Westmoreland revealed that in November 1967, the US captured an important document regarding the adversary’s military plan in 1968 near Đắc Tô. This document was precisely the plan of false battles the content of which, in Westmoreland’s view, further strengthened his assessment that the *Vietcong* were experiencing a process of great defeat, the beginning of which was the Đắc Tô Battle. Therefore, the US Military Command in Saigon (MACV) guessed that *in 1968 the activity of the Vietnamese army and people in South Vietnam was principally aimed at countering the “pacification,” launching a number of battles along the border, attacking the targets in Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên, trying to preserve their forces and to maintain the fighting level of 1967.*

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1. Quoted from Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie* (Vietnamese translation). Vol. 2, Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1990; p. 392.

2. *Cuộc Tổng công kích-Tổng khởi nghĩa của Việt cộng, Mậu Thân 1968*. Op. cit., p. 358.

3. To keep secret, the *true* fighting plan was *verbally presented* to the battlefield commanders by the envoy of the People’s Army of Vietnam High Command, or the key commanders of the battlefield had to go to Hanoi and receive orders.

Prompted by such an assessment of the intention and capability of our side, the US Military Command advocated the stabilization of the Saigon Administration and army, *the continuation of the strategic "search-and-destroy" and "pacification" measures, the destruction of the transport corridor and the liquidation of our bases and storehouses in the mountain region.* Since the US could no longer greatly increase its troops in South Vietnam to maintain a *stalemate situation*, the US Military Command decided to launch a 3rd strategic offensive during the 1967-1968 dry season, the principal direction of which was still East Nam Bộ, the Trị Thiên region being the important direction.

Under this plan, the US would *successively* concentrate its forces on key targets such as our bases in East Nam Bộ, the North-South transport corridor, to help the Saigon army in "pacifying" the rural areas, and to intercept our main forces in the region adjoining Laos in the strategic territory of the Central Highlands. In Trị Thiên, Westmoreland had the intention of carrying out four operations code-named "York" sweeping the Vietnam-Lao border region to restore the control of the A Sầu Valley.

So, in the planning of this counter-offensive, the US Military Command was *cautious* in determining its objectives although it had some 1,200,000 troops, including 486,000 US GI's. The scheme of the US Military Command in Saigon and the leadership in Washington was to endeavour to maintain a *stalemate situation* on the battlefield and *to avoid a sudden upheaval* in South Vietnam, pending the US presidential election in November 1968. Only then would the following step be considered.

In the US, at the end of 1967, on the advice of Dean Acheson and the high-ranking advisers on Vietnam, the "wise men,"<sup>1</sup> the Johnson Administration launched a strong campaign of propaganda

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1. All the members of this group had assumed important posts in the Government or had been advisers to US Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.

on the US success in Vietnam to cope with the erosion of the administration's credibility in the eyes of the public. National Security Adviser Rostow was designated by Johnson to watch all anti-war congressmen and to take appropriate measures. Johnson also created among his subordinates a group to gather information on Vietnam. The task of the group was to make regular reports on the US progress in Vietnam and to win the support of the US people. In mid-November 1967, on the occasion of the US Veterans' Day, Johnson went to several different states to convince the US public that the US was obtaining solid progress in Vietnam. The US ambassador and the US Military Commander in Saigon were recalled to Washington to advocate Johnson's war policy. In coordination with propaganda activities in the US, MACV in Saigon held regular meetings to speak about the victories of the US and allied forces. By this propaganda campaign, the US Administration could *to some extent resuscitate the hope* of winning sympathy in a part of the US people, and prevent the "rustling" of support for the US Administration and the war in Vietnam. However, the price of this resuscitation was too high because the US Government had to win public support with a promise on the favourable outcome that would never come true.

In December 1967, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government released two US POWs to let them join their families on the occasion of Christmas. This gesture made a number of high-ranking officials in the US Administration think that "the leaders of Hanoi had given up hope of seizing South Vietnam in the near future." In their view, *this fact meant that the possibility of direct negotiations with North Vietnam representatives had opened slightly* and the US was in a *Panmunjam-like Phase*. At a reception of the diplomatic corps in Hanoi on 30 December 1967, Foreign Minister Nguyễn Duy Trinh said that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government would negotiate with the US Government after the cessation of US bombings of North Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Before that date, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had never stated what it would do after the cessation of US bombings in North Vietnam.



This indication increased the hope of many personalities in the Johnson Administration, and in consequence, the pressure within the US Administration, the US and world opinion increased strongly for the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and the start of negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Together with this move on the diplomatic field, on the military field, North Vietnamese main forces coordinated with the Pathet Lao troops in launching the Năm Bạc Campaign, thereby obliging MACV to disperse its forces not only in Vietnam but also in Laos and creating favourable conditions for the simultaneous offensives against the South Vietnamese cities.

After preparation for some time, on 12 January 1968, Vietnam-Laos joint forces opened the campaign to annihilate the enemy in Northern Laos. At the same time, in South Vietnam, divisions and regiments of Liberation Forces and units of specialized troops began leaving their bases and heading for population centres and cities, including Saigon-Gia Định. Also, a number of divisions of North Vietnamese main forces were concentrated around the Khe Sanh mountain region, surrounding and menacing this US base of strategic importance. In such circumstances, on 13 January 1968, Westmoreland was compelled to *cancel the 3rd planned strategic counter-offensive*, and to pull out the US units already deployed against War Zones C and D in East Nam Bộ for the defence of the surroundings of Saigon-Gia Định. Because of the threat against the northern part of South Vietnam, the US was compelled to cancel the "York" operations in the northern provinces and to order the US Air Borne Cavalry Division 1 not to leave the Central Highlands for East Nam Bộ as originally planned but, together with the US Infantry Brigade 196, to go to Thừa Thiên as reinforcement to the northern battlefield.

So, the US forces had to shift from the preparation for the strategic counter-offensive aimed at seizing initiative on the battlefield to the passive defensive position around Saigon and Trị Thiên.

At the same time, on the night of 20 January 1968, our armed forces launched sudden attacks against the Khe Sanh entrenched camps, seriously menacing the defense line of Road No 9. The Khe Sanh Campaign *had foiled the Johnson Administration's efforts to convince the US people that the US had seen "light at the end of the tunnel" of the Vietnam War.*

Khe Sanh was a position of strategic significance in the mountain and plateau region of west Quảng Trị, 10 km long on each side. This was the western part of the McNamara line created for the cutting off North Vietnam supply line to the South, the defence of the eastern portion of Road No 9 and the population of the coastal plain of Quảng Trị. In the eyes of US military top hats, Khe Sanh was a patrol base to prevent the infiltration of North Vietnamese main forces from Laos through Road No 9; a base for the US and Saigon special forces' onslaught on North Vietnam bases in Laos; an airfield serving the spy planes in ensuring the surveillance of the Trường Sơn strategic transport line; a western anchor of the defence system in the southern part of the demilitarized zone (DMZ); and a tramplng board for military operations to cut off the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. In Westmoreland's view, to give up Khe Sanh was to lose all these advantages and to accept bringing the war to the coastal populated centre of Quảng Trị, which would certainly happen. Because of this importance, the opening of the Khe Sanh Campaign immediately attracted the attention of the US leadership. Johnson instructed General Taylor to set up the "*extraordinary situation*" room at the White House and *personally* followed the situation of Khe Sanh every hour. He also ordered the Joint Military Chiefs of Staff to undertake to keep Khe Sanh at any cost, and Westmoreland to daily report on the situation at Khe Sanh.

Because of the tense situation in Khe Sanh, Westmoreland had to sleep at night in the operation centre of the US MACV in Saigon. He and his colleagues assessed that Khe Sanh was the main direction of attack of the adversary in winter-spring 1968. Haunted by the Điện Biên Phủ Battle in 1954 which buried the prestige of the

French armed forces. Westmoreland requested the military historian working at MACV, Colonel R. Arger, to expound the causes of the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ.

According to Arger in Điện Biên Phủ and in many other places in world war history, the garrisoned troops failed because they were surrounded and lost all initiative. This conclusion, according to Westmoreland's memoir dismayed him and the whole MACV. Westmoreland decided to set up the *front-line commanding post* of the US Military Command in Tactical Zone 1 to supervise and command all US and Saigon forces in the northern front and to cope in time with the fighting in Khe Sanh which, at the end of January 1968, accounted for 40% of the infantry and tank battalions MACV had at its disposal.

So, before the start of the general offensive and uprising, the US had a completely inaccurate estimation of the real strategic scheme of our side. Even the intelligence officers of US MACV revealed later that even if they had knowledge of the whole plan of the general offensive, they would not have believed it and would not have understood the real nature of the action. As for Westmoreland, after his return to the US, in his memoir, he remarked that North Vietnam had mapped out a very clever plan, menacing Khe Sanh while alluding to negotiations. Then though unconsciously, many Americans, including journalists, Congressmen, and intellectuals and even government officials, *passively played the role they were actually allotted, as if they had read the scenario of the negotiations beforehand.*

## II. DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENERAL OFFENSIVE AND UPRISING AT TẾT MẬU THÂN

The diversionary activities, particularly the Khe Sanh Campaign *ten days* before Tết Mậu Thân, had misled MACV in Saigon and the leadership in Washington. While the US side concentrated its attention and forces on Road No 9-Khe Sanh and

evaluated that *Khe Sanh was a Điện Biên Phủ in the strategic scheme* of the Vietnamese Supreme Command, the general offensive and uprising of Tết Mậu Thân broke out all over South Vietnam, the main direction of which was the cities, the military, political, and economic centres of the US and the Saigon Administration.

On the night of the 29 and in the small hours of 30 January 1968 (on the eve of Tết, South Vietnam calendar), the army *and people of the provinces in the coastal plains of Central Vietnam and the Central Highlands* opened offensives simultaneously against cities, towns, district capitals, military bases, airfields, and commanding posts, starting the general offensive and uprising throughout South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The fact that different localities of Zone 5 opened fire to start the general offensive one day earlier than the Military Zones Trị Thiên, Zones 6 and 7, etc. is explained by a number of books published in Hanoi and other provinces. *Nam Trung Bộ kháng chiến 1945-1975* notes that: "At the end of 1967, for scientific reasons the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government decided that the first day of Tết Mậu Thân was one day later than the old calendar (i.e. on 31 January, 1968) while the Saigon Administration kept unchanged the old calendar (i.e. on 30 January, 1968). As the time fixed for opening fire all over the battlefield was on the night of the Tết Eve, the foresaid change in the calendar evidently led to the discrepancy of the time for starting the offensive. Discovering this fact, the General Staff ordered the various battlefields to delay the start of the offensive for one day to be simultaneous." (Book *Quân khu 5 - 30 năm chiến tranh giải phóng* published by Military Zone 5). According to the same book, at the conference to sum up the offensive and uprising of Spring 1968 (held in Hồ Chí Minh City from 1 to 8 March, 1986), the officers of the Operation Department affirmed: the order was clearly written "the Eve of Tết (South Vietnam), but a number of localities did not carefully study the order and acted wrongly." Yet, this book did not mention the date when that order was sent. In the meantime, *Lịch sử Quân đội Nhân dân Việt Nam*, vol. 2, reveals: "In the afternoon of 29 January, 1968, Military Zone 5 received a message postponing the offensive to the night of 30 – dawn of 31 January, 1968. If so, the message was sent too late, considering the conditions of the battlefield at that time. Therefore in practice, the postponement of the fire-opening time could only be known to "Division 2, Division 3, Regiment 10; Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi provinces," the remaining localities: "Quảng

0 hour on January 30: Tuy Hoà  
 0 hour 30 minutes on January 30: Tân Cảnh  
 0 hour 45 minutes on January 30: Buôn Ma Thuột  
 0 hour 55 minutes on January 30: Pleiku  
 1 hour on January 30: Đà Nẵng, Hội An  
 1 hour 15 minutes on January 30: Quy Nhơn, Kon Tum...

In the Central Highlands, at 00.30 on 30 January 1968, a battalion of the main forces (Regiment 174 of the Tây Nguyên troops) opened fire on Tân Cảnh, a small township at the foot of a hill 3 km away from Đắc Tô and 40 km from Kon Tum town in the North, where was located the Commanding Post of Regiment 42 of the Saigon army. A few minutes later, Battalions 401, 402, 300 of local forces of Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Đắc Lắc Provinces, in coordination with the commandos of the Central Highlands Battlefield Command, attacked Cù Hanh Airfield, A-ri-a and Buôn Ma Thuột, Pleiku, and Kon Tum towns. From the beginning, the Liberation Forces had hit the top organs of the Saigon Administration such as the Administrative Quarter, the Province Chief's Office, the Police Service, the Provincial Militia, the Broadcasting Station... as well as the bases, and commanding posts of the US and allied forces outside or inside the towns.

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Đà, Phú Yên, Bình Định, Khánh Hoà did not receive the order and started the offensive on the night of 29-dawn of 30 January, 1968" (*Lịch sử Quân đội Nhân dân Việt Nam*, vol. 2). We are not specialists on Vietnamese calendars to define when the lunar month includes 30 days or 29 days and when there are leap months... It is a high speciality and we cannot explain "the scientific reason" for which "the first day of *Tết Mậu Thân* was one day later than the old calendar." However, studying a historical event occurring 30 years ago, we think that "the change of the calendar" and thereafter, a number of localities in Military Zone 5 started the offensive one day earlier than other regions in South Vietnam, in itself was a strategic diversionary action. It drew the attention of the enemy to a non-crucial battlefield in the plan for general offensive and uprising of *Tết Mậu Thân*.

In the coastal provinces of Zone 5, the Liberation Armed Forces attacked Tam Kỳ, Quảng Ngãi, Đà Nẵng, Hội An, Quy Nhơn, Tuy Hoà, Nha Trang and over 40 townships, district capitals and military and political targets in this strategically important area.

In Đà Nẵng, a big US and allied military base complex, one of the three key objectives of the *Tết Mậu Thân* general offensive, although preparations had been done long before, there were difficulties from the beginning. The *principal causes of these difficulties* were that the situation of the enemy side was not well understood, preparations were not meticulously carried out in all respects and the position for the start of the offensive was not good so that the enemy was able to check the advance and fight back forcefully.

According to plan, on the night of 29-30 January 1968, the artillery, commandos, infantry, and the crack troops of the Liberation Forces would simultaneously attack the airfields, the artillery installations, the storehouses and occupy a number of key targets in the city. They would help the *outer-city population* enter the town to *coordinate with the inner-city population* in rising up and seizing power. In Đà Nẵng, the guide line for winning victory was chiefly to mobilize the masses for uprising and seizing power.

However on that night, the troops that infiltrated to attack the Commanding Post of the Saigon Army Corps 1 were stopped at the bank of the Cẩm Lệ River by the enemy. Only 57 officers and men who had crossed the river previously could assault the target and fight to the last man in the face of an adversary several times more numerous and supported by tanks, heavy guns, and airplanes. In the meantime, *Infantry Division 2 of the Military Zone 5 main forces*, which had the task of attacking Đà Nẵng from the South, received orders to delay the attack and *to draw back to the rear*. The US and Saigon troops concentrated their forces, artillery and airforce to prevent movement on all roads leading to Đà Nẵng. Forty thousand people of the districts around the city, who had been organized into companies and battalions, were stopped on their way to the city. Over 100 cadres were arrested or killed. Inside the city, popular uprisings could not take place.

Twenty four hours after the army and people of the coastal provinces of Central Vietnam and those in the Central Highland opened fire, the general offensive and uprising broke out simultaneously in all provinces and big cities of South Vietnam. From the first moment, our infantry, commando, and artillery troops fought strongly and hit the key targets in Saigon, Huế, Quảng Trị, Tam Kỳ, Quảng Ngãi, Phan Thiết, Phan Rang, Đà Lạt, Tây Ninh, Bến Tre, Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho, Cần Thơ, Trà Vinh, Châu Đốc, Vĩnh Long, Cà Mau, Sóc Trăng, and Rạch Giá.

*On the Huế battlefield:* Huế was the third largest city of South Vietnam of 150,000 inhabitants by the end of 1967, and the place where the US and Saigon centres leading the war were concentrated in Tactical Zone 1. At 02.33, on 31 January 1968 the Liberation artillery pounded the adversary positions in Tam Giác and Phan Sào Nam areas, Phú Bài, Đông Toà, Đông Ba, initiating the offensive against this ancient capital city. Thereafter, the assaulting forces were divided into two prongs to attack 39 target-areas outside and inside the city.

*The northern prong* on the left side of the Perfume River, composed of Infantry Regiment 6, a number of infantry commando and mortar battalions and the crack troops of the city, attacked the Mang Cá area from several directions where the Commanding Post of the Saigon Infantry Division 1 was located, and An Hoà, Chánh Tây Gate, Tây Lộc Airfield, the Right Gate, Thượng Tứ Gate, Đông Ba Gate, the Flag Pole area, the Imperial City area, Bạch Hổ Bridge, Kim Long area. Almost all these targets were captured by the Liberation Forces, except the Mang Cá area and Tây Lộc Airfield.

At the same time, the *southern prong* on the right bank of the Perfume River including Infantry Regiment 9, reinforced by two battalions of Huế, two commando battalions and a number of units of specialized troops, commandos, and guerillas of the suburban districts Hương Thủy, Phú Vang, attacked the base of Saigon Tank Regiment 7 in Tam Thai, the South Korean company in An Lãng, the engineering area in Nam Giao, the combat police commanding

headquarters, the Kho Rèn area, Ngã Sáu, the Broadcasting Station Phước Quả, Sắc Tộc School, and Bò Ghè; captured the railway station area, assailed the US Hotel (Hương Giang) and Thuận Hoá Hotel.

