

სამართალი და პოლიტიკა

1968 Tet Offensive: An Intelligence Failure?

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1968 „ტეტ“-ის შეტევა: იყო თუ არა დაზვერვის ფიასკოს შედეგი?

დავით ჩხეტიანი, დოქტორანტი

რეზიუმე

1968 წლის 31 იანვარს ჩრდილო ვიეტნამისა და ვიეტ-კონგის ერთობლივმა ძალებმა 80 ათასამდე მებრძოლით წამოიწყეს „ტეტ“-ის შეტევა (სახელი გამომდინარეობდა ბუდისტური კალენდრის ახალი წლის დასახელებიდან „ტეტ“) სამხრეთ ვიეტნამის 100-ზე მეტ დასახლებულ პუნქტზე კოორდინირებული იერიშების სახით. მართალია ა.შ.შ. და სამხრეთ ვიეტნამის ძალებმა მოახერხეს კომუნისტთა შეტევების აღკვეთა, მაგრამ მოვლენათა გაშუქებამ შოკში ჩააგდო ამერიკული საზოგადოება და კიდევ უფრო შეამცირა მათი მხარდაჭერა ომისადმი. მიუხედავად მძიმე დანაკარგებისა ჩრდილო ვიეტნამმა მოიპოვა სტრატეგიული გამარჯვება რადგანაც ამ ოპერაციამ ფაქტიურად გარდამტეხი როლი შეიტანა ვიეტნამის ომში და მონიშნა ამერიკის როგორც უშუალოდ ომიდან, ასევე რეგიონიდან გამოსვლის პროცესის დასაწყისი.

ბრძოლის შემდგომ წარმოიშვა სერიოზული კითხვები თუ რატომ არ მოხერხდა „ტეტ“-ის მზადებების დროული აღმოჩენა და ნიშნავდა თუ არა ეს ა.შ.შ.-ს სადაზვერვო ძალისხმევის სრულ ფიასკოს. ნაშრომი გაანალიზებს მოვლენებს, რომლებიც წინ უსწრებდა თავდასხმას, რათა დაადგინოს, იყო თუ არა მოულოდნელობის ეფექტი დაზვერვის, თუ უფრო მეტად უმაღლესი სამხედრო და პოლიტიკური ხელმძღვანელობის ბრალი, რამაც გამოიწვია მოვლენათა ამგვარი განვითარება.

Summary

In January 31, 1968, some 80,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched the Tet Offensive (named for the lunar new year holiday called Tet), a coordinated series of attacks on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam. Though U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to hold off the Communist attacks, news coverage of the offensive shocked the American public and further eroded support for the war. Despite heavy casualties, North Vietnam achieved a strategic victory, as the attacks marked

a turning point in the Vietnam War and the beginning of the American withdrawal from the war and region.

In aftermath of the battle serious questions arose how did the preparations of the offensive of such scale remained undetected and if the surprise of the “Tet” meant a total failure of the US joint intelligence efforts. This essay will analyze the events that preceded the offensive in order to determine whether the initial surprise that accompanied the attacks was a failure of Intelligence from the US and allied side or the deficiency occurred on the highest echelons of leadership, which led to the known events.

Introduction:

The Tet Offensive (named so after the Chinese Lunar New Year holiday), was a main element of Hanoi’s 1967-1968 winter/spring campaign and one of the most significant battles during the US presence in Vietnam. It started on 30 January, when the [Viet Cong](#) and [People’s Army of Vietnam](#) (PAVN - North Vietnam) conducted a massive attack countrywide against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN – South Vietnam) and the forces of US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV). Offensive consisted of series of surprise attacks against military and civilian objectives all over the South Vietnam. It was initiated by the attacks on border regions (central Vietnam) and in the areas of responsibilities (Corps Tactical Zone - CTZ) of the First and the Second Corps. The following morning the main thrust came throughout the country with supposedly above 80,000 combined Viet Cong and PAVN forces assaulting over 100 cities including the majority of the provincial capitals and the capital city of Saigon. The commencing assaults caught the ARVN and the US troops on ground by surprise, which resulted in temporary gain of control over number of cities by the North Vietnamese troops. However they were soon thrown back by fast responding American war machine and in couple weeks, full control over all objectives (except of the former imperial capital Hue, battle for which lasted about 26 days) was reestablished. The offensive ended with a critical defeat of the PAVN units and near annihilation of Viet Cong. “There were 4,000 Americans killed or wounded, and between 4,000 and 8,000 casualties for the ARVN. The Communists lost between 40,000 and 50,000 killed in action. Their Viet Cong infrastructure was destroyed.”¹ Much