*So, almost all the leading organs of Thừa Thiên and those representing the Central Government of the Republic of Vietnam in Huế were captured by the Liberation Forces.*

At dawn the following day, February 1, 1968, gunfire was still resounding in many pieces but the greater part of Huế was under the control of the Liberation Forces. In the early morning fog, the red-blue flag of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was flying on the flag tower of the inner citadel. On the morning of February 3, the popular masses began to rise and search for the wicked elements and the remnants of the Saigon troops, to eliminate the coercing machinery of the enemy, to set up revolutionary administrations at base level, to build fortifications for defence, and to give medical treatment to the wounded soldiers. *The Front for National Union, Democracy and Peace of Huế* was founded. It called on all strata of people to unite against the US and its allies in South Vietnam.

*In the districts surrounding the city*, the revolutionary armed forces were supported by the popular masses in seizing the enemy bases in the outer circle, liquidating military posts, calling the militia to surrender, and punishing the wicked and recalcitrant agents, and enlarging the liberated area around Huế.

In the meantime, for *the purpose of coordination*, armed units of Trị Thiên opened fire to support the people in seizing power and becoming masters of large rural areas.

*In the direction of Phú Lộc*, the Liberation Forces captured the district town, cut off Highway No 1 (the portion from Đà Nẵng to Huế) for many days. At the same time, in this direction, the offensive troops damaged the Hai Bridge, the Nước Ngọt Bridge, liberated the crucial coastal area, the area south of Cầu Hai and the Truối area.

*In the direction of Phong Điền, Quảng Điền*, the armed forces of Battlefield 6 cut off the Phú Ốc-Sịa Road, surrounded the district capital Hương Điền and forced the enemy to withdraw from Thanh Hương. Over 3,000 people of Hương Điền district surrounded and put pressure on the district capital Phò Trạch.

*In the direction of Quảng Trị*, in spite of strong defense by the US and its allies in South Vietnam, on the night of 30-31 January 1968, heavy attacks were launched against the town from the southeast, destroying or seriously damaging two battalions of Saigon troops. On the same night, Liberation troops secretly crossed the Thạch Hãn River, and carried out surprise attacks against the Police Station, the Province Chief's Office, and the Power Plant. These two offensive operations were fiercely fought back by the enemy and were not decisive. In the meantime, the attacks against La Vang Thượng, La Vang Trung, and Cầu Lớn could not secure a clear-cut victory. That is why on the night of January 31, all the Liberation Forces had to withdraw from the town.

*In Military Zone 6*, only in the afternoon of January 29, 1968 did the Party Committee and the Zonal Military Command receive the order to start the offensive on the eve of *Tết Mậu Thân*. All the preparations had to be completed in too short a period. In spite of that, with great determination and full confidence in victory, at 00 hour of February 1, 1968 the armed forces of Zone 6 attacked *Phan Thiết Town*, the provincial capital on the coast of Central Vietnam (population: 50,000 people). As the attack began later than in other places, Saigon was able to organize better defence. However, the troops on the offensive entered deep in the area, occupied a greater part of the provincial administration headquarter, a number of organs of the sub-zone, controlled the railway station area and around the Trịnh Tường post. The people were enthusiastic in seizing power and controlling almost all the wards on the left side of the Cà Ty River, which divided the town into two parts.

*In Đà Lạt*, the armed forces of Zone 6 strongly attacked the Commanding Post of the sub-zone, the Provincial Command of the

Militia, the Province Chief's Office, the Jail, the Municipal Hall, the Police Headquarters, the Railway Station area, the Psycho-War School, and Cam Ly Airfield... On the morning of February 1, the Liberation Forces controlled many areas of the town and, using them as bases, they fought back enemy counter-attacks for over ten days.

*Saigon-Gia Định* was the primary key direction of the *Tết Mậu Thân* general offensive and uprising. To defend this political, military, and economic centre, the US and Saigon had built up several solid defense lines with various forces. At the end of 1967, on the outer circle *in the northwest*, besides the Đồng Dù Base with Division 25 and two brigades of US troops, there was the Saigon Infantry Division 25, several commando battalions and a number of militia companies. In the north, there was the Lai Khê Base of the US Infantry Division 1, Saigon Division 5 and a dozen commando battalions. If necessary, US Tank Regiment 11 could be called from Bầu Khai and Bến Cát for support.

*In the eastern and northeastern direction*, besides the US parachutes in Biên Hoà, there were South Korean troops in Dĩ An, Australian troops in Long Bình, and Saigon troops in Xuân Lộc. The defense in the southern direction was ensured by the parachutists, the marines, and the naval units of the Saigon Army. Moreover, a part of US Infantry Division 9 was operating in the direction of Tiền Giang and in the north of the Hậu River, ready to move and defend the area south of Saigon.

*For the inner circle*, besides the security forces of the capital special zone, and the combat police units, there were a number of battalions and companies of US and Saigon troops at Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the Đồng Đa, Hoàng Hoa Thám, and Quang Trung camps.

In addition, on the ways leading to the city, in the suburban areas and in all city quarters, the network of intelligence officers,

spies and secret agents was very thick and found everywhere along with watchposts, and control stations...

According to the plan for the general offensive and uprising in this large city, the Party Central Office and Zonal Military Command mobilized the whole strength of Corps 100, and all the existing commando groups to launch quick surprise attacks against nine key objectives to paralyze enemy resistance, to hold the "bridge head" pending the arrival of spearhead battalions, the students and the youths as reinforcement, to expand the area of control, and to direct the uprising of the people. In the meantime, the divisions of the main forces fought in the *outer circle* to keep the enemy in place and not to let the US troops move inside the city to rescue: they were prepared to enter the city when they received orders.

Here like in many other places on the battlefield, the start of the offensive was delayed, before the fixed time for opening fire, MACV had strengthened its defense, at the crossroads with jeeps mounted with machine guns and mobile patrol units were deployed along the streets. The US combat troops were kept in the highest fighting readiness... Nevertheless, at 02.00 on 31 January 1968, the general offensive and uprising began in Saigon-Gia Định.

From the very beginning in the city, the lightly equipped commandos simultaneously attacked the determined targets: the Independence Palace, the Saigon Army General Staff, the Saigon Navy Command, Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the US Embassy. However, the other targets, such as the Police General Department, the Capital Special Zone, the Chí Hoà Jail, etc. could not be attacked because the commandos had been intercepted by the enemy on their way to these targets. The self-defenses corps, the commando units of city youths, the trade unions, the mass organizations, etc. carried out activities throughout the city, attacking the police posts, searching for the wicked elements in Bến Đá, Bàn Cờ wards. Wherever the Liberation Forces went, they were assisted by the population of

Saigon in many ways, such as showing the way, giving supplies, taking care of the wounded, building roadblocks, participating in the search for traitors.

At the same time with the commandos activity, the *spearhead battalions* of the sub-zone also assaulted determined targets. *In the northeast and the east* of the city, the military units of Sub-zones 4 and 5 attacked on Road No 13, Bình Triệu area, the Biên Hòa Motorway, Intersection Hàng Xanh. *In the southwest*, the spearhead battalions of Sub-zone 2 cooperated with Infantry Regiment 16 and commando troops struck at Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, seized the Textile Company Vinatexco and fought back counter-offensives in the Tham Lương Bridge area. Spearhead "Battalion 6 of Bình Tân" on its way to the target, the Capital Special Zone, destroyed the combat police camp beside the horse race-track at Phú Thọ, fought fiercely at the Nguyễn Văn Thoại Crossroads, controlled the Female Soldier's School, controlled a large area from Tứ Nghiêp Pagoda to Ấn Quang Pagoda, which was surrounded by four avenues: Nguyễn Tri Phương, Trần Quốc Toản, Lý Thái Tổ, and Minh Mạng. *In the south*, spearhead battalions of Sub-zone 3, leaving its staging areas in Long Giang, Long Định, Hiệp Phước, Phước Lại, Rạch Bà Tầng, headed for the city and seized Phú Định, Lò Gốm, Chợ Thiếc, Nhị Thiên Đường Bridge, Bến Đá, Hùng Thái, Đa Phước wards. *In the north and northwest*, the armed forces of Sub-zone 1 seized the Commanding Post of the Saigon Tank Unit at Phù Đồng Camp, part of the Commanding Post of the Saigon Artillery installations at Cỏ Loa Camp, the base of the Saigon artillery battalion at Nỏ Thần Camp, Base 80 storing war materials, and Communication Base 60. Thereafter, Infantry Battalion 1 of Quyết Thắng Regiment directed its attack on the five-way crossroads of Bình Hoà, and three-way crossroads of Cây Thị. At the same time, the Gò Môn spearhead battalion and commando troops lost their way to the Saigon General Staff, they had to rely on the guidance of the people to reach their fighting target. Therefore, on the morning of the second day of Tết

(7.00 on January 31, 1968),<sup>1</sup> the Battalion opened fire at Gate 4 of the Saigon Army General Staff. In the meantime, a part of Regiment 1 of Zonal Main Force Division 9 attacked the Quang Trung Training Centre and fought fiercely at Tân Thới Trung, Thới Trung Thôn, Trung Mỹ Tây, and Xuân Thới Thượng.

*Around Saigon-Gia Định*, a series of Saigon military bases, and government offices in Biên Hoà, Bình Dương, Hậu Nghĩa, and Long An were raided.

Further to the south of Saigon, the immense delta plain is found. This is the rice granary of South Vietnam, a region of strategic importance for both sides, ours and Saigon. Before Tết, the office in charge of “pacification” and the US advisers made optimistic statements about the good security of the provinces in this densely-populated plain. But on the night of 31 January and the dawn of 1 February 1968 and the following days, the Liberation Armed Forces (mostly local forces) attacked 13 out of 14 towns, district capitals, townlets, military bases and military posts of the Saigon Army and Administration. The general offensive and uprising by the army and people of the provinces of the Mekong River Delta sowed confusion to the US and the Saigon Administration which had not yet recovered from the onslaughts on Huế, Saigon, and other cities, on Khe Sanh-Road No 9 still being menaced...

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1. A number of historical books, such as *Miền Đông Nam Bộ kháng chiến* (People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993); *Tổng tiến công và nổi dậy Xuân Mậu Thân* (Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1988) note as late as February 1, Battalion 2 of Gò Môn arrived at Gate 4 of the Saigon Army General Staff. Yet, some other texts such as documents for internal circulation of the Institute of Vietnamese Military History. *Hướng tiến công Sài Gòn-Gia Định 1968* write that on the morning of January 31, this Battalion was present at Gate 4 of the Saigon Army General Staff for attack. Confronting with the document of the Military History Department of the Saigon General Staff, we think that on the morning of January 31, 1968, Battalion 2 of Gò Môn came to Gate 4 of the Saigon General Staff. This is accurate.

The sudden and violent attacks against the cities forced the US and its allies to call back their forces for rescue, leaving the rural areas undefended. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the local troops helped the popular masses in rising up and taking control of large rural areas.

Being attacked extensively both in the cities and the countryside, at the beginning, the US and the Saigon Administration retreated in embarrassment. But they pulled themselves together and mustered their strength for counter-attacks. The fight for the control of crucial target-areas evolved fiercely in the cities all over South Vietnam. In this fight, the US and Saigon forces had numerical superiority, better weaponry and firepower. To drive out the Liberation units from the positions they occupied, the counter-attacking forces used their overwhelming manpower and all kinds of heavy weapons (tanks, guns), toxic chemicals, and airforce. Many city quarters were razed, many houses destroyed, many civilians killed in big cities such as Saigon, Huế, and towns such as Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre, Vĩnh Long, Cần Thơ, and Phan Thiết, as well as in a series of district capitals.<sup>1</sup> That is why, from the start of the US and

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1. The deliberate use of massive fire power in the cities of South Vietnam at Tết Mậu Thân by the US was widely reported by press and television correspondents. On February 7, 1968, AP News Agency divulged US correspondent Peter Arnett's article in which he wrote: "In what conditions, do you call your artillery and your bomber planes to destroy the city quarters that you are defending? In what conditions the massacre of civilians will be no longer a matter that you don't care?" These questions were answered during the first hours of the battle for Bến Tre Town, a peaceful locality of 35,000 inhabitants beside the Mekong River. A US Major said: "The city is to be destroyed for its defense." (Re-translated from Vietnamese).

The Reuter News Agency related the statement of a US high-ranking officer: "You can estimate the casualties in direct proportion of the fire power. So, the US created more destructions than necessary. The US had the possibility to raze to the ground a city quarter for the purpose of searching for a few Vietcong. On the contrary the Vietcong infiltrated into the city, therefore they tried their best not to make noise."

It should be added that the unlimited use of fire power by the US at Tết Mậu Thân in itself was evidence of its political failure in Tết Mậu Thân, although that helped the US restore the control of the cities.

Saigon counter-offensive *in the cities*, the fighting was most violent due to their *superiority in numbers and fire power*. The Liberation Forces fought heroically against the US and Saigon troops for every house, every street corner, and they were *also seriously decimated*. The hostilities were violent and fierce *but the offensive was not strong enough for the masses to rely on to join*. *Insurrection could not take place in the cities* as a result. In these circumstances, after occupying the targets for some time and breaking several counter-attacks, the Liberation Forces had to withdraw to suburban areas for consolidation and replenishment and also for keeping staging areas for future offensive.

With regard to the *Saigon-Gia Định* battlefield, street fighting in suburban areas lasted several days and was very bitter. Early on the morning of January 31, the Saigon Parachute Battalion 1 cleared up the Broadcasting Station, Parachute Battalion 8 the General Staff Headquarters, Parachute Battalion 6 Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. Commando Unit 5, composed of four battalions, was in charge of the arc Thủ Đức-Nhà Bè-Bình Chánh-Hóc Môn. It was urgently called inside Saigon city. On January 31, three battalions of Saigon marines were transported by air from Vũng Tàu and Cai Lậy (Định Tường) to Saigon. On the following days many more US and Saigon military units were brought to the Saigon-Gia Định battlefield<sup>1</sup>.

With the rapid massive reinforcements, the US and Saigon forces successively opened counter-attacks to clear up the areas held by the Liberation Forces. From January 31 to February 4, many fierce battles occurred in the streets of Saigon.

*In the area of the Independence Palace*, 15 commando fighters used explosives to force open the iron gate, but they were obstructed by the firing of the guards and could not enter the Palace. They had

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1. The AFP News Agency reported on February 3, 1968 that there were then in Saigon about 3,500 Liberation combatants and about 500,000 troops on the US and Saigon side, including 15 US battalions, 18 Saigon battalions, and 34,000 combat policemen.

to fight on the flight of steps in front of the Palace. When morning came, the Saigon forces received reinforcement with the support of armoured vehicles. The spearhead battalion and the students could not come to assist, the commando fighters had to withdraw and to engage combat on Nguyễn Du Street with unequal strength. Eight combatants were killed and the rest were arrested.

*In the area of the Saigon Naval Command Headquarters*, the commandos met with difficulty from the beginning. Sixteen of them were killed or arrested on the very night of January 31 – February 1, being overcome by the adversary.

*In the area of the Saigon General Staff*, the fighting was fierce on January 31 and February 1. Commando Group 679 was composed of 27 combatants. After taking Gate 5 and Gate Phi Long, they could not get inside because the Saigon troops were overwhelmingly more numerous. In the morning, Saigon sent more troops and armoured vehicles to counter-attack. Covered by the houses of Trương Quốc Dũng Street, the Liberation commandos fought staunchly, putting out of action hundreds of Saigon troops and setting two armoured vehicles on fire. However, our side also suffered losses and had no ammunitions left. At 2 p.m. on January 31, the remaining combatants had to pull out. In the meantime, at Gate 4 of the General Staff Headquarters, Battalion 2 of Gò Môn arrived late; only at 7 a.m. on January 31, did they open fire to start the offensive. Started late, the surprise factor no longer existed. Nevertheless, part of Battalion 2 of Gò Môn managed to enter inside, and seize the Saigon Army's Foreign Language School. On January 31, Saigon battalions of parachutists and marines came there to reinforce the defenders of the General Staff Headquarters and to launch a counter-offensive. Saigon armed helicopters indiscriminately strafed the areas suspected to be held by the Liberation Forces, heavily damaging the Foreign Language School, the General Management School, the Training Instruments Centre, and the surrounding buildings. On the morning of February 1, the remnants of Battalions 2 of Gò Môn withdrew from the area of Gate 4



of the General Staff Headquarters. In pulling out, the battalion suffered heavy casualties and only 28 out of 500 combatants returned to base:

*At the Saigon Broadcasting Station*, 12 commando fighters and two servants captured it after three minutes of intelligent fighting, putting out of action the section of guards. Yet, because of the lack of technicians and the precautions of the station authorities, the attackers could not use the radio broadcast as expected. After the loss of this important service, the Saigon troops counter-attacked with the utmost fierceness; and armed helicopters and tanks were called in for support. It was an unequal fight indeed. All the commandos were wounded, only the two technicians of the station escaped from the siege.

*At the US Embassy*, 17 commando fighters managed to get inside the compound and rapidly take control of the first, the second and the third floors. The US guards fought back fiercely but they were unable to repulse the offensive. At 7 p.m. on January 31, one section of the US military police entered the main gate of the Embassy. Turbulent fighting took place in the Embassy garden. The US intended to drop troops on the roof of the Embassy by helicopters, but failed to do it because of heavy fire from the ground. The commandos fought staunchly, but they were numerically weak and at 9 a.m. on January 31, the US forces recaptured the whole compound of the Embassy.