1 US Army Intelligence Centre, “Uncertain Oracle: Some Intelligence Failures Revisited”, Fort Huachuca history files: 12

sever were the casualties throughout the civilian population of the South Vietnam. Especially brutal was so called Hue Massacre, where during the 26 days of occupation almost 6,000 civilians were executed by the PAVN and Viet Cong death squads. "The victims included soldiers, civil servants, merchants, clergymen, school teachers, intellectuals and foreigners."² Most of them were shot, bludgeoned to death or simply buried alive.

Despite the fact that North Vietnam's effort was defeated, it had a shocking effect on the US government and public because of the misperception that North Vietnam, due to previous defeats, was incapable of launching an attack of such scale. Thus, the events imprinted the turning point of the war by the military defeat of the North Vietnam's offensive, but at the same time by their psychological and political victory. "The turning point marked American acknowledgement that a victory in Vietnam was no longer worth the cost."³ The US government has lost the most decisive battle not on South Vietnam's battlefields, but back home, with its own public opinion. From that moment on, United States started to deescalate their efforts in Vietnam followed by final withdrawal.

This essay will analyze the events that preceded the offensive in order to determine whether the initial surprise that accompanied the attacks was a failure of Intelligence from the US and allied side or not. It will argue that actually the US military and intelligence services on ground succeeded in collecting and disseminating the intelligence and as a result the MACV leadership was well aware of the coming attack through the intelligence provided warnings and indicators. The deficiency that occurred was not of the intelligence but of the highest echelons of leadership, especially the political one, with fusion and understanding of the obtained information and finally with the decision making and drawing the right conclusions from it. "All the intelligence was there, and all of it was briefed and discussed, but it was the senior decision-making officers — the users of the intelligence — who did not act in the right way, based on what they knew but would not believe."⁴ Those were the crucial factors that made it possible for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to surprise Americans by the massive attacks. To prove this argument, after the introduction the essay will give a brief historical background and show a general situation before the attack took place, including Hanoi's plans. Then in the main body it will introduce the organization and structure of the US intelligence system in South Vietnam. In order to show that there was sufficient information to anticipate the imminent attack, the essay then will follow up with the factual evidence of the indicators and warnings obtained through the

http://huachuca.army.mil/files/History_UncertainOracle.pdf (accessed February 5, 2015)

2 James H Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: a Concise History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 55

3 Ronnie E Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 1

4 Thomas L. Cubbage II, "Comments on James J. Wirtz's: The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War" *Conflict Quarterly*, summer 1993, 77

collected intelligence. Finally it will conclude in summing up the essay and the arguments presented.

Historical background:

At the beginning of 1968 the situation in Vietnam was very complex. Conflict, which was escalating for several years continuously, looked like as stalemate and North Vietnam's efforts seemed to be checked. "Despite large-scale offensive operations — intended to destroy South Vietnamese and American military units and to establish full control over the southern population — the VC/NVA were making no headway in their war efforts."⁵ But in no better position were the ARVN and the US forces because of inability to conduct a decisive blow to the adversary.

"The conflict resembled an American style boxing match between a lightweight and a blindfolded heavyweight. The Communist Vietnamese lightweight danced nimbly around the ring, unseen by his opponent, while he could deliver quick jabs, and an occasional one-two combination, he was ever wary of the risk that his powerful adversary would find, corner, and attack him."⁶

Hanoi was aware that the enemy could not be defeated simply through the war of attrition. The United States, on the other hand, was spending great efforts with little success, because the enemy could always elude him to the North Vietnam and other sanctuaries, and was frustrated that no decisive victory was visible in the close future. "More important, a situation had arisen where both sides were fighting indecisively, entrenched in a war of attrition."⁷ Both of them were facing the dilemma of how to defeat the adversary.

"By mid-1967, the party leaders in Hanoi decided that something had to be done to break the bloody stalemate."⁸ They knew that the US military was just getting warmed up, and soon the Communist North and Viet Cong would have no forces left to continue fight if they didn't change the tactics. It was seen as a weakness of Americans, that in their role of advisers and mentors they had to rely on the South Vietnam government and its troops. So this weakness had to be exploited by the new strategy. In summer 1967 the 13th Plenum gathered in Hanoi to discuss the situation. "The Plenum decided, after debating the issue through the month of June, that the time was right for the initiation of the General Offensive/General Uprising."⁹ The plan considered to conduct massive attacks on the South Vietnam's military and government structures by using the Viet Cong and PAVN, then followed by the general public uprising. The attacks were supposed to topple the political and military foundations of the Saigon regime, followed by the establishment of the coalition government with South Vietnamese Communist Lao Dong Party taking

5 Cubbage, 79

6 Stephen M Goldfein, "Why Tet Offensive? Sun Tzu Knows the Answer" (report document f, US War College, 1994), 1

7 Ford, 55

8 Willbanks, 9

9 Ford, 70

the lead. Such events would convince Americans that the war was impossible to win, force them to sit at the negotiations table together with North, and simply withdraw from the war if there was nobody left to support. By October 1967 most of the issues regarding the plan were worked out and the Resolution 14, an official order of General Offensive General Uprising (Tong Cong Kich/Tong Khoi Nghia – TCK/TKN) was issued. “Attacks were to be carried out mainly against the City of Saigon and Upper Mekong Delta provinces.”¹⁰ General Giap, who actually opposed the plan, was tasked to conduct the military planning. He came up with the three phase plan. Initially, the preparatory phase considered rural attacks in the border regions to draw the forces away from populated areas. During the first phase, conventional attacks with large number of regular units were to be commenced in the Highlands (central Vietnam) and alongside the DMZ. Simultaneously with those attacks, other units had to infiltrate into the urban areas and get everything ready for the next phase. The second phase considered General Offensive and the General Uprising to start through the coordinated attacks within the cities targeting the Southern government structures and military installations. While conducting those attacks, a political battle was to be thought as well. “An appeal would go out to the Southern people to join the General Uprising.”¹¹ The fight was to be brought in concurrency with the diplomatic efforts, calling for negotiations and creating the coalition government in the South. In the final third phase the second wave of reinforcements were supposed to follow from the North, concentrating against the US military, forcing the Americans to negotiate.

Soon after publication of the resolution the plans were in motion, troops and logistics on the way, and all preparatory works to start the offensive in development. By mid-January of 1968 the Communist build-up of forces was complete, and they stood ready for their offensive.¹²

US Intelligence Structure in South Vietnam:

Before discussing the intelligence activities and collected information, in order to see whether the MACV and the Saigon regime had sufficient data to anticipate the coming offensive, the essay will look at the intelligence structure and its organization in the South Vietnam. It will also consider if all various intelligence agencies, operating on ground, were really acting coherent with the unity of effort.

“Very little information has been found on the exact configuration of US intelligence agencies in Vietnam outside of MACV J-2.”¹³ It is widely known fact that besides the MACV’s own intelligence efforts, there were: CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), DIA (DoD’s Defence Intelligence Agency), Military Intelligence and other structures operating in the country. Furthermore, there were the US

Pacific Command’s and domestic intelligence assets also present in South Vietnam. That all made a large array of intelligence efforts operating simultaneously, which from the first sight should mean that the Allied Forces, fighting against the Communist North, were well served of critical intelligence. However that was not the case. All those assets were not consolidated under the MACV and there was no effective fusion of the gathered Intelligence. “General Westmorland did not control all the intelligence assets available nor did he receive full intelligence support from the CIA, DIA, the Army Communications Agency, CINPAC, and the military Intelligence Agencies.”¹⁴ Of course there was a formal cooperation between those organisations and they were exchanging the information, but without the unity of effort, which would have served the common goals. The fusion of all efforts was necessary to depict a solid common operational picture for the fighting force. As it was directly involved in the operations, MACV J-2 would have been a perfect place for such cooperation. “This arrangement would have provided a more complete intelligence picture to Westmorland and Washington.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, no such unification of efforts occurred.