While the hostilities were violent in Saigon, the Zonal Military Command took timely decisions to mobilize a number of zonal military units to launch many attacks in the outer circle for support.

*Division 5* attacked Biên Hoà Airfield, the Long Binh Storing Area, US Second Field Command, the Commanding Post of Saigon Army Corps III. Then a part of the division forces kept solid and strict control of the Tân Hiệp Three-way Crossroad in Biên Hoà Town.

*Division 7* attacked Saigon Division 5 Command in Bến Cát, the troop grouping of 'Red Scarf' Infantry Division 1 and US Tank Regiment 11 in Phú Giao area.

*Division 9* fought with US Brigade 1, the "tropical lightning" Division 25 in Củ Chi.

The aforementioned battles retained an important part of the US and Saigon main forces and prevented them from reinforcing Saigon. But to preserve their strength, the divisions and regiments of the zonal main forces did not advance to the capital city. For that reason, the fighting units inside the city were isolated and surrounded on all sides and suffered great losses: nearly 80% of the commandos were killed or arrested, 50% of the soldiers of the spearhead battalions sustained casualties, and a number of battalions had only 1/5 or 1/10 of their effectives.<sup>1</sup> The bases in the inner city were exposed and also suffered losses... Under such circumstances, the forces fighting inside the city received orders to withdraw to the suburbs.

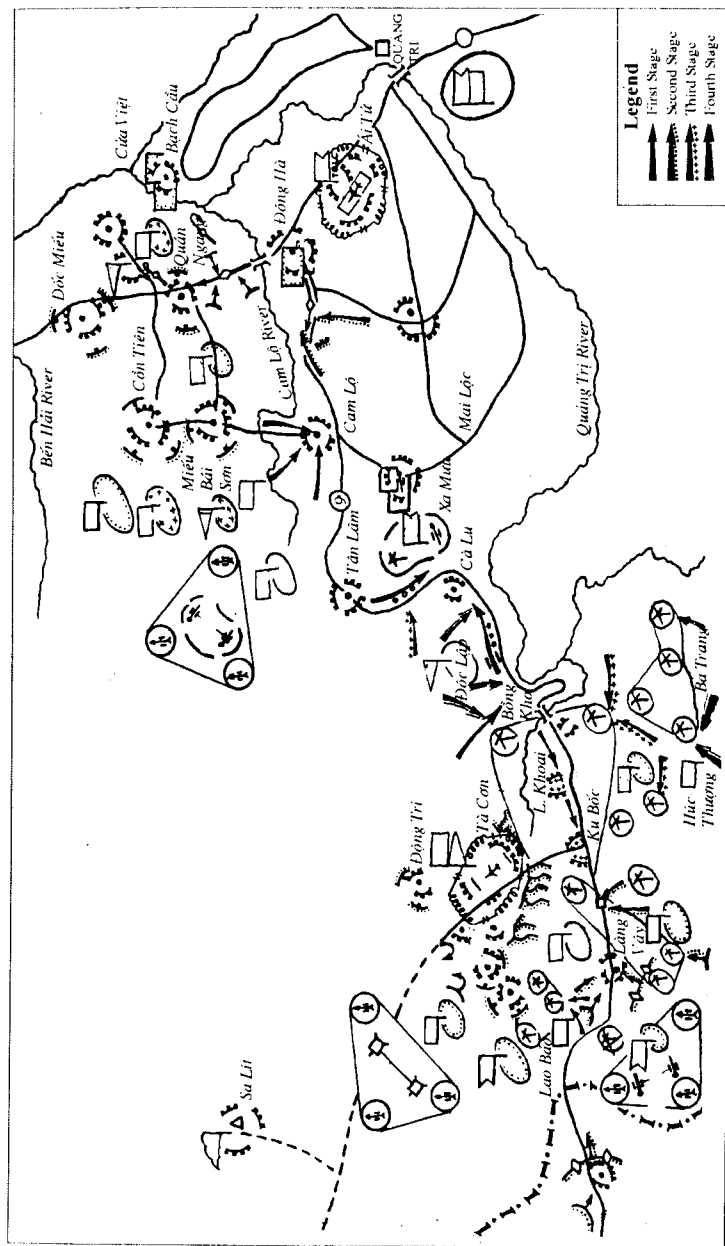
From mid-February 1968 onward, suburban areas became the battlefields of fierce fighting between the two sides to hold the staging areas for offensives into the inner city of Saigon.

From then, on the battlefield as a whole the general offensive and uprising of *Tết Mậu Thân*, after days of breaking up, gradually subsided. Only in the northern front did the fighting remain fierce at Road No 9–Khe Sanh and Huế.

*At Road No 9–Khe Sanh*, from the night of February 6 to February 7, Division 304 of the North Vietnamese main forces opened fire and captured Vây Village, a strong position in the defence of the Road No 9 area, enlarging the staging area for the siege of Tà Con on February 8. On that day, *North Vietnam artillery*

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1. Quoted from *Miền Đông Nam Bộ kháng chiến (1945-1975)*. Vol. 2. People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997; pp. 339, 340.



barrage was carried out on the airfield of this US marines' base. However, US helicopters could still land. That is why from February 15 on, North Vietnam troops applied the *gnawing siege tactic* to gradually encroach on the US base. In the west of Tà Con Airfield, the besieging troops had come to the hedges within the shooting range of the US trenches. The targets inside the base were menaced by *direct firing* and dominated by North Vietnam artillery. The tactic applied around Tà Con in February 1968 *seemed* to be the repetition of the tactic applied in Điện Biên Phủ previously.

However, as the Liberation Force offensive in Huế and the North Vietnam pressure on Road No 9-Khe Sanh were not strong enough, MACV did not send great reinforcements to this area. Instead of using infantry, MACV mobilized artillery and airforce, including B.52 bombers, to strafe and bomb the surroundings of Tà Con all day long to reduce the besieging pressure of our side.

*In Huế*, after days of offensive and uprising with resounding victories, the Liberation Forces shifted to resisting the counter-attacks of the other side. *In the north*, on the left bank of the Perfume River, we had not been able to seize the Mang Cá and the Tây Lộc posts, and to obstruct the Saigon troops in Bao Vinh; in order to counter-attack the inner city and other places. *In the South*, on the right bank of the river, the Saigon troops drove ours out of many targets, forcing them to withdraw to the edge of the An Cựu River, Văn Dương and Long Thọ. Here, the Liberation Forces again organized attacks deep in the city. However, from February 5, they had all pulled out from the inner city and had taken position in the suburban areas.

From February 7 onwards, MACV and the Saigon General Staff mobilized 14 main force battalions with the massive support of the airforce, artillery, and tanks to launch counter-attacks and to recapture the northern part of the city, on the left bank of the Perfume River. Then several units of the US and Saigon main forces were sent to this front, bring their total number to 23 battalions. Moreover, US Airborn Division 1 occupied the northern and

northwestern parts of Huế to prevent reinforcement from our side, destroying many houses and monuments in the ancient capital.

In coordination with all the military zone, a number of Liberation Forces units were deployed to the inner city with the determination of keeping the already controlled targets. In suburban areas, Liberation main forces and local troops assaulted the adversary in Nam Giao, Long Thọ, Tam Thai, Bến Ngự Bridge, Lò Rèn Bridge, Đập Đá, Vĩ Dạ, and An Cựu in order to force them to scatter their resisting troops and to assist our forces in the inner city.

From February 9, fighting occurred in many places of the city. Fierce battles took place in the Phú Văn Lâu area, Đông Ba Gate, Mang Cá Post, Huế Radio Station. In Đông Ba, Right Gate, An Hoà, Thượng Tứ Gates, the belligerent sides disputed each house, each garden, each portion of road, both sides suffering heavy losses.

On February 21, after many counter-attacks, the Saigon forces pushed ours to An Hoà. In the inner city, they seized the Thượng Tứ Gate, and pressed our troops to the western part of the city. In such conditions, to preserve our forces from being besieged, on February 22, the Party Committee of Trị Thiên and the Huế Front Command decided to withdraw all our forces out of the city. From 23 to 25 February, the main forces, the commandos, the local troops, the militia and the wounded gradually and secretly withdrew to the liberated areas and the zonal bases in the Trị Thiên mountain region.

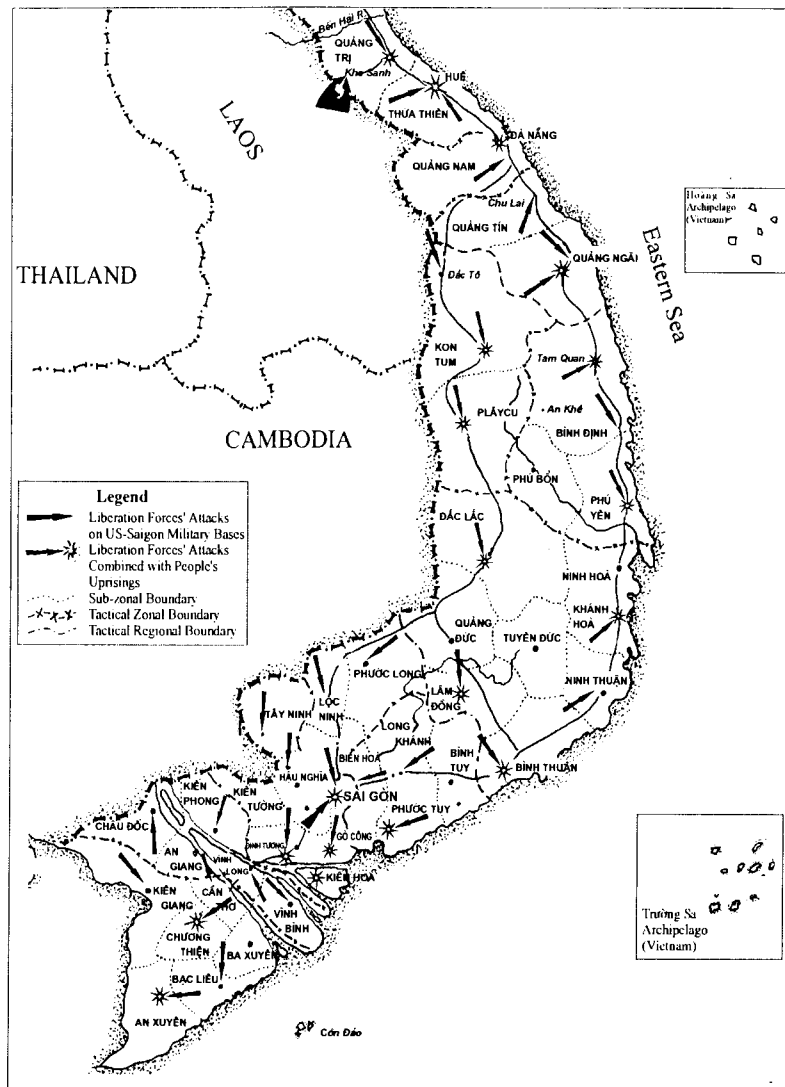
In the zone as a whole, on the night of 17-18 February, the Liberation Forces simultaneously launched attacks with land and artillery forces against 47 cities, district capitals, and many bases of the other side. In Định Tường, Kiến Hòa, Châu Đốc, and Phan Thiết Provinces, infantry, forces attacked deep into these provincial capitals. In Saigon, although US and Saigon forces had flooded the city and fiercely staged military operations in suburban areas, the Liberation Forces got on inner city targets such as the MACV

Headquarters, the Command of the Saigon parachutist troops, the Police General Department of the city, the Special Zone of the Capital, the Phú Lâm Radar Installations, the Chợ Quán Power Station, and the US Residential Quarter. On 17th, 21st, 24th February, the Liberation artillery pounded Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the gasoline storages of An Nhơn and Gò Vấp. In the surrounding areas, they attacked the Power Station of Thủ Đức, the Logistic Base of Rạch Chiếc, Bình Lợi Bridge, the Military Training Centres of Trung Hoa and Quang Trung, the Đồng Dù Base, the Bình Chánh Submilitary District and Hóc Môn Town. They also intercepted the adversary's sweep operations in Vĩnh Lộc, Tân Thới Trung, Hóc Môn, Bà Điểm.

Then, on February 25, Liberation infantry and artillery forces overran the Long Xuyên provincial capital and a number of towns and district capitals in the whole of South Vietnam, increasing pressure on the west and the northwest of Saigon, Phú Thọ and Hóc Môn regions. On the night of March 5 many district capitals, towns and townships were attacked by mortars and infantry troops. However, from March 1968 onwards, *the pressure of the Liberation Forces around the cities gradually dwindled. In reality, the Tết Mậu Thân general offensive and uprising had ended.*

After Tết Mậu Thân, the Liberation Forces that had attacked the cities pulled out to suburban areas or rear bases for consolidation. In the meantime, the US and Saigon troops concentrated their strength to launch large-scale operations to push our forces away from the cities, the military and logistical bases, the key communication lines, to remove the pressure around these important areas. Along with these *clearing up operations*, they continuously opened *sweep operations* to destroy the South Vietnam revolutionary bases in the city and suburban areas. In these operations, the US massively bombed many villages so as to set up a *no-man's land* around the cities and bases, and to massacre innocent people to sow terror

TẾT MẬU THÂN GENERAL OFFENSIVE AND UPRISING (1968)



among the South Vietnam people.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, measures of intimidation and coercion were intensified: arrests of members of the opposition – those who had run for the presidency against Thiệu and Kỳ in 1967; the “Front for Saving the Nation from Danger” headed by Trần Văn Đông was set up; the “civilian defense” was promoted to become a “national policy,” considering these the key measures to oppose the offensives of the Liberation Forces and the insurrection of the people. The administrative organs were purged, ‘denouncing letters’ were distributed to each family, each person to encourage mutual surveillance and the denunciation of the Vietcong or the Saigon army deserters.

Using military measures of the South Vietnam battlefields and the concentration of airforce and navy to destroy the “pan-handle” area between the north of the 17th parallel and the south of the 20th parallel and obstruct supplies from North Vietnam, the US hoped to calm down public opinion in the US and to secure a strong position at the Paris negotiating table.

The Politburo of the Party Central Committee decided to launch continued offensives and uprisings, although our losses were not yet made up and the adversary had strengthened their defense around the cities.

1. Typical was the massacre of Sơn Mỹ, in suburban Quảng Ngãi, on 16 March 1968. The Japanese photo-book *Vietnam, Revolution and Victory* depicts it as follows: “On 16 March 1968, Sơn Mỹ Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province, was annihilated by the US troops. 500 civilians were killed at one time. Then, US planes of various kinds divided in four levels were flying over Sơn Mỹ. Flying below 300 m were helicopters, equipped with guns shot dead any Vietcong trying to run away from the commune. Flying above 300 m were planes transporting officers commanding the battle. Above 800 m was the division commander’s plane observing the battle. This cruelty went to extreme when the US troops considered the operation a sporting activity. It aroused indescribable indignation in us.” Quoted from the Party History Institute, Committee for the Preparation of the History of the Resistance of Southern Central Vietnam, *Nam Trung Bộ kháng chiến (1945-1975)*, Hanoi, 1992, p. 403.

This was the consistent policy of our Party throughout 1968.

In the implementation of this scheme, at 00.30 on May 5, 1968, the Liberation Forces in all battlefields opened simultaneous offensives with infantry and artillery forces against 31 cities and towns, and 58 district capitals and townships. They hit ten command headquarters of the army corps and divisions, 30 airfields, 20 staging bases and military training centres of the enemy. During this campaign, the fighting was violent in Saigon-Gia Định and the Road No 9-Khe Sanh area.

In Saigon-Gia Định, the Liberation artillery pounded Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the US Embassy, the residential quarters of the US Ambassador, the Independence Palace, the Saigon New Port, the Naval Command, the Police General Department, and the Special Zone of the Capital. The commandos and the special forces assaulted the Television Station, and the Phan Thanh Giản Bridge. *The zonal main forces and the spearhead battalions, together with the local troops*, entered the central part of the city, occupied the Bảy Hiền crossroads, the Phú Thọ Hippodrome, the Gò Vấp district capital, the Letter-Y Bridge, the Police Post of district 8, and the Bình Lợi and Bình Hoà Bridges. In coordination with the force fighting inside the city, in the *Saigon suburbs*, our forces controlled the roads leading to the city, and pounded a number of storehouses, airfields, and district capitals of the other side. The US and Saigon troops strongly opposed, and organized large-scale counter-offensives. In spite of their superiority in troop numbers and fire power, they could not easily drive the attacking forces out of the occupied places. Fighting in the Phú Thọ Hippodrome, the Tre Bridge, the Letter-Y Bridge, the Phạm Thế Hiển Landing Place, Minh Phụng Road was fiercest for a number of days.

*On the Road No 9-Khe Sanh battlefield*, reinforced with fresh troops, North Vietnam main forces units defeated US Airborne Division 1 and four Saigon battalions, and tightened the siege around Tà Con, putting serious pressure on the US forces.

In such conditions, the US Military Command was compelled to withdraw from Khe Sanh in order to preserve their forces (in June 1968) after losing 17,000 troops and hundreds of planes; as a result, the defense line of Road No 9 was broken at a crucial section. This was a big military and political defeat for the US, proving that *it could not stand firm at the outer circle of the defense line, on the face of the offensive of the North Vietnam main forces*.