More effective were the MACV J-2 subordinated intelligence assets, which successfully incorporated within their organisation the South Vietnam’s military intelligence structures. “The ultimate result was a Combined Intelligence Centre (CICV) with separate components responsible for prisoner and rallier interrogations (CMIC), captured document exploitation (CDEC), captured material exploitation (CMED), and intelligence production.”¹⁶ These structures were further split into subsections effectively covering the whole theatre of operations and providing timely and ample data at all echelons. Furthermore, on the tactical level there were the Tactical Operations Centres instituted with effective incorporation of the intelligence assets, which excessively improved the intelligence evaluation, synchronization and dissemination processes. Even better off were the operational level headquarters. “The component elements of CICV were eventually replicated at the headquarters of each of the four CTZ.”¹⁷ That enabled to reduce the intelligence cycle times to minimum and to channel the critical information on both directions: bottom-up and top-down. Thus CICV could depict relevant common operational picture for the MACV and commanders on ground, but it lacked the CIA and the DIA contributions for common intelligence effort, which would have definitely painted more potent intelligence picture. “For whatever reason – stovepiping information, institutional biases, or otherwise – research indicates that MACV lacked valuable intelligence sources in its fight against the

10 Ibid., 79

11 Ford, 93

12 Andrew Wiest, *Essential Histories: The Vietnam War 1956-1975*, (Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2002), 41

13 Charles A P Turner, “American Leadership and Decision-making Failure in the Tet Offensive” (Master Thesis, US Army CGSC, 2003), 43

14 William C Westmorland, *A soldier Reports*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 415

15 Turner, 51

16 John R. Johnson, Richard P. Joyce, Paul C. Nagle, Aristotelis D. Stathacopoulos, Roswell B. Wing, James L. Jones, *Analysis of Tactical Intelligence Experience in Southeast Asia*, (General research Corporation, McLean, 1976), 89

17 Ibid., 91

North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.”¹⁸ There is no solid evidence of what was the reasoning behind the top echelon decisions for not establishing such interagency joint intelligence structure on the basis of CICV. Having such could have better contributed to the fight against the Communists by uniting and coordinating all intelligence efforts and providing the fusion of collected intelligence enabling more sound decision-making process. One was for certain: “General Westmorland did not have control of all or access to all intelligence assets in his theatre of operations as other commanders directed forces that were not permanently based in Vietnam.”¹⁹ In other words, he was supposed to be the overall commander, directing the whole intelligence cycle and efforts, and other commanders or civilian executives supporting him by providing personnel, assets and collection management. Unfortunately, to general Westmorland’s disappointment, Washington did not share that sentiment. Not only he had no control over all intelligence assets available in the theatre, but also he had to share his resources with other agencies, what was straining his limited capabilities even more.

Collected Intelligence and Warnings:

In analysing how the North has managed to surprise Americans, the essay will try to look at the series of events, enemy activities and intelligence collected, which if fused properly together, could have depicted a very accurate picture of the coming days. There were the warnings and information of different nature acquired through different means. First the essay will list the general indicators, than the CDEC provided warnings through the obtained documents, and finally the information collected by the other intelligence sources.

The first PAVN attacks in preparation of Tet offensive came already during the late autumn of 1967. The attacks mainly took place in the northern regions of the South Vietnam especially in border areas. Those were the first actual indicators of coming offensive. The attacks had dual purpose. “They were designed to draw American troops away from populated areas, and provided an opportunity to rehearse coordinated operations between troops of the People’s Army of Vietnam and Viet Cong guerrillas.”²⁰ At the same time those attacks made possible to screen the movement of supplies and equipment to the attack positions and the infiltration of large numbers of personnel from North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The most important out of those initial attacks probably was the attack on Marine base at Khe Sanh, where the North Vietnamese had accumulated up to 30,000 troops. “The primary divisions assigned to the front were 304 and 325C Divisions. The 320 and 324B Divisions would support the operation.”²¹ Worth mentioning, that 304 and 320 were the elite divisions, which were formed and participated in the First Indochina War against the French. They had better equipment and training than the