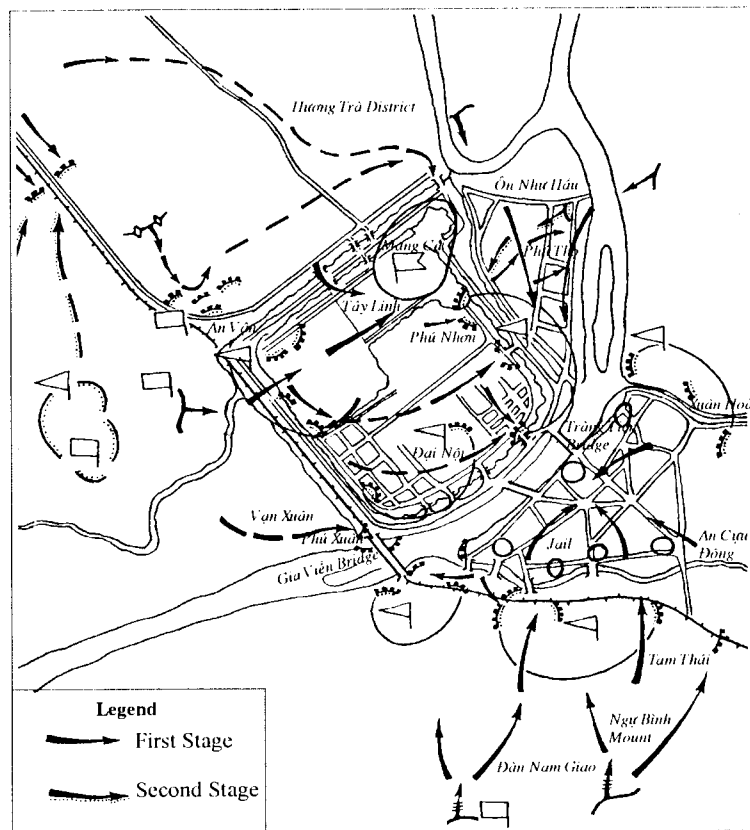
After the wave of the offensives in May, the army and people of South Vietnam launched another wave of attacks in August,<sup>1</sup> in which artillery was the main instrument, against targets in 27 cities, 100 towns, district capitals, and submilitary quarters of the US and Saigon side.

The offensives in May and August 1968 dealt a *heavy new blow on the US will of aggression*, causing it great losses in vital forces and war materials. Therefore *the US representatives in the Paris negotiations were in a weaker position than before*.

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1. Authors at home and abroad writing about *Tết Mậu Thân 1968* often think that after the second wave of offensives (May 1968) and the third wave (August 1968), the strategic leadership of Vietnam advocated the launching of continued offensives and uprisings against South Vietnam cities. These waves of offensives would last until 1969. As a matter of fact, after approving the proposal of the Zonal Command on the second wave of attack against Saigon (March 1968), the Supreme Strategic Command had envisaged the shifting of military efforts to the plains, rural areas and to the mountain regions. Thereafter, there was an exchange of views between the First Secretary of the Party Central Committee, the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief-of-Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam in June 1968. A definitive decision was taken to shift military activities and to keep the newly-liberated rural areas. This important decision was immediately conveyed to the battlefields. In reality, there were not any fourth or fifth waves of offensive at the end of 1968 or in early 1969. Even though, in the press and on television, propaganda was then very active in claiming the victories won by the 4th and the 5th waves of offensives for the purpose of diversion and pressure on the US Government from the world and US public opinion while the Liberation main forces had completely moved to suburban areas and mountain regions.

**TẾT MẬU THẦN GENERAL OFFENSIVE AND UPRISING  
IN TRỊ THIÊN - HUẾ (1968)**



For our part, launching continuous and lasting offensives and uprisings, the revolution in South Vietnam and its military and political forces suffered heavy losses in 1968: 111,306 cadres, combatants, and revolutionary people had been killed or wounded. For Nam Bộ alone, our casualties in 1968 were “higher than all previous years from 1961 to 1970” except 1968.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, while concentrating our forces in the successive drives of offensives against the cities, we had exposed the rural areas in the plain. Taking advantage of this situation, the adversary mustered its forces to drive our main forces away from the cities and the military bases. At the same time, they carried out “urgent pacification campaigns” and sweep operations, trying to recapture the areas they had just lost, particularly the Saigon suburbs, the Mekong Delta, the coastal areas of Zone 5 and Trị Thiên. From November 1968, they launched the “*Phượng Hoàng (Phoenix) Campaign*”<sup>2</sup> aimed at “destroying the secret administration of Vietcong” that they were quite sure existed in 17 provinces, five cities and 2,541 communes<sup>3</sup> in the forms of Revolutionary Committees in all South Vietnam.

With great efforts and new maneuvers, taking advantage of our exposure in the rural areas of the plains, from mid-1968 onwards, they gradually recaptured all the regions they had lost during the February and May general offensives and uprisings and restored

1. Institute of Vietnamese Military History. *Mấy vấn đề về tổng kết chiến tranh và viết lịch sử quân sự* (speeches and writings by General Hoàng Văn Thái, Vice-Minister of National Defense from 1980-1986). Hanoi, 1987, p. 278.

2. In July 1968 Phoenix Committees at all levels were set up to destroy revolutionary bases in South Vietnam through assassinations and kidnapping agents in this organization were mostly chosen from among hooligans who were paid and directed by the CIA (USA).

3. Quoted from Trần Văn Giàu. *Miền Nam giữ vững thành đồng*. Vol. 5. Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1970; p. 220.

important communication lines. From that period to 1969-1970, *the people's war situation in the three strategic regions of the South Vietnam Revolution* met with great difficulties and harsh trials.

This situation explained why over the past several years, there had been many writings and serious discussions *about the launching of the offensive drives in May and August 1968*. Scientifically speaking, these discussions are necessary; they contribute to further clarifying *the most important and complicated historical event* which lasted fairly long and happened on a large scale. But in spite of all these debates, this event does not reduce its historical value as *a great landmark and a great turning point* in the 26 years of the Vietnamese people's resistance against the US for national salvation.

### Chapter III

## THE EFFECTS OF *TẾT MẬU THÂN* AND SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT *TẾT*

The general offensive and uprising by the army and people of South Vietnam dealt a decisive blow to the US will of aggression after so many years of war waving. The US was obliged to "de-escalate" the war, to pull out its forces. *Tết Mậu Thân* became an obsession of the US political circle and a "Vietnam syndrome" in the US for many years.

Although *Tết Mậu Thân* did not reach the objectives of the expected first possibility, it created a situation that had never been seen before, thereby allowing our army and people to bring the revolution in South Vietnam to a new strategic direction.

Explaining the causes and effects of *Tết Mậu Thân*, the US and Saigon military and political circles, some American researchers and even some of ours, often focus on certain facts of *Tết Mậu Thân*: secrecy, surprise, the information and the exaggerated impression of the US mass media, the inopportune intervention by the US military forces, the violent anti-war movement fanned up in the US. However, these are only the apparent effects of *Tết*. They are not the main force that drove the US from initiative to passivity, from an offensive to a defensive position, that compelled it to review completely its way of conducting the war and to resign itself to bitter defeat on the battlefield in Vietnam.

In fact, in the aggression against Vietnam, only after its military failure, did the US accept to de-escalate the war, which, from the very beginning, it had wanted "to win and withdraw" quickly. This was in reality a hopeless and impracticable expectation. In this connection, before *Tết Mậu Thân* and many years after that event, *the US military commanders and many US authors had taken the criteria of a battle to consider a strategy*. They had based themselves on "body counting" or statistics of casualties by both sides to decide victory or defeat. They did not understand that in a small country like Vietnam, when fighting against such "super powers" as France and the US, all Vietnamese patriots had the same mind that "they would accept any sacrifice rather than losing their country and being slaves." This determination was expressed in the first day of the nation-wide resistance war in 1946. Nearly twenty years later, it was once again voiced by President Hồ Chí Minh: "Facing the invasion of the country by the US, all the people in both North and South Vietnam are united as one man and will resolutely fight; the struggle may last 5 years, 10 years, 20 years or longer, we shall fight with determination until complete victory." Therefore, considering the success or failure of a military strategy, we should consider its practical effect as compared with the objectives initially set.

## I. THE EFFECTS OF *TẾT MẬU THÂN*

### 1. The strategic turning point on the South Vietnam battlefield

At the beginning of the US limited war, the US military forces were used to destroy the South Vietnam revolutionary armed forces and political bases, to break the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese people, and to consolidate the Saigon Administration and army as the basis of neo-colonialist domination in South Vietnam. For this strategic purpose, the US opened "search-and-destroy" operations against the Liberation main forces and the

leading organs of the South Vietnam revolution; Saigon troops were used to support "the pacification" of the rural areas, the US navy and airforce were to escalate the *war of destruction* against North Vietnam to check its support to South Vietnam. However, after two counter-offensive campaigns, these measures did not yield the results expected by the US. On the contrary, after over two years of fighting, the revolutionary forces were not destroyed or driven back; they were strengthened and the situation of the people's war was bettered in both North and South Vietnam. These factors enabled our army and people to launch the *Tết Mậu Thân* 1968 general offensive and uprising.

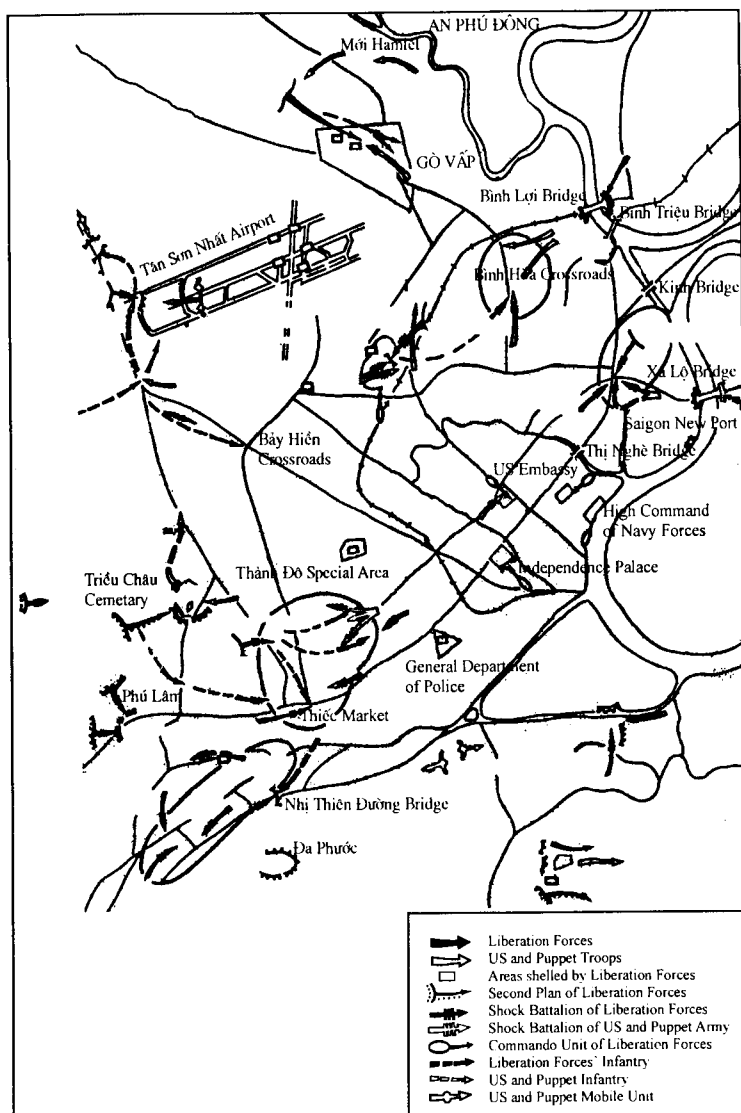
For nearly two months, this campaign, like a tidal wave, attacked four out of six big cities, 37 out of 44 towns and hundreds of district capitals.

Almost all US and Saigon central-level and local organs were attacked. The Liberation infantry, artillery troops, and commandos hit four army corps commands, eight out of eleven division commands of the Saigon army, two special-zone commands, two US field-combat commands, and many brigade, regiment, sub-zone, district quarter commanding posts, as well as hundreds of military bases, storehouses, airfields, ports. Many land and waterways were cut off, many communication centres were attacked, disturbing transport and communication activity in many areas controlled by the US and Saigon. *So, it was the first time in many years of war in Vietnam, all the defense system of cities and towns was attacked, the rear and war bases of the adversary had become battlefields for fierce confrontation between the two sides for many weeks and many months.*

In the measuring of forces, the audacious, violent onslaughts of the Liberation Forces *damaged or destroyed a great deal of the adversary effectives, armament, and war reserves, upset their previ-*



**FIRST STAGE OF THE TẾT MẬU THÂN GENERAL OFFENSIVE  
AND UPRISING IN SAIGON (FROM 31 JAN. TO 28 FEB. 1968)**



ously secure rear base.<sup>1</sup> Although the accurate number of casualties has not been made public by both the US and Vietnam, but it can be affirmed that during the *Tết Mậu Thân*, both sides suffered heavy losses in troops and war means. However, what surprised the US and the world was that the Liberation Forces could launch such a simultaneous and widespread offensive, and cause so many casualties to the US while using *not a numerically large force*. According to the assessment of MACV then and many US authors later, the Communist Command had mobilized about 67,000 out of 240,000 troops in South Vietnam. Fighting against the Liberation Forces were, on the other side, 1.1 million combatants – 492,000 GI's, 61,000 troops from South Korean, Thailand and other countries of the “free world,” 342,000 regular troops and 284,000 local troops and militiamen of the Republic of Vietnam. Moreover, the US mobilized 2,600 planes, 3,000 helicopters, 3,500 armoured vehicles to cope with this offensive by the South Vietnam revolution. In spite of the big discrepancy in terms of troops, fire power, and war means, to

1. The casualties of each side during *Tết Mậu Thân* are mentioned in a number of books. Yet the difference of the given numbers is great. For instance, in *Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước 1954-1975 - những sự kiện quân sự* published by the Vietnamese Military History Institute in 1988, it is estimated that during the first 2 months of 1968, 147,000 enemy officers and men (including 43,000 GI's) were killed. Recently, J. Stein and M. Leepson (Americans) in their *Notebook on Facts of the Vietnam War* wrote that in 1968, US casualties in South Vietnam increased drastically, nearly double those in all previous years put together (30,610 as compared with 16,201). Also according to the same authors, the number of GI's killed in 1968 in South Vietnam was 14,589. In one week only, from 10 to 17 January 1968, 543 GI's were killed for the recapturing of the cities and towns. These were the weeks with heaviest US losses in South Vietnam (*Notebook on Facts of the Vietnam War*. Vietnamese translation. National Political Publishing House, 1993, p. 81). *Cuộc Tổng công kích-Tổng khởi nghĩa của Việt cộng Mậu Thân 1968* published by the Saigon Army in August 1968, gives the number of casualties among Saigon troops in February and March 1968: 20,977; 4,904 were killed. As for US/allied troops, the figures were respectively 24,013 and 4,124.

the US advantage, the South Vietnam Liberation Forces managed to break the defense line of the cities and towns and to inflict great losses on the enemy, they also *pinned over one million troops of the other side to the urban battlefield*, and drove them to failure in spite of their numerical superiority and their better equipment. That is why, 17 years later, G. Kolko in his *Anatomy of a War* wrote that *Tết Mậu Thân* was “the bitterest lesson in the US fighting.”

While the *Tết* offensive was reaching its climax, on February 17, 1968, Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reported to Washington that the *Vietcong* offensive was near to success in dozens of places. To avoid defeat, the US could not help taking “*timely action*” which compelled the US forces to massively use their artillery, air force, and tanks to raze to the ground many residential quarters and to kill civilians in the rear of their bases. The US fire power transformed into ruins, 80% of Huế, half of Mỹ Tho Town (population: 8,000 persons). Bến Tre Town also had the same fate.

“*We must destroy this city to save it,*” said a US officer when Bến Tre was being destroyed. The typical statement was at once widely published in the press of the US and many other countries.

This statement unknowingly exposed the ironical contradiction between the objectives of the US war and the means used to implement them. The US had hoped at the beginning to “win the mind and the heart” of the Vietnamese population, to make them believe that the US presence was to protect and to support South Vietnam in building a “free non-communist nation.” That is why though the US succeeded later in driving the Liberation Forces out of the cities and considered it a victory, *Tết Mậu Thân* was actually a *great political defeat for the US in the South Vietnam battlefield*.

In the plain rural areas and in the mountain regions, the *Tết* offensive made the Saigon coercion machinery and 50,000 pacifi-

cation workers in 555 pacification teams fall into oblivion, and disintegrated the US “pincer prongs.” The reason was that, while the greater part of the US effectives was retained in the cities, the local revolutionary forces immediately helped the people in dissolving the Republic of Vietnam militia, seizing power and extending the liberated zone, thus *dealing a heavy blow to the enemy grassroots administrative system in the countryside*.

*In Trị Thiên*, over 200,000 people of 40 communes, 30 villages were freed from coercion of the Saigon Administration, expanding the liberated region to 4/5 of the number of the villages.

*In Zones 5 and 6*, the offensive and uprising made a greater part of the Saigon Administration’s coercion machinery collapse in many provinces in the plains and along the coast.

*In the Central Highlands*, with the help of the Liberation Forces, in many places, the populations broke out of the concentrated camps and returned to their native villages and to build the latter into fighting villages.

*In Nam Bộ*, the grassroots level of the Saigon Administration disintegrated; the liberated regions were expanded up to the proximity of the towns or district capitals.

The aforesaid situation was reported to Johnson on 17 April 1968: “The *Vietcong* have controlled large portions of the rural areas... The pacification program called “the revolutionary development program” by the US has seriously set back.”<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, in Washington, the situation analysis office of the Defense Ministry remarked that the *Tết* offensive had killed for good the “Pacification” Program. Later, a number of US researchers on the Vietnam War came to the common conclusion on the US failure that it was difficult to describe the control of rural areas by each

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1. The Secret Papers. Vol. 2, op. cit., p. 249.

party. G. Kolko further revealed that during *Tết Mậu Thân* both Washington and Saigon agreed that, although the National Liberation Front did not succeed in the cities, it recorded achievements in rural areas. This avowal testifies to the fact that *Tết Mậu Thân* not only brought the war to the US and Saigon Administration lair, it also dealt a heavy blow to the "Pacification" Program throughout South Vietnam.

This situation aroused confusion and fear among many Americans working on the "Pacification" Program. They were so naive to be surprised that "the Vietcong had entered all the cities for attack and no Vietnamese informed their government of the fact!"<sup>1</sup> This secrecy was obviously a direct threat to the existence of the Saigon political structure which the US had long relied upon to wage its neo-colonialist war. For that reason, in late February 1968, the Clifford Commission was set up by Johnson to examine the request of 206,000 troops by General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for coping with the *Tết* offensive. The Commission remarked that "the ineffective political response of the Republic of Vietnam Government might also help the *Vietcong* improve their enterprise in the cities as well as in the countryside". The political response referred to here was nothing but the US string pulling Thiệu-Kỳ-Hương to put in jail elements of the opposition, to purge the administrative organs, to issue the order of general mobilization

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1. Quoted from Trần Văn Giàu. *Miền Nam giữ vững thành đồng*, op. cit., p. 55. It should be added that for many years, all families in South Vietnam, up to 1967, were to a certain extent related to the Saigon Administration and army, no matter they lived in the Saigon or the National Liberation Front-controlled zone. However, the preparations for *Tết* took place in a large scale for several months, including the movement of Liberation main force divisions from their mountain bases to the proximity of the cities, and no inhabitants of South Vietnam informed the Saigon Administration of the fact. It should be affirmed that the attitude of the South Vietnam population represented the submerged part of the iceberg of *Tết Mậu Thân 1968*. This submerged part was one of the important factors that discouraged the Washington leadership most during *Tết*.

for the recruitment of soldiers<sup>1</sup> and to consider "civilian defense" as a national policy, to forbid the gathering of over three persons to distribute "denouncing letters" to the families... The consequences of these "political responses" were actually contrary to the US initial expectations. They further increased the *hostility and opposition of the South Vietnam population; they narrowed the social basis of the Saigon regime and further weakened its military forces*, which had been defeated before the massive entry of US troops, which were more and more depending on the presence of GI's, and which had proved to be passive and inefficient in the task of pacifying the rural areas. Therefore, it was not surprising that, when *Tết Mậu Thân* broke out, the number of deserters in the Saigon army was higher than ever; its combat battalions had only half of their effective. After *Tết*, desertion continued to increase, particularly among the new recruits.<sup>2</sup>

From now on, opposition to the war became widespread not only among the Saigon army but also among US troops who were demoralized ever since the March 31, 1968 Statement by President-Commander-in-Chief Johnson. The common psychology of the US expeditionary corps was "to take care of your own life to survive this period," "to avoid being the last dead soldier in Vietnam" and "to remain perseverant in a phase of nightmare."

So, *Tết Mậu Thân* completely exposed the weaknesses and inefficiencies of the Saigon Administration which became more and more dependent on the US presence, both militarily and economically. No

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1. This general mobilization order demanded that men aged between 16-50 must join the army. To recruit soldiers, the Saigon Administration resorted to such measures as sweeps in civilian residential quarters, forcible recruitment of Buddhist monks and making most students fail in their examinations to graduate from high schools.

2. Many US authors admit that after *Tết Mậu Thân*, the US de-Americanization, then its Vietnamization of the war put too heavy a burden on the shoulders of the Saigon army, causing the widespread desertion phenomenon. In 1969 only, the number of deserters was 107,000.

one in Saigon and Washington could believe that the Saigon Government *would survive* in case US troops were withdrawn.<sup>1</sup> That is the reason why the Vietnamese army and people started *Tết Mậu Thân* with so much self-confidence, bravery, and fierceness. *Tết* was a surprise large-scale offensive aimed at the *weakest spot of the US in South Vietnam, i.e. the Saigon Administration*, to discourage the leadership in Washington and to smash the US will of aggression. To smash the US will of aggression was the consistent objective of Vietnam. Therefore, fixing its initial strategic objective, Vietnam had no illusion to win victory over the US because of purely military strength, or to annihilate all US forces in South Vietnam. Instead, Vietnam should fight the US and win victory thanks to a combined, multi-faceted force (political, moral, military), thanks to the standing and strength of the people's war. This force stems from the unswerving will and determination of a whole nation not resigned to losing their country and being slaves; it stems from the traditions forged by many generations of Vietnamese throughout thousands of years of national construction and defense.

To promote that force to the utmost, the Vietnamese strategic leading organ during *Tết Mậu Thân*, recognized, on the one hand, the use of main force divisions to besiege Khe Sanh for many days so as to draw part of the US forces to the mountain region, thereby creating conditions for simultaneous attacks on the cities, and the US and Saigon leading organs. On the other, great attention was attached to the *simultaneous uprising of the populations* in the rural areas and that of the cities as well. The simultaneous attacks on the cities compelled all the US forces to give up their "search-and-destroy" operations and to return to the cities, which became then

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1. *Tết Mậu Thân* was a heavy blow dealt to the Saigon Administration and army. In this connection, the author of *The USA and Indochina: from Roosevelt to Nixon*, is of the view that the essential lesson of *Tết* was that it would take a long time before South Vietnam could stand firm as a non-Communist state. From that reality, H. Kissinger, in his article in the January 1969 issue of the *Foreign Affairs*, comes to the conclusion that the US military strength could not attain the political objectives in South Vietnam.

battlefields; the US troops had fallen from their offensive position into a passive and defensive position. This situation of the US forces caused the Saigon forces to concentrate also in the cities and towns. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had to call on the Saigon Government to order its forces to take suburban areas and the outside of the cities to relieve the adversary force's pressure on Saigon and other cities. Yet, the Republic of Vietnam troops admitted that they were being in a critical situation and could not fight back any *Vietcong* attack against the cities. In such circumstances, MACV had to withdraw to the military bases and the communication lines. What was more important, as for *Tết Mậu Thân*, the US had to mobilize 50% of its forces to the northern front to cope with adverse eventualities. This fact created a new difficulty for the US because its *reserve forces were too thinned up*; it would be very dangerous in case Khe Sanh, Huế, Quảng Trị, the Central Highlands, and Saigon were attacked simultaneously by the other side. For that reason, MACV demanded an urgent reinforcement from the US to Vietnam in order to help and encourage the Saigon troops to leave the cities and towns, to return to the countryside so as to prevent *Tết Mậu Thân*-type offensives. The request on reinforcement for South Vietnam aroused hot debates among high-ranking officials in Washington to the extent that one member of the US Government had to flatly say: Gen. Westmoreland should not be afraid of losing, if his request for more troops was rejected by Washington. In mid-March 1968, Westmoreland's troop request, supported by the JCS, was rejected. This fact meant that the US could not afford necessary and sufficient quantity of troops for the pursuance of the "search-and-destroy" strategy as before. That is why after *Tết Mậu Thân*, US combat troops in South Vietnam were shifted to the task of occupation and defence, in application of the "sweep-and-keep" strategy.

So, after so many months of fruitless "search-and-destroy" operations against the South Vietnam Liberation Forces, US troops had to assume the task of "home guards," a task entrusted by MACV to Saigon troops during the 1965-1966 and the 1966-1967

dry seasons, to avoid high casualties and gradually to push the Saigon army to confront the Liberation main forces.

However, the change of the "sweep-and-keep" strategy in reality did not have as much effect as expected by the US.

Because after Tết, the towns and cities continued to be attacked by the Liberation Forces: US casualties increased day after day. It was known that the number of GI's killed in 1968 was unprecedentedly high in all the US war of aggression in Vietnam.

So, *the South Vietnamese army and people had recorded great achievements: decimating the adversary forces, damaging/destroying a great deal of war means, disintegrating the Saigon Administration in rural areas, breaking the defense of the cities and towns throughout South Vietnam, upsetting the US and Saigon strategic deployment in South Vietnam.* What is more important, Tết was like an effective test exposing the contradictions that the US and Saigon could not surmount in their policies and the conduct of the war, exposing the US military and political failure during all the years of the limited war. The biggest military failure was that the US strategic objective of attacking the backbone of the Vietcong was completely floundered after three years of "search-and-destroy" activities; the US strategic deployment had been upset. When Tết offensive was still going on, the CIA already admitted that *the Communists had achieved big results in their military, political, and psychological objectives. They had controlled large rural areas, smashed the Republic of Vietnam administrative, economic, and military system, or at least they were able now to establish direct relations with the urban regions in an effective way. And the revolutionary offensive had been to a large extent successful in fulfilling its initial objectives, except popular uprisings in the cities. This success of Tết Mậu Thân had dealt a strong blow to the prestige of the US forces on the Vietnam battlefield, weakened the position and influence of the Saigon Administration and army in both the cities and the countryside, thereby stunning and amazing the top leaders in Washington.*

## 2. Violent commotions in the USA

In fact, not until Tết Mậu Thân but, as expounded in Chapter I, as early as US troops were sent to South Vietnam and in 1968, the US was deeply embarrassed, the US military leaders were facing a crossroad, a dilemma, being unable to fight in the way they wanted to. This fact had made the US political circles re-examine the US military line and strategic measures in Vietnam. That is why Tết Mậu Thân pointed out the strong division among the US political circles. As early as the Tết offensive began, many US politicians realized at once that Tết proved the US failure in controlling Vietnam, that Tết had removed the illusions that prevented the US from seeing the real situation in Vietnam. Then, the already acute contradictions of the ruling circles in the US became all the more acute.

The debates in the US Administration were at first about the urgent measures to be taken to cope with Tết Mậu Thân. The JCS was of the view that more troops were to be sent to Vietnam. The difficulty was that a solution must be worked out to avoid making thinner the strategic reserve forces which were already dangerously thin then. Should the reserves be called up? This was what President Johnson had by any means to avoid doing during the three years of war escalation, so as to maintain the support of the US Congress and people. Nevertheless, Defence Secretary McNamara sent 10,500 more troops to Vietnam and advised Johnson to abstain from calling up the reserves.

Thereafter, the JCS and Gen. Westmoreland requested a 206,756 men reinforcement to South Vietnam: three divisions of ground forces, 15 squadrons of tactical planes, and a number of squadrons for the support of the US Navy now operating in Vietnam. In other words, the US had been obliged to publicly put the country in a state of war, to escalate the war to a new degree, the consequences of which could not be estimated in February 1968. We can understand then why the US high-ranking officials were dumbfounded when they received the reinforcement request:

Johnson had to designate his close friend Clark Clifford to head a committee of US high-ranking leaders to examine the request by Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland for more troops at that time.

At the very first meetings of the C. Clifford Committee, the US officials did not discuss the troop reinforcement but turned to reviewing all the US war policies and military strategies in Vietnam. The meetings were pressing and tense under the pressure of the daily situation of the battlefield during *Tết Mậu Thân*. Later, recalling these meetings, Clifford said he could not see when and how the war would end, how long the request for troops and armament would last, when the Republic of Vietnam army would be able to replace the US forces.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, after the ten days of late February and early March 1968, he firmly believed that the US military lines and policies in South Vietnam throughout the years of the limited war were without end; they were also hopeless.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the Clifford Committee's official report to Johnson, many questions relating to the US war policies in Vietnam were left unanswered. Anyhow, the members of the Committee were of the view that US policies in Vietnam should be examined in the light of the global politico-military thought that the US could no longer control the war in Vietnam. As for the US leadership at that time, they had to admit that *Tết Mậu Thân* had led them to a turning point.

However, this was not only a strategic crisis of the US in Vietnam; it also revealed a still more painful reality: the deep division in the US leadership, the increasing anger of the US people about the Government, under the impact of *Tết Mậu Thân*. Moreover, while the US Administration was at a loss in coping with the *Tết* offensive, and hesitating between the escalation or de-escalation of the war, in the US towns and campuses, the movement of

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1 and 2. Memoirs by US Defence Secretary Clark Clifford about his meeting with high-ranking military officers after *Tết Mậu Thân*. Vietnamese translation in the January 1993 issue of the *Military History Journal*.

opposition to the war and to the Government strongly surged up. The US television and press continuously gave information and comments on the offensive. Modern TV technique, the reportages and the images about the battles in the cities and towns of South Vietnam by correspondents played an important role in exposing the realities of the war and in helping the US public understand what had been happening on the battlefield.

It is obvious that the mass media only reflected events and could not be the creators of events. That is precisely why they became an overwhelming pressure directed to the White House and Pentagon and they showed to the public the US errors in *Tết Mậu Thân* and Saigon on the battlefield, and affirmed the simultaneous attacks and the fierce confrontation of the Liberation combatants to the GI's. The moving pictures of the destructions caused by US bombs and shells in the cities and towns, particularly the horrible scene of Police General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan shooting at the head of an empty-handed prisoner of war were covered by the US mass media. This stark objectiveness of the US mass media broke up the wall set up by the Johnson Administration to conceal information about the Vietnam War. As a result, the various strata of US society could realize the contrast between the realities of the remote battlefields in Vietnam and the "victories" alleged by the Administration. Moreover, the activity of the mass media brought the Vietnam War to every US family<sup>1</sup>. The US people understood that the US Government and President had been deceiving them. For that reason the changing of their attitude towards the war had reached a decisive and irreversible phase. Generally, whenever a crisis occurred in the world and having relations to the US national interests, the initial reaction of the US Congress and people was to

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1. It should be added that at the time of Pearl Harbour, there were only 10,000 television sets in all the US. At the time of the Korean War (1950-1953) this number reached 10 million. At *Tết Mậu Thân 1968* there were 100 million TV sets in the US, i.e. 16 out of 17 families had TV sets, 98% of the US population were TV viewers.

unite and support the efforts of the Government and the President to solve the crisis. The World War II, the Korean War, and the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964 testify to this remark. It is still remembered that when the Tonkin Gulf incident happened, the US Congress, the press, the people in general, supported the reaction of their government. And immediately thereafter, an antedated declaration of war was approved by the Congress, paving the way for the Johnson Government to start a large-scale war of destruction against North Vietnam. In those days, the US stood firmly united around its President in an absolute way. But four years later, in the first week of *Tết Mậu Thân*, there was no longer such support and unity that had been a solid prop for the Johnson Administration's war policy in Vietnam. On the contrary, the forces opposing the war and the Administration gathered all over the US. The *Tết* offensive was like a lightning showing the way for the people who were still doubtful or dissatisfied to get together and to muster courage to demand a new strategy to end the war. Even those who, before *Tết Mậu Thân*, were supporting Johnson's policy also were involved in discussion on the war and the US military strategy with anxiety and despair. Many among these people had changed their standpoint and demanded with insistence an end to the war and the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. This was a tragic change turning the Vietnam War into a burning political issue in the US, the direct cause of which was the *Tết Mậu Thân* general offensive.

On 3rd February 1968, at a press conference held in Washington after the start of *Tết*, the US President called the people opposed to the war "defeatists deceived by communists," and said that these people were not numerous. At that press conference, he read out excerpts from messages sent from Saigon<sup>1</sup> and affirmed

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1. Johnson did not know that while he was reading the messages, all the audience murmured to one another. Their doubt that there were two kinds of messages from Vietnam, one for the President to know the sad truth on the battlefield and the other for him to soothe public opinion.

that the communist offensive had been completely smashed. Yet, shortly later, a series of incidents made it impossible for the US President to conceal the truth: on 14 February 1968, he personally went to Bragg to say goodbye to the GI's about going to Vietnam to cope with *Tết Mậu Thân*. Many of these soldiers had just returned from Vietnam. They were no longer youngsters leaving for the pleasure of adventures but veterans obliged to return to a battlefield from which a number of them would never go back home.

Only a few days later, the US President was thunder-struck by the *New York Times* that leaked Gen. Westmoreland's request for more troops to deal with the *Tết* offensive of the *Vietcong*. The top secret news became a major event in the US, a crucial point of political discussion that increased the discontent of the US public.

This discontent was manifested two days later when the test election of the Democratic Party in New Hampshire showed that McCarthy, an opponent to the war, got more votes than current President Johnson. This fact proved that Johnson was being challenged by a candidate who had the capability of taking advantage of all the dissatisfaction and weariness about the war. Moreover, encouraged by the happening in New Hampshire, on March 16, Democratic Senator R. Kennedy, the political adversary of Johnson, announced his candidacy and violently criticized Johnson's warlike policy. At the same time, a Gallup poll showed that the number of supporters of the US war in Vietnam reduced to an unprecedented low level of 26%. Johnson's supporters accounted for 36% only. It should be added that as Gallup had observed, whenever the number of supporters of a President was lower than 50%, then he was in a politically critical situation.

What was the reason of such as wide popular discontent? Answering this question, one of the politicians supporting Johnson studied the issue and concluded: the direct cause was the *Tết* offensive by the South Vietnam army and people.