regular divisions. Using large numbers of PAVN troops, especially the elite divisions, should have rung alarm bells for the MACV command indicating that Hanoi was engaging in decisive actions. Unfortunately the events were misinterpreted by Westmorland, due to his nightmare of possible repetition of French fiasco at Dien Bien Phu, who believed at the moment that the enemy’s whole effort was directed against Khe Sanh. The attack on the Marine base served its purpose well to divert all American attention to the support of the Marine regiment stationed there. “While Westmorland was fixated on Khe Sanh, fifteen Viet Cong battalions, totalling approximately 6,000 troops, positioned themselves in and around Saigon.”²² However the movement of those troops didn’t remain completely unnoticed to the US intelligence assets. All the information was indicating that, with high probability, a major offensive was about to start sometime around the Tet celebrations. The intelligence branch has timely brought up General Westmorland’s attention to the developing situation, in regard of which he tried to warn the political leadership both in Washington and Saigon. “He began lobbying with the Saigon government for cancelation of the normal Tet truce.”²³ This attempt itself speaks for the fact that the intelligence did not fail in producing the warning, however listed above circumstances were not the only indicators forewarning about the imminent attack.

General Indicators:

Before going into the details whether the intelligence was properly utilised or not, it has to be mentioned that there were multiple general indicators on hand, analysing of which could have made possible to anticipate the future developments. The factual history of Vietnam itself should have been the first and foremost indicator for the Americans to be on alert while negotiating truce with the communist North. Throughout the centuries it showed how the Vietnamese had always been using unconventional tactics of breaking the truces in the sake of surprise attacks. Such tactics played decisive role in 1789, when the Vietnamese defeated the Chinese invaders, attacking them likewise on the eve of the Tet. Not very long ago in 1944 the Vietnamese attacked the French troops on the Christmas Eve during the truce. The 1960 attack on South Vietnam’s military installations at Tay Ninh took place also during the Tet truce. Finally, there were the multiple truce violations of previous year’s Tet celebration and also of the latest Christmas and New Year’s truces. About 338 incidents of violation were accounted for during the most recent Tet truce only.²⁴ All those facts were well known to the MACV leadership, which should have driven them to the conclusion that no truce could be trusted with the North Vietnam’s regime, particularly when it was preceded by large number of warnings about the major offensive.

A solid indirect indicator was provided by the North

18 Turner, 52

19 Turner, 52

20 Willbanks, 15

21 Gordon L Rottman, *Khe Sanh 1967-68: Marines Battle for Vietnam’s Vital Hilltop Base*, (Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2005), 8

22 Turner, 11

23 Ibid, 11

24 Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! the Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 134

Vietnam's regime in September 1967. The political struggle, which took place between the opposers and the supporters of war, ended with the victory of Hawks, and was followed by mass arrests of the Doves. More than 200 party officials and politburo members were incarcerated in this purge including the acting chief of intelligence service and other high ranking military officers. "They had all been arrested for 'heretical thoughts' and opposition to the war."²⁵ Purge should not have remained unnoticed to the South Vietnam's and the MACV leadership, and logical conclusions should have been made that some major hostilities were about to follow those events, since the war faction has won the supremacy.

As another warning of the major developments should have served the fact that by summer 1967 Hanoi called most of their major diplomats and ambassadors back home, to convey the directives regarding the coming offensive. "Such unusual diplomatic activity should have aroused someone's suspicion, but no one appears to have seriously questioned the moves."²⁶ The movement was picked up by the US intelligence services, however was misinterpreted by the political leadership. At first sight insignificant matter, which had falsely created hopes of peace in the circles of American diplomats, caused the confusion. Arriving to Hanoi the Vietnam's envoys were avoiding airplane connections with the stops in China, and because latter was consistently opposing to any compromise with Americans and Saigon, this fact was received as a will of Hanoi to negotiate peace settlement.²⁷

A very significant development, which should have indicated on further escalation, was the signing of the military aid agreement between Hanoi and the Soviet Union in September. The agreement was making it possible to supply the North with modern equipment and weaponry. However details of the agreement were not known by that moment and it was impossible to anticipate to what extent it could influence the warfighting at the tactical level. "In the absence of information about the actual terms of the agreement, the intelligence community could only speculate about the types of Soviet-supplied weapons that might soon emerge on the battlefield."²⁸ Futile discussions about the possible composition and sophistication of the weaponry to be supplied were instigated instead of reaching simpler conclusion: such agreement would certainly be followed by major combat operations.