If the division inside the Administration, and Johnson's Democratic Party and the rapidly increasing anti-war movement in the US were important factors driving Johnson to the aforesaid situation, *the change of views of the Congressmen and the so-called "wisemen"* on the Vietnam War policies were the moral factor deciding the political fate of this President. On March 11, Secretary of State D. Rusk testified at the Senate on US policies in Vietnam. On March 18, 1968 at the House of Representatives, 139 Congressmen including 89 from the Republican Party and 41 from Johnson's Democratic Party, approved a resolution requesting the Congress to review all the US policies and strategies in South Vietnam. In this situation, the US Congress strongly opposed the intention of sending more troops to Gen. Westmoreland; the Congressmen were increasingly fed up with the war in Vietnam because they realized that even with more troops it was not easy for the US to reverse the situation that was becoming worse and worse. Such was the attitude of the Congress, what about the "wisemen" who represented top capitalists in the US?

After over 15 days of study about the war situation in Vietnam through direct interviews with high-ranking officials of the State Department, the Defense Department, the CIA, Dean Acheson, former Secretary of Senate under Truman who had great influence on Johnson and who was entrusted by Johnson with the task of examining the real situation in Vietnam, stated: the more he studied the US policies in Vietnam, the more he thought the situation hopeless. That is why having resolutely supported Johnson's policy before *Tết*, on March 15, 1968 he felt it necessary to tell Johnson that he was being deceived by the JCS, that what Westmoreland was striving to do in Vietnam was unpracticable unless economic and military resources were used with no limits for the purpose. *500,000 US troops were far insufficient to crush and to submit the Vietcong, this could be clearly seen through the Tết offensive.*

So, would the request for more troops be "sufficient" to recover initiative on the battlefield? And the sending of reinforcement to Vietnam would further stretch thin the US strategic reserves. D. Acheson also said that the US had no other hope than *reassessing the situation and changing the activities of its ground forces, that it must stop or greatly reduce the bombing and end the war with the minimum losses.*

Finally he affirmed that he himself had no hope and concluded that: *"the country no longer supports the Vietnam War."*<sup>1</sup>

On the same day, the US Ambassador to the UNO sent a memorandum to Johnson urging him to completely end the bombing of North Vietnam and to open the way for negotiations. This was also the view of many high-ranking officials in the US Government during the days of *Tết Mậu Thân*.

Immediately after the meeting between Johnson and D. Acheson, on 19 March 1968, C. Clifford, who just replaced McNamara as Defense Secretary, requested Johnson to convene the "wisemen" to settle the problems that the Clifford group had not solved. It is to be noted that before *Tết*, except Georges Ball and Goldberge, all other members of the Clifford group, Clifford included, supported Johnson in escalating the war of destruction against North Vietnam. The reason was that they were closely related to the financial circles, the law firms, and the influential economic corporations in the US. *Their view was the true reflection of the attitude of the financial oligarchy.*

This proposal by C. Clifford at the inception of his post as Defense Secretary was motivated by his desire to let the "wisemen" (behind them were the US financial circles) speak out the idea that

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1. Quoted from Peter Apuller's *The US and Indochina, from Roosevelt to Nixon*. Vietnamese translation. Op. cit., p. 255.



the Clifford group had formulated but dared not to conclude decisively. Looking back at the activities of the US industrial and financial circles a few years before, one can see that before *Tết Mậu Thân*, they had confidence that the US military might would rapidly be victorious in Vietnam. In November 1965 D. Acheson affirmed "*his support for the US commitments in Vietnam and his determination to mobilize all the national resources to implement these commitments successfully.*"

Yes, in view of the economic difficulties created by the Vietnam War, *financial deficit* and inflation increased, the *value of the dollar* considerably reduced. Many European banks poured out dollars to buy gold. The whole financial system of the world based on the dollar was more and more seriously influenced by the feverish "gold hunt."

The gold reserve of the US Treasury diminished day after day causing the US to close the gold market on certain days, the *foreign exchange war* threatened to break out between the US and other developed countries, and separate *trade blocks* appeared. According to G. Kolko, should the US Administration not put the defence of the dollar before all other considerations, then the European banks would have the right to take a step that would upset the US position in the world economy.

The US economic-financial quandary originated from its being bogged down in the Vietnam War, which *was followed by a quick weakening of its military position in the world*. When US combat ground forces began to be introduced into South Vietnam, when the war of destruction was escalated against North Vietnam and the limited war was started, the US armed forces were four times more numerous than those of France, six times more numerous than those of West Germany, Italy, and the U.K. Its total force reached 3.5 million men, 1,700,000 of them were stationed in hundreds of bases in foreign lands worldwide. With its strong economic potentialities and such huge armed forces, under its global "flexible response"

strategy, the US was strong enough to cope with a world war or two *Vietnam-type* limited wars in two different directions and win victory. However, U.S forces were concentrated in the Vietnam War, US remaining *non-nuclear forces* were dangerously thinned out in hundreds of military bases all over the world, to extent that during *Tết Mậu Thân* 40% of ground forces combat divisions, 50% of marines divisions, 50% of fighter planes, 30% of warships of the US were retained on the Vietnam battlefield. It is to be noted that under the US global strategy, *Europe* and not Asia, not Vietnam for still more reason, was the *main direction* to which the US gave priority in all respects of the military field. Yet, in this main direction, even at the greatest tension, the US concentrated only 493,000 troops. In Vietnam in 1968, US forces on land and at sea amounted to 800,000, i.e. nearly double the number of troops concentrated in Europe. As *Tết Mậu Thân* broke out, the US had to reconsider all its strategies in Vietnam and in the world as a whole. In this process, it was amazing to know that the *US had only five divisions of strategic reserve left to withstand all eventualities happening the world over*. Moreover, among these five divisions only *Division 82 of parachutists had full effectives and could fight*. The other divisions had "to lend" their troops to the Vietnam battlefield. Sometimes, they had only their name number left or their "frame" maintained. Moreover, immediately after the beginning of *Tết Mậu Thân*, the aforesaid Division 82 of parachutists had to send one of its three brigades to Vietnam, it had *only 2/3 of its forces to defend the US*.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the military expenditures for the global strategy, a critical situation also prevailed. Many US strategists at that time realized that the US had "overspent" in Vietnam US\$ 110 billion of the US defense budget. Shortly later, new Defense Secretary M.

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1. Statement by a member of the Senatorial Military Forces Committee at the time of *Tết Mậu Thân*.

Laird under Nixon (1969-1973), receiving the heritage left by his predecessors, discovered that the Defense Department under Johnson had “borrowed” detached part of shells, planes, warships from other places and from NATO forces borrowed war materials from the world over to support the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> This fact had a bad effect on the strength and the prestige of the US armed forces.

For that reason, the US Administration was deeply embarrassed when a series of incidents happened in the world during *Tết Mậu Thân* and affecting US military, political, and economic interests in Berlin, the Middle East, particularly in Korea.<sup>2</sup>

US strategic allies, Western Europe and Japan, taking advantage of the US being bogged down in Vietnam, rapidly surged up and became economic and political competitors with the US. The Soviet Union, China, and the Warsaw bloc were strengthened in many aspects, military in particular. This situation caused many US politicians to think that: “If the US failed in Vietnam, it would lose a war, but if it became desperately backward in the field of nuclear strategy, it might lose its own existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Precisely the US failure in the limited war in Vietnam caused the collapse of the US “flexible response” global strategy. Moreover, though very stubborn and warlike, after coming into the

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1. Michael Mc. Lear. *Vietnam - The 10,000-day War*. (Vietnamese translation). Op. cit., pp. 142-143.

2. On March 23, 1968, the People’s Republic of Korea captured the US intelligence ship *Pueblo* and 83 crewmen on board. PRK television showed pictures of these men being walked on the streets of Pyongyang. According to G. Kolko, this was an act humiliating the US Administration and proving the impotence of the Administration.

3. Statement by Senator Stennis, Chairman of the Senatorial Committee investigating the combat readiness after *Tết Mậu Thân*. Quoted from *Thất bại quân sự của đế quốc Mỹ*. (Vietnamese translation). People’s Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1979.

White House, Nixon had to gradually withdraw US troops, even envisaged to compromise with a number of countries, hoping to pressurize Vietnam to make concessions and to enable the US to withdraw “in a strong position.”

It is evident that *Tết Mậu Thân* was a “test,” a catalyst that exposed all the failure of the “limited war” strategy of the US, that made it impossible for the US to conceal its real force to the US people and to the world. Through the Vietnam War, the US “giant” had shown his “Achille heel” or revealed a stark truth to the world: the US economic and military power had limits; within these limits the US could not use military measures to win a war without completely tearing the US organization and its international relations.<sup>1</sup> If it continued the Vietnam War in accordance with its old strategy, it would suffer immeasurable consequences on the US economic position at home and abroad, on its military strength in other places and on its political life as well. This reality obliged the US financial and industrial circles to change their views regarding the Vietnam War.

### 3. The US suffered failure, had to stop the introduction of troops into South Vietnam, and tried to bring home its forces

All the above-mentioned facts compelled the US President to announce the personnel change in his government (chiefly the top generals closely related to the Vietnam War). On March 23, 1968, in the oval room, before press and TV correspondents, Johnson stated: Admiral G. Sharp, who stood for sending more troops to South Vietnam and intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam, would be relieved of his function as Commander in the Pacific. Gen. Westmoreland would give up his post as Head of MACV. Gen. C. Abrams was called to Washington to “defend” the US military plan

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1. Comment of the Editorial Board of *Newsweek*, March 11, 1968 issue. Quoted from Oberdoipher’s *Tết*. Op. cit., p. 149.

in South Vietnam. On the following day, March 24, 1968, General Wheeler was ordered to secretly fly to the US base in the Philippines to meet Gen. Westmoreland, where he informed that Westmoreland's troop request was rejected, that the "search-and-destroy" strategy was criticized in the US. He proposed to Westmoreland that, during his remaining office in Vietnam, he *should find another name to replace the calling of "search-and-destroy."* Later, MACV in Saigon ordered its lower levels to drop the terms "search-and-destroy" in their writings. Instead, from now on, the offensive mobile should be named: *combat sweeps, armed reconnaissance operations, or simply sweeps.*

At this point, the role of the powerful financial circles in the US appeared again. On March 25 and 26, 1968, the "wisemen" met in Washington and officially expressed their views on the Vietnam War. At that meeting Johnson listened to the statements made by all of them and concluded: "Except Murphy, Bretty, Taylor, Forstat, and Gen. Wheeler, all the others proposed *to withdraw from the Vietnam War.*"<sup>1</sup> *The turn-about attitude* of almost the "wisemen" toward the Vietnam War made Johnson waver.

The irony of fate was that *the death sentence* for the adventure that D. Acheson was responsible for starting was read out by himself.<sup>2</sup> *The death sentence* for the US limited war in Vietnam was the summing up of the views of the majority of the "wisemen," which had been formulated months before.

Only on that day, conditions were ripe for them to flatly state to their President that *the US could no longer continue the work it had begun three years ago; therefore, the US was obliged to take measures for withdrawal.*

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1. According to Don Oberdoipher. Op. cit., p. 257.

2. According to Neil Sheehan. *A Bright Shining Lie*. Vol. 2; op. cit., p. 249.

In March 1968, the choice was definitive. On March 31, 1968, in the message addressed to US Ambassadors to Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and South Korea, the US State Department chiefly emphasized the importance of strengthening the fighting capability of the Republic of Vietnam Government and army with US equipment and other assistance. This *was the first priority action of the US*. In reality, this decision was a face-saving measure for the US by "breathing into the mouth" of the almost "asphyxiated" Saigon army. Actually, it was said later, the US wanted to change the "skin colour of the corpses!" A few hours after the sending of that message, on the historical evening of March 31, 1968, in a hesitating and serious mood, Johnson appeared on the federal television and delivered the most important speech in his political life, *the most tragic speech* that throughout 21 years of involvement in Vietnam no US President had to utter. Johnson stated:

- The US would unilaterally stop the bombing of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from the 20th parallel northward and was prepared to send a representative to negotiate with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
- The US would end the period of commitment of US troops to the ground war in Vietnam.
- The re-equipment of the South Vietnam army would be intensified for it to assume greater responsibility in the defence of South Vietnam.

Finally, he stated he would not run for another term of presidency.

At once, the speech made a *strong impact in the US and the world over*. It showed that evidently *the US had made a turning point in the war and in its policy, there could be no reversal.*

So, with the March 31, 1968 decision, the US admitted the failure of its "limited war" strategy in Vietnam. That date *opened a significant chapter in the history of US intervention*. Henceforth, in

accordance with the change of the war strategy, from a limited war to de-Americanization, then Vietnamization, the role and the task of the US military forces on the battlefield were increasingly reduced. Thereafter, Nixon became President of the US. Although he tried by every means to avoid failure, the US was just fighting for bringing its troops home. This was irreversible. This proved the success of *Tết Mậu Thân*, the effects of which were brought into play during the remaining period of the war from 1968 to 1973. After *Tết*, the US Congress restricted the fighting activities of the US forces. In spite of the increasing fierceness of the war and although the US military involvement continued under Nixon for five more years and the Saigon regime remained in existence for seven more years. Strategically speaking, the US had admitted *its failure since spring 1968 under the effects of Tết Mậu Thân*. As a result, after March 31, 1968, all the developments related to the Vietnam War should be considered in a different framework because the situation and the scope of the war had changed.

## II. SOME THOUGHTS AFTER TẾT MẬU THÂN

### 1. On the waves of attack subsequent to Tết

As expounded at the end of Chapter II, after *Tết Mậu Thân*, there was no longer the surprise factor, the US and Saigon had strengthened the defense of the cities; their successive attacks were still aimed at the cities; they caused heavy casualties and big losses to the other side, but they also suffered big losses too. Moreover, while our forces were concentrated on the cities, the countryside was left empty; the US and Saigon availed themselves of that situation to recapture the lands they had lost during *Tết Mậu Thân*. Since the end of 1968, particularly in 1969, the position of the revolution in its three strategic regions was weakened: the trampling boards in suburban and plain rural areas no longer existed, causing the Liberation military units to withdraw to mountain regions, even to the other side of the frontier, in Cambodia and Laos; a number of

main forces units had to return to the southern part of the Fourth Zone, north of the 17th parallel for consolidation. In the meantime, in the cities and suburban plain areas, the US and Saigon continuously opened sweeps and pacification operations and intensified their Phoenix pacification operations, in an attempt to destroy the political bases of the South Vietnam revolution. From mid-1968 to 1969 and 1970, the South Vietnam revolution experienced a period of critical ordeals and difficulties.

The aforesaid situation caused quite a few people to view the Liberation Forces in South Vietnam as the result of the narrow vision or the error of the strategic leaders; in consequence of this error, the situation of the battlefield after *Tết Mậu Thân* became “worse than in 1968,” the South Vietnam revolution underwent a “dark period.” Many people thought that “after phase 1, had we halted the offensive and changed the direction of the fighting against pacification, it would have been more appropriate;<sup>1</sup> if there had been a previous plan in this connection, it would have been better (...) and the possibility to keep our forces, to remain in suburban areas and to control the countryside would have been greater, our casualties would have been less and the adversary still could not avoid great defeat.”<sup>2</sup> Particularly, if with Phase 2 and after Phase 2, since we had come close to the cities and controlled the countryside extensively, *if we had considered the keeping of the newly-liberated region as main objective, the situation might have developed in a much better way, our casualties would have been less and our posture in coming to the negotiating table would have been firmer.*<sup>3</sup>

1. Lê Đức Thọ. *Một số vấn đề về tổng kết chiến tranh và biên soạn lịch sử quân sự*. Sự Thật Publishing House, Hanoi, 1989; p. 54.

2. Hoàng Văn Thái. *Mấy vấn đề về chiến lược trong cuộc tiến công và nổi dậy Xuân 1968*. Op. cit.

3. Trần Bạch Đằng. *Bàn thêm về một vài khía cạnh của cuộc Tổng diễn tập chiến lược Mậu Thân 1968*. Military History Journal, July 1988.

Considering the real situation of the battlefield at that time, these remarks showed some judiciousness. But these were views expressed 18-20 years after *Tết Mậu Thân*. In other words, they were *summing up ideas, experience-drawing ideas*, therefore, they could not avoid using such terms as “if,” “instead of,” “would have been.” Or as General Võ Nguyên Giáp said: “History, more precisely historical reality happens only one; it cannot be corrected, but historical perceptions and historical writings can be done several times, again and again.”<sup>1</sup> And when writing several times about one historical event, the researcher uses the word “if” to make supposition and to consider the same issue under different aspects and angles, and then he can draw lessons from historical successes or failures. The real bitter realities of certain battlefields after *Tết Mậu Thân* are actually bloody lessons for the People’s Army of Vietnam, which, seven years later, could bring the complete liberation of South Vietnam from two years as scheduled to only 55 days of heroic fighting to capture Saigon almost intact, avoiding the “blood bath” imagined by quiet a few people on the other side.

In the study on *Tết Mậu Thân*, though differences of views still remain but there is no doubt or denial of the great impact of Phase 1 of the simultaneous offensive of *Tết*, a bombardment, as Lê Duẩn said, that exposed the political factors to light.<sup>2</sup> But the outstanding questions, i.e. the subsequent phases of the *Tết* offensive which, if not launched, would have not caused so many casualties and would have maintained our posture at negotiations... To avoid confusion in evaluating the waves of attacks after *Tết Mậu Thân*, we should consider them from a historical point of view. Therefore, the May and August 1968 offensives should be put in the general historical conditions after *Tết*. Of course, to have an adequate explanation and a

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1. Võ Nguyên Giáp. *Điện Biên Phủ xưa và nay*. Xưa và Nay Review, May 1994.

2. Trần Bạch Đằng. *Mậu Thân - Cuộc tổng diễn tập chiến lược*. Military History Journal, Feb. 1988.

convincing evaluation, there must be profound studies on this complicated historical period; with the passage of time, official texts, and historical documents relating to the strategic calculations of Vietnamese leading organs and those of US top leaders at that time have been made public and studied in detail.

As a matter of fact, so far no author has been able to gather all the materials he expects to go deeply enough in each wave of attacks in May and August 1968 and to write a special study on these offensives.

In my view, such a special study should be carried out to answer the following questions:

1. After the general offensive of *Tết Mậu Thân*, what were the real strategic intentions of the Vietnamese strategic leading organs and the leaders of the White House?
2. What international factors were directly or indirectly influencing the calculation of Vietnam and the US after *Tết*?
3. What posture would Vietnam have had at the direct negotiations with the US, if after *Tết Mậu Thân* our army and people had stopped attacks against the cities and turned to the consolidation of the rural area where the US had overwhelming fire power superiority? Would the US and Saigon have let us carry out that consolidation when the US superpower still at its disposal over one million troops and a huge quantity of modern weaponry and war means?<sup>1</sup>

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1. During and after *Tết Mậu Thân*, the cruelty of US troops was testified to by their massacres of our people in South Vietnam. Mỹ Lai was typical. They also bombed heavily suburban and rural areas. Gen. A. Brams, who succeeded Westmoreland, stated that B.52 bombers would be used so extensively that it would require a patrol team (unarmed) to walk far behind with a book to note down the results of the bombing (AP, June 29, 1968). Therefore, in the second half of the 1965 there were 50 B.52 flights per week in South Vietnam, there were no 352 flights of B.52s (*New York Times* August 26, 1968, quoted by Trần Văn Giàu in *Miền Nam giữ vững thành đồng*. Vol. 5, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

We still remember that, at that period, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government maintained that: *the US must unconditionally stop all acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam before any official contact could be made between the representatives of the US and Vietnam.* On March 31, 1968, under the impact of *Tết Mậu Thân*, the US had to de-escalate the war and to declare that it was ready to send representatives for negotiations with Vietnam. But in reality, it continued the bombing raids from the 17th to the 20th parallel and air reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. It also reserved the right to resume the bombing all over the Democratic Republic of Vietnam when necessary.

In the meantime, fighting continued and became more and more atrocious. In March and April 1968, the US and Saigon concentrated forces to open successive large-scale operations to push the South Vietnam revolutionary forces far away from the cities and to restore the cut-off strategic communication lines. At the same time, they intensified repression and terror against the political bases of the South Vietnam revolution in the cities, suburban areas and the countryside, stepped up "pacification" activities to recapture the newly-lost plain rural areas, the key ones in particular.

In such circumstances, the strategical leading organs of Vietnam could not help *weighing all plans of action* to maintain the continued development of the resistance war. It is certain that the previous negotiations with the French in 1945, 1946 and 1954 had left valuable lessons of vigilance in diplomatic struggle for small countries like Vietnam to negotiate directly with a big, ambitious power like the USA. We still remember that 36 months before his 31 March 1968 speech, President Johnson stated in Baltimore (on 7 April 1965) that the US was ready *to negotiate unconditionally with Hanoi* to end the war. But along with this statement, the US expeditionary corps massively landed onto South Vietnam and the US air and naval forces escalated the war of destruction against North Vietnam. The world public opinion realized that the US Government words did not match with its actions. Then in

September 1967, in his speech at the legislative conference in San Antonio, Johnson again stated that the US and its South Vietnam ally were prepared to start negotiations on that very night with North Vietnam, to talk with Hồ Chí Minh, to dispatch Secretary of State Rusk to meet his Vietnamese counterpart tomorrow, "to send a US competent representative to go anywhere in the world and to have secret or public talks with the spokesman of Hanoi."<sup>1</sup> But precisely because of their *long experience* in diplomatic struggle and their understanding of the nature of the other side that the Vietnamese leaders were unmoved by apparently good-willed statements by the US. And as a matter of fact, up to *Tết Mậu Thân*, the US was still determined to win a military victory on the Vietnam battlefield. This was proved by the 17 January 1968 *message of President Johnson on the State of the Union*. In the message Johnson referred to the Vietnam War and repeated that "the negotiations with North Vietnam should be based on the San Antonio formula."<sup>2</sup> In appearance, the formula seemed to be flexible but in reality it reflected a rigid and conditional negotiating stand; it was aimed at soothing public opinion in the US and in the world so as to allow the US to overcome the difficulties of an election year, but *the stand of the US was still one of war.*<sup>3</sup>

Through these realities, the Vietnamese leaders clearly realized that the so-called US peace initiative on unconditional negotiations was nothing but a propagandistic manoeuvre to mislead public opinion, to cover US acts of war in Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam had no illusion on PAX AMERICA, the peace good-will of the US, but Vietnam was confronting the US, a country several times militarily and economically stronger than Vietnam. Therefore, at the beginning

1. Quoted from Lưu Văn Lợi, Nguyễn Anh Vũ. *Tiếp xúc bí mật Việt Nam-Hoa Kỳ trước Hội nghị Paris*. Institute for International Relations. Hanoi, 1990; p. 243.

2. Quoted from Lưu Văn Lợi, Nguyễn Anh Vũ. *Op. cit.*, p. 243.

3. PM Phạm Văn Đồng's answer to Rumanian Deputy Foreign Minister, December 17, 1967. Quoted from Lưu Văn Lợi, Nguyễn Anh Vũ. *Op. cit.*, p. 247.

of the US limited war, the 12th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Vietnam emphasized in its strategy: "In the anti-US struggle for national salvation, we must firmly maintain our strategic determination, and at the same time *apply clever flexible tactics in the political and diplomatic struggle*; we must take initiative in launching offensives and hold high the banner of independence and peace to win the broad support of the world opinion and to further isolate the US." In October 1966, the Party Politburo met to evaluate the situation and map out the policy of "actively holding the initiative in applying the tactic of *"combining talk and fight, fight and talk"* with a view to winning the support of the world opinion, isolating the US, creating difficulty to the enemy, causing US and Saigon troops to be passive and embarrassed, and increasing their internal contradictions." Three months later, from 23 to 26 January, 1967 the 13th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Vietnam decided to establish the front of diplomatic struggle. The Plenum held that: "*We can only obtain at the negotiating table what we have obtained on the battlefield.* However, diplomatic struggle does not only reflect the fighting on the battlefield but, in the present international situation and due to the characters of the confrontation between us and the enemy, diplomatic struggle plays an important and active role."

Prompted by the consistent political line of our Party, after *Tết Mậu Thân*, on Johnson's proposal for negotiations and considering the US real actions on the battlefield, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government declared its *readiness to send its representative* to contact the US envoy to determine with the US the unconditional cessation of bombings and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in order to beg in the talk;<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, "all the Party, army, and people are mobilized to avail themselves of the current victorious trend to *continue their offensive*

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1. *Việt Nam - Những sự kiện*. Vol. 2 (1954-1975). Social Science Publishing House. Hanoi, 1976; p. 82.

*in all respects* and to record still greater successes (...), driving the other side to successive failures, irretrievable weakness and disintegration, and paving the way for us to win a decisive victory."<sup>1</sup>

The reason was that, after March 31, 1968, in case we refused to send our representative to meet that of the US, we would fall in trap of the US leadership: the US stated it was prepared to send its representative to talk with Hanoi, but in its mind, it actually wanted a flat refusal from Hanoi "to kick the ball onto the ground of the other side" and to mislead public opinion. The US did not expect that three days later, on April 3, 1968, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government accepted to send its representative to the bilateral meeting. US writer Peter A. Puller wrote in this connection: "*The rapid response of Hanoi certainly surprised the Johnson Administration*, as evidenced by its embarrassment in solving the procedural question of the venue of the conference between Vietnam and the US."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, even though the US accepted to sit at the negotiating table in early April 1968, it came to the conference in the position of the stronger party. According to Johnson's memoirs, at the April 9, 1968 meeting between the US President and his top officials to discuss the sending of a representative for negotiation with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, National Security Adviser Rostow remarked the acceptance of Hanoi to talk with the US meant Hanoi's admission that it was in a weaker military position.<sup>3</sup> Harriman, who was designated to lead the US delegation for talks with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam delegation, said at the April meeting that at the coming negotiations, the US would certainly obtain positive results. He also added: *to obtain "positive results" at the conference table, the US had to step up its military efforts on the battlefield, the stronger the US was on the battlefield, the stronger would be its posture in the negotiations.*<sup>4</sup>

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1. Resolution of the Party Politburo, April 1968.

2. Peter A. Puller. *The US and Indonesia from Roosevelt to Nixon*. (Vietnamese translation). Op. cit., p 162.

3 and 4. L.B. Johnson. *Vantage Point* (memoirs). Op. cit., pp. 430-431

Prompted by this viewpoint, on the battlefield the US and Saigon launched many large-scale military operations, resorted to different measures, massively used bombing and toxic chemicals... hoping to secure new victories.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, on the international arena, they intensified propaganda on “the military success” of the US and its allies in South Vietnam after *Tết Mậu Thân*. At the conference table, the US arrogantly put conditions for the complete cessation of bombing in North Vietnam. It demanded that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam:

- recognize the representative of the Saigon Administration at the Paris Conference;
- stop the introduction of troops and weapons into South Vietnam; and
- halt the offensive in big cities of South Vietnam.

Publicly sticking to the aforesaid position, in the July 20, 1968 joint communique at the end of the meeting in Honolulu, between Johnson and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, it was written that the US reaffirmed its commitment “to checking North Vietnam aggression,” “to refraining from abandoning South Vietnam,” “to demanding that North Vietnam withdraw its forces from South Vietnam at the same time as the US troops.” After this public statement, in mid-August 1968, Johnson spoke at a Conference of US veterans, reaffirming the US Government’s stand that it had no intention to go further until it had reasons to believe that *the other*

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1. Quoted from J. A. Amter. “These new activities were aimed at hindering the peace negotiations that began in Paris on May 13, 1968. It was obvious that Johnson wanted to negotiate from a strong position, and only after securing a new victory in Vietnam. Moreover, Johnson also stated that his administration would not accept the National Liberation Front or *Vietcong*. Besides, he required two concessions: South Vietnam be allowed to decide its own political future and the US be allowed to keep its presence, maybe military presence, in Southeast Asia” (J. A. Amter. *Vietnam Verdict*. Op. cit., p. 229).

side had serious intention to coordinate with the US to de-escalate the war and seriously advance to peace.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, the Saigon Administration openly required direct negotiations with Hanoi and not the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.

After March 31, 1968, the US consistently stood for compelling the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government to meet US conditions before it could put an end to the war of destruction against North Vietnam.

In such a situation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam persisted in demanding the US to *unilaterally and completely end its war of destruction against North Vietnam*, and in directing our army and people in South Vietnam to boost up their military and political offensives and to *open the third phase of Tết offensive against the cities*, which was aimed at inflicting failures to the enemy on the battlefield, in South Vietnam big cities and in the US itself.<sup>2</sup>

So, the developments on the battlefield after *Tết Mậu Thân* actually reflected the *real strategic intentions* of both Vietnam and the US: *to secure an advantageous position on the battlefield so as to have a strong position at the conference table*. Reviewing this historical reality, a US author commented: “Apparently, both sides ostentatiously extolled their respective strong will.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that both sides suffered heavy casualties: 111,360 officers and men were killed or wounded in 1968 on the side of the revolution; the number of casualties in the US ranks increased tremendously in 1968, *it nearly doubled the total number*

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1. Quoted from A. Puller. *The US and Indochina from Roosevelt to Nixon*. Op. cit., p. 264.

2. Resolution of the Party Politburo meeting in August 1968.

3. P. A. Puller. Op. cit.; p. 264.



of casualties of all the previous years put together; 30,610 as compared with 16,210. For the first six months of 1968, the US and Saigon forces lost 101,400 men. In 1969, the number of GI's killed during the first week was 453, the second week 336, the third week 351; the losses of the Saigon forces were heavier, on the average 500 men per week. These numbers of casualties to some extent revealed the fierceness that each side had to *accept to assert their respective will and position on the battlefield and through which to secure an advantageous position at the negotiating table*. This is not only true during the turning-point year of 1968; it is repeated again in 1972 before the conclusion of the Paris Agreement in January 1973.<sup>1</sup>

So, Vietnam's army and people could oblige the US to de-escalate the war one rung only through concrete actions on the battlefield, particularly at a decisive point of time, for instance the US decisions on March 31, 1968 on the unilateral and unconditional cessation of bombing against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in spite of the *violent opposition of the Saigon Administration*. The US had given up the condition that North Vietnam should stop giving aid to South Vietnam; it had to recognize the National Liberation Front representative at the Paris four-party conference whom it previously denied... *To succeed in forcing the US to get down one rung in the war when the US and Saigon forces were reaching the climax was a success of strategic significance of Vietnam, and an achievement in the consistent strategical direction by Vietnam: to make the US de-escalate the war and eventually to completely break down its will of aggression.*

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1. According to Lê Đức Thọ, after Quảng Trị Campaign in 1972, in Paris, Kissinger said in substance. "Purely from a military point of view, no party would fight and accept such losses." Answering Kissinger, Lê Đức Thọ said: "This was a political matter, to fight and secure political strength at negotiations, militarily speaking, no one would fight in such a way for a small land of ruins." Lê Đức Thọ, *Một số vấn đề về tổng kết chiến tranh và biên soạn lịch sử quân sự*. Op. cit., pp. 67-68.

Recalling the historical developments related to the post-Tết period, I don't think that I have fully described all the complicated background of the situation of that period. I have not pointed out the correctness or the errors of the offensives in May and August 1968. However, through the few historical events I have mentioned, I still think that after the 31 March 1968 statement by Johnson, *Vietnam could not yet sit to the negotiating table with the US in the posture of a victor*. To affirm its posture in negotiations, Vietnam had to accept sacrifices by pushing forward its offensive activities, thereby obtaining a new war de-escalation by the US. If the above-mentioned US author said that, during the May and August offensives, it seemed that both sides were showing up their respective strong will, his way of speaking might appear to be objective, but in certain measure it was not comprehensive and accurate. Because, with its military and economic potential, the US might show off its military forces wherever it wanted. In the conditions of Vietnam at that time, Vietnam had no intention to show up, but in reality we *had to muster all our strength, to accept sacrifices to prove the strength of our will* intentionally for the sake of national freedom and independence; our attitude was never synonymous to passionate voluntarism or irrationality.

## 2. Some thoughts about Tết Mậu Thân

Tết Mậu Thân created the decisive turning point of the large-scale war that lasted 21 years in Vietnam (1965-1975). It was also a most complicated event on which views are still different. I would like to express some of my views as a participant in the study of the history of the war.

### a) On finding and taking the strategic opportunity

Opportunity is one of the important conditions that each belligerent party should find out and take in time to bring about a decisive change of the war situation. Opportunity is determined through

a process of preparing forces and preparing the situation of the front. It results from the process of analysing the military, political, economic, diplomatic factors relating to the war during a certain period of time.

The leadership of the army and people in both North and South Vietnam during the war against the US, as well as during that against the French never had the illusion of winning it through a purely military superiority. A small country withstanding powerful aggressors for ten years, Vietnam always paid great attention to finding strategic opportunities, and when the opportunity came, it always did its utmost to push forward and to take the opportunity and make a strategic resolution to change the war situation.

As early as late 1965, the *Resolution of the 12th Plenum* of the Party Central Committee (Dec. 1965) pointed out the way to win victory in the limited war while keeping the guiding principle of waging a lasting war; "It is necessary to make greatest efforts, to concentrate the forces of the two zones, to *seize opportunity for winning a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time on the South Vietnam battlefield.*" It is to be noted that in that Resolution, the concept of "*decisive victory*" does not imply the complete annihilation of the adversary military forces, but it essentially means "*the smashing of the US will of aggression and the attainment of the objectives of independence, democracy, peace, neutrality, and eventually, national unification*".

Studying the history of the anti-US resistance war after 1965, we can realize that this strategic guiding line is strictly observed in each military campaign, each wave of military and political activities. Vietnam knows how to vanquish its adversary step by step, part after part and constantly to calculate "a victory over the US appropriate to our own strength." That is why after defeating the US second strategic counter-offensive and the strategic objectives of the US war of destruction against North Vietnam, it was *thought that*

*favourable opportunities for winning bigger victories* were approaching.

*On the battlefield*, although the number of the US and Saigon troops was large, their superiority in military and firepower as well as their mobility were greatly restricted by the fighting method of the Liberation Forces and the current war situation. The weaknesses of the US and Saigon, particularly their political weaknesses, further deepened. So, the US was still subjective in evaluating its forces, but in general "*the trend of the situation in all the country in 1968 was that the other side would become more and more defensive and passive.*"<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, it was also analysed that Vietnam was not the most important objective in the US global strategy, and therefore the US could not *sacrifice its interest in all other strategic regions because of the Vietnam War*; The Party remarked that, in comparison with its original political and military objectives, the *US war efforts and its heavy losses in Vietnam had reached a climax*<sup>2</sup>. This was a very important assessment for drawing the strategic plan of *Tết Mậu Thân*. Because, in strategic direction, the perception of the *climax of the war efforts of the adversary would allow the determination of the time for launching a decisive offensive*, this perception was highly significant. If it was not accurate, if the time chosen for the decisive blow was not appropriate, the blow would have lesser effects, the results might be even contrary to the initial calculations, as the adversary might have quick reaction, receive massive reinforcements, and continue greater war efforts, causing big losses to our side.

Such was the situation in Vietnam. In the US, Johnson was faced with great political, economic, military, social, diplomatic difficulties in consequences of the US being bogged down in the Vietnam War. *All the internal situation of the US was analysed and*

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1 and 2. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

assessed by the Party. It was also noted that these difficulties were multiplied when the year of presidential elections was approaching. The question for us was how to put that situation to avail and to oblige the US Government to decide to put an end to the war.

As for Vietnam, although we still had many difficulties and weaknesses (regarding the organization of forces, the capability of waging a large-scale annihilating military campaign, logistical management, popular movement inside the cities...). The fundamental developments of the situation showed that "we were holding the initiative, winning victories, that conditions were favourable for us. The other side was in a losing and difficult position."<sup>1</sup>

From the analysis and evaluation of these developments and this trend of the situation, the Plenum concluded that "we are facing great prospects and strategic opportunities. *The US is in a dilemma, strategically speaking.*"<sup>2</sup> This situation allows us to shift the revolutionary war in South Vietnam to a new period, that of winning a decisive victory.<sup>3</sup>

So, in the process of leading the army and people in both North and South Vietnam in defeating the US strategy of "limited war," our Party had perseveringly stood for "winning a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time on the South Vietnam battlefield" for nearly three years (1965-1967), as foreseen by the 12th and the 13th Party Central Committee Plenums (respectively in December 1965 and January 1967). In this direction, while leading the army and people in South Vietnam to step up military and political offensives and to prepare forces and conditions for the decisive offensive, our Party closely followed the situation on the battlefield, in the US and the world. When realizing the new changes of the other side after the 1966-1967 dry season, our Party had foreseen the trend of

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1, 2 and 3. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

the war and the opportunity for a strategic decision to launch the *Tết Mậu Thân 1968* general offensive. Party First Secretary Lê Duẩn wrote a letter to the General Office in South Vietnam and the Zonal Party Military Committee to point out that: "For the last three, four years, we have been preparing forces and the battlefield for this strategic offensive. Yet, for many reasons our forces are not sufficient." However, as the Central Committee has analyzed, "when a favourable opportunity has come, if we know how to act and to act correctly, with tremendous efforts, then a numerically smaller force can create strength to ensure great important victories."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, 1968 is a presidential election year in the US, when the political situation was very sensitive and turbulent in the US; a strong impact from the Vietnam battlefield could put a strong pressure on the choice of the US population.

We should note that this letter to the South Vietnam Central Office and the Zonal Military Committee was sent less than two weeks before the "G" hour of *Tết Mậu Thân*, that in the letter the excerpted passages were put under the headline "*Opportunity is most important.*" We can consider the letter the final decision of the Politburo of the Party Central Committee after three years of creating, waiting for, and taking the opportunity "to win a decisive victory in a relatively short period in the South Vietnam battlefield."

b) *On the art of launching offensives*

To obtain great strategic effects, breaking the will of aggression of the adversary, our Party advocated during *Tết Mậu Thân* simultaneous attacks a "new strategic way of fighting" and directed the brunt of the revolutionary war against South Vietnam cities. The Party considered it "*a deep stab in the throat of the enemy, which has a strategic significance for the whole battlefield and the war,*"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Lê Duẩn. *Thư vào Nam*. Op. cit., p. 192.

2. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

'the most dangerous blow at the enemy's nervous centre and the best way to combine the three direct attacks in the three strategic regions to destroy his forces as many as possible, to smash his political prop, and to smash his will of aggression.'<sup>1</sup> However to onslaught the system of US and Saigon bases which were strongly defended in several levels by different kinds of military forces and measures, it was necessary to settle a series of problems concerning the art of making offensives during *Tết*, particularly when the relation of force between the two sides was still in favour of the US and Saigon.

*Strategic diversion* was aimed at scattering the enemy main force and distracting their lines of defence. Diversionary measures had been taken before *Tết* by the Liberation Forces in many ways and forms. During the last months of 1967, the Liberation Forces opened a number of military campaigns in the border region, the Central Highlands, while the local forces maintained their routine activities in suburban areas and the countryside. Such an action made the enemy believe that the Liberation Forces had been decimated by the counter-offensives of the 1966-1967 dry season and had no longer capacity to launch attacks in the plain as before. In the diplomatic field, in December 1967, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Government released two US prisoners of war. Thereafter, our Foreign Minister implied at a diplomatic reception that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam would start negotiations with the US. It is to be noted that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had never before said publicly what it would do in case the US stopped bombing North Vietnam. This diplomatic indication further divided the US Administration into *supporters of war* and *supporters of peace*. What is more important, the US leaders were more convinced that our side had been really militarily weakened. In January 1968, our side opened two large-scale military campaigns, one in Nậm Bạc and other at Road No 9-Khe Sanh. At once,

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1. Resolution of the 14th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (January 1968).

Khe Sanh attracted the attention of MACV and the Washington leaders. Later a US author, Michael Mc Lear, commented that the gun shells of North Vietnam main forces at Khe Sanh "hit home at Washington capital."<sup>1</sup> The US leadership thought that Khe Sanh might be a *Điện Biên Phủ* in the strategic mind of the Vietnamese High Command. That is why Johnson ordered the JCS to keep Khe Sanh at any price. It was precisely due to this erroneous assessment that the US had to suffer the serious consequences of *Tết Mậu Thân*.

During *Tết*, the principal *direction of attacks* was against South Vietnam cities. It was such a *great surprise* that caught the enemy unawares on the battlefield and that dumbfounded and amazed the leaders in Washington. It was the first time that after many years of war, the South Vietnam revolution succeeded in bringing the war to the cities, turning the US and Saigon rear into the battlefield of the Liberation Forces. This was a big success of our Party in the art of conducting the war, the art of dealing a dangerous and hard blow at the throat and the nervous centre of the other side. The reason was that "with the same number of troops, with the situation of the war as it was, and a balance of force as it was, in winter-spring 1967-1968, should we apply another strategy, *choose another direction of attack*, the war would not have drastically changed and would not have driven the enemy into a quite dangerous situation both militarily and politically as during *Tết Mậu Thân*."<sup>2</sup>

The surprise of *Tết Mậu Thân* was not only in the direction of attack, it was also *in the moment of attack*. It was the New Lunar Year when the US forces, and particularly the Saigon army and administration, exposed their vulnerability and loosened their defense. This choice of the moment of attack testifies to extreme clear-sightedness of our leadership. Later many documents from

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1. Michael Mc Lear. *Vietnam - The 10,000-day War*. Op. cit., p. 148.

2. Lê Duẩn's speech at the conference of provincial Party secretaries in North Vietnam, on 9 March 1968, quoted from *Lịch sử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*. Vol. 2 (1954-75). National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995; p. 398.

the other side admit that when *Tết* started, the Saigon army units had only one half of their effectives, which made MACV greatly embarrassed in coping with the situation. Because of this reality, the leaders in Washington were desperate. The greatest despair and disillusion of the US then were its hopelessness about the capability of the Saigon Administration and army. Later, although the burden of the war was gradually shifted to the Saigon army so as to change the skin colour of the corpses, this action did not mean that the Saigon army had really become stronger in the eyes of the US, but it only paved the way and was a pretext for the US to give up its responsibility and to pull out in honour.

During *Tết Mậu Thân*, the commandos and the units of the Liberation army had hit *the throat and the nerve centre* of the other side. The targets of attack were the leading organs at the central and local level of the Saigon Administration, commanding posts, airfields, ports, storing houses, communication centres, road system... *These were the places of concentration of high-ranking officers of the US and Saigon, the most sensitive targets in their war machinery in South Vietnam.* In particular, during *Tết*, the US Embassy, the symbol of the US authority in South Vietnam, was attacked and occupied for many hours. Along with the attacks against other crucial targets in all cities, the significance of the offensive against the US Embassy was beyond that of a single battle. Apparently, the whole war seemed to be decided by the control of the Embassy by one side or the other.

The art of conducting the *Tết Mậu Thân* offensive was not only the choice of targets but also *the choice of the form and way of attacking.* In *Tết Mậu Thân*, the offensives were simultaneous and carried out in different forms and by different kinds of forces. The Liberation troops did not advance from the outside to the inside but they combined attacks from the outside to the inside, and from the inside to the outside, the US and Saigon troops were thereby all the more surprised.

So, during *Tết Mậu Thân*, the military diversions, the choice of the direction and time of attack, the choice of targets, the forms and way of attack *proved the new development of the art of conducting the war* and launching offensives of the Party, army and people in South Vietnam. While the US strategy was “to search and destroy” so as to “bring the war to the land” of the adversary and while MACV was firmly confident that the *Vietcong* strategy was “to surround the city by the countryside...”, the war broke out violently and simultaneously in Saigon and a series of other cities and towns all over South Vietnam. Moreover, in early 1968, the US and allied forces in South Vietnam amounted to nearly 1.2 million men and the Saigon Administrative system at all levels, the strategic hamlets, the intelligence and spying networks spread out all over South Vietnam. In such conditions, the *Tết* offensive, mainly directed against the cities, was really like a “thunder stroke,” US intelligence officers had to admit that: even in case they caught the offensive plan of the adversary, they would not be able to understand its “nature.” But the “nature” of that bold plan precisely reflected the creative art of launching offensives during *Tết*, the great effects and the outstanding characters of this historical event. By its offensives, *Tết* dealt a might stunning blow at the US will of aggression when its war efforts in Vietnam were reaching the highest point.

To apply this art of launching offensives, our Party, army, and people had overcome many difficulties and accepted many sacrifices, they were determined to fight the enemy, to build up people’s warfare, and to develop it solidly in the cities, the countryside, the plain and the mountains, as well to organize and to deploy political and military forces adequately in all regions. Moreover, the *Tết Mậu Thân* art of launching offensives was the result of a process of grasping the situation of the war fronts and the internal situation of the US; and on this basis, the best way to fight the enemy was calculated and chosen to suit the real conditions of Vietnam, of our Party, and our battlefield commanders.

c) *Regarding the use of forces*

*Tết Mậu Thân* was envisaged when the US and its allies still had over one million troops, their war machinery was still effective, and their war potentialities were still plentiful. To break the US will of aggression, during the *Tết* offensive, large military forces and strong firepower were used against the main force units of the other side, against Saigon and other cities, thereby creating conditions for millions of people of the enemy-occupied cities and rural areas to rise up, and in cooperation with the military forces, to disintegrate the Saigon troops to destroy the leading organs of the Saigon Administration. The war machinery of the US and its allies in South Vietnam were upset and paralysed; their rear areas and war potential became those of the South Vietnam revolution. The balance of force between the belligerent parties changed rapidly in our favour to the detriment of the other side.

In this trend, before and during *Tết Mậu Thân*, the Liberation *main forces* opened military operations in the *mountain regions* of Eastern Nam Bộ, the Central Highlands, Western Trị Thiên so as to attract a major part of the US main forces to the mountain battlefield, thereby facilitating the offensive and uprising in South Vietnam cities.

*In and around the cities*, a number of Liberation main force units attacked the targets and retained there the US and Saigon divisions and regiments, thereby creating conditions for the *specialty trained sappers and commandos* to onslaught a number of central-level and local leading organs of the Saigon Administration. From the suburban areas, lightly-equipped spearhead battalions quickly assaulted the assigned targets. A number of them succeeded in thrusting deep inside the cities, stayed there and fought back enemy counter-attacks for several days. At the same time, the attacking troops pounded many other targets with mortars and rockets: air-fields, commanding posts, communication centres, etc.

In coordination with the sappers, the commandos, and the spearhead battalions, the military and paramilitary groups of the mass organizations (youth, trade union, women, workers among Chinese, etc.) fought the adversary with great mobility on the streets. In the outer circle, to maintain the rear of the spearhead battalions, the Liberation main force brigades and regiments intercepted the Saigon main force units coming to reinforce the suburbs and the cities.

These military blows by the Liberation Forces played the role of fuses for the popular masses to rise up in many city quarters and towns in various forms, which in their turn further strengthened the military attacks. Profiting by the opportunity created by the offensive and uprising in the cities, the local armed forces of the South Vietnam revolution helped the population of the countryside in smashing the grassroots level of the Saigon Administration, in securing mastership, and in expanding the liberated zone.

In view of this deployment, organization, and use of forces, our troops and people had during *Tết Mậu Thân*, brought into full play their offensive spirit, determination, and abundant forces. As a result, the leaders in Washington realized that the US military force could not submit the Vietnamese people. Particularly in Saigon, the sappers and commandos units, the spearhead battalions, the military and paramilitary groups of mass organizations, though not big in numbers, had dealt dangerous, simultaneous, and accurate blows at many crucial central/local organs of the Saigon Administration, causing a great impact that rapidly affected the fighting will of the adversary. This was an outstanding success of the art of deploying and using forces during the *Tết* offensive, a manifestation of Vietnam's military art to enhance the human factor so that a small number of troops may fight bigger forces, higher quality combatants may cope with numerical superiority, Vietnamese intelligence may overwhelm the weaponry and the intelligence of the US war-conducting machinery.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the 21 years of struggle for national independence and freedom (1954-1975), the Vietnamese people have experienced many hard trials of the war and have suffered many losses and sacrifices. They have found their own way to fight with the US, a superpower in the 20th century, in whose global strategy Vietnam was but a domino chip in its long-term strategic calculations. During these 21 years, the US has applied many measures and maneuvers, changed its strategies several times, and spent a lot of money and efforts to submit the opponent side. *To find the way to fight the US and to win victory is therefore a long and hard process full of creativeness and resourcefulness. Tết Mậu Thân with its strategic effects is a great success of this process.*

From the intentions of Vietnam's strategy directing organ to the actual developments on the battlefield, *Tết Mậu Thân* was a large field of complicated activity. The US had a big number of troops, modern weapons, abundant firepower, high mobility; in addition, it had absolute superiority in the air, on rivers, and on the sea. Therefore, no illusion was nurtured about completely destroying this expeditionary corps. During the years of "limited war" and the apogee of the US war efforts in Vietnam, our Party led the army and people on the battlefield to maintain and develop an offensive strategy. At the same time, it closely followed all devel-

opments related to the war, on the battlefield, in the US and in the world. In this vision, it had foreseen the development trend of the war, found the approaching strategic opportunity. When the balance of force was still inclined on the enemy side, the Party grasped the trend of the situation and took the favourable opportunity when it appeared to change the situation of the war. It stood for breaking the adversary's will of aggression by the *combined strength of the South Vietnam revolutionary war, harmoniously combining the military, political, and diplomatic struggles aimed at all crucial targets of the opponent on the battlefield, assaulting his nerve centres, and vital organs of the most sensitive time of the US political life, in the year of presidential elections in the US.*

That is why the effects of *Tết Mậu Thân* did not result from any factor but from the combination of the military, political, psychological, diplomatic factors. The *Tết* offensive exposed all the military and political failures of the US on the Vietnam battlefield, revealed the impotence of 1.2 million troops in the face of the attacking force and the way of fighting of revolutionary troops, laid bare the strategical errors and the way of conducting the war by the leadership in Washington... *Tết* also exposed the limits of the US military and economic power which seriously affected the US global initial strategy. For that reason, although a great power invincible and far away from the Vietnam battlefield, the US was strongly shaken by *Tết Mậu Thân*. Many of its social strata, including high-ranking officials, Congressmen, influential tycoons, had to change their views on the war and to stop supporting the war policies of the Johnson Administration. All these facts obliged Johnson to *publicly announce, on the night of March 31, 1968, the US unilateral de-escalation of the war, the withdrawal of the US commitment to bring expeditionary troops to the land war in Vietnam, while no objective of the war had been obtained. The shifting of the war burden onto the shoulder of the Saigon Administration and army, which had been defeated before the US direct participation in the war, made the US dependent on people depending on the US.*

This fact assured the final victory of the Vietnamese people. Therefore, after *Tết*, though the war still continued fiercely, the fate of the hostilities between the US and Vietnam had been decided by Johnson's decision on March 31, 1968.

Up to March 31, 1968, *Tết Mậu Thân* was the expression of the Vietnamese people's will and staunchness, the manifestation of the creativeness and resourcefulness of the Party in leading the war: the war of *taking opportunities* for dealing a decisive blow that changed the war situation, the art of *launching offensives* under a new strategy, bringing the war to the cities in an unexpected way, the art of *deploying, organizing and using forces* so as to fight bigger forces with smaller ones, to vanquish big numbers of troops with higher-quality soldiers, to use Vietnamese intelligence to prevail over the weaponry and intelligence of the US war-conducting machinery. So, throughout the war (1954-1975) between the US and Vietnam, *Tết Mậu Thân* inherited and enhanced the Vietnamese people's martial arts and traditions to fight foreign invaders.

After the *Tết* offensive, the great losses of the army and people during the May and August 1968 waves of offensives were real. But in spite of these losses, no one could deny that only with the effect of *Tết Mậu Thân* could Vietnam *shake the US will of aggression, drive the US troops out of South Vietnam*, and prepare the situation for *overthrowing the puppets* unexpectedly earlier, for the complete liberation of South Vietnam, for national unification, and for ushering Vietnam into the current *renovation drive*.

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