A revealing evidence of Hanoi's intents was the similarity to 1789 Tet surprise attack on Chinese. Just like centuries back, in 1968 the Communist Regime announced the celebration of Tet festivities one day earlier than usual.²⁹ This indicator should have been picked up and appropriately interpreted specifically by the South Vietnam's intelligence. Unfortunately it remained either completely unno-

ticed, or not much attention was paid to it. If there were no other indicators, even just this single fact, because of the historical similarity, should have alerted the MACV about the impending hostilities.

Finally, the most direct warning of the coming major offensive was provided by the number of premature attacks in the central and northern parts of the South Vietnam on early morning of January ³⁰. "Major attacks started to erupt at about 01:35, and by 05:00 the province capitals of Pleiku, Khanh Hoa, Darlac and Quang Tri were all under heavy attack."³⁰ Everything indicated that it was not only the Viet Cong participating in the attacks but also a large number of PAVN regular units. The tactics have also changed. This time, they did not just attack and try to disengage immediately avoiding the fire superiority of the US troops, but instead were pressing as much as they could, utilising artillery and even armour assets freshly provided by the Soviet Block, and standing the ground when being counter-attacked. Such developments should have been especially alerting for the MACV command indicating that the North was engaging in decisive effort. However the whole attention of General Westmorland was focused on the fact that he finally could engage the enemy on his own terms and destroy it without costly and complicated 'hide and seek' games in the jungles. He must have felt that finally he was winning the initiative and presumably disregarded any other considerations by that moment.

Each of listed above facts taken separately would not have indicated probably on any significant development of situation and would not have sounded as alarm signal for the MACV command. However merged together, all those facts were drawing an implicit picture of some major events to take place shortly after, which required immediate reaction.

SDEC Documents:

Much more revealing was the information provided by the MACV own intelligence assets through the captured documents. Number of them were obtained and processed by the CDEC which directly indicated about the coming attack. "In March 1967 in III corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), the ARVN captured a document from NVA CT-5 division which provided a very basic summary of the offensive to be conducted in Saigon."³¹ Similar plan of the attack on the South Vietnam's capital was captured a bit earlier from the Viet Cong units. Both plans, indicating on an attack on Saigon, should have been distressing for the MACV and the South Vietnam government, but information was dismissed as untrustworthy. Third document indicating the Tet offensive came to the hands of the ARVN in October 1967. It was the resolution 13 of the Communist Plenum in Hanoi. But instead of focusing on the part of the document discussing the military plans, which called for 'major offensive to achieve a quick victory,' the MACV leadership's attention was centred on the part discussing the American domestic support of the war and coming US presidential

25 Ford, 95

26 Turner, 19

27 Ford, 71

28 James J Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 151

29 Oberdorfer, 88

30 Wirtz, 219

31 Ibid, 153

elections with possible outcomes.³²

More evidence was captured during the battles around Dak To in November 1967. The MACV intelligence assets obtained the Communist Western Highlands Front Party Committee directives for the 1967-1968 Winter-Spring campaign calling for large scale attacks throughout all CTZs in order to inflict massive casualties to the US forces and seize the territory. It stated: "Destroy a significant portion of US troop strength, force the enemy to dispatch as many as possible of its mobile forces to the Western Highlands, destroy and disperse the bulk of puppet forces."³³ Directive considered attacks to be simultaneous and coordinated as one single major offensive. However this critical intelligence information, which should have served as another alarm indicator, was also downplayed by the MACV command in its significance.

Top secret documents were obtained in the same month in Long An province. Those were the instructions of infiltration of the city of Saigon by large numbers of the Viet Cong in order to subsequently overthrow the government. Of outmost interest should have been the part of document that insisted on completion of positioning the agents by all means not later than the end of January 1968. This document should have had provided the US and South Vietnam leadership with the rough timeframe of the enemy attack and the scale of its effort.

At the same period another significant document was acquired by the US 101 Airborne Division soldiers in Quang Tin province. The document was directly calling for the final effort to overthrow the Saigon government and defeat the Americans by attacking in the urban areas. "Central Headquarters concludes that the time has come for a direct revolution and that the opportunity for a general revolution and general uprising is within reach."³⁴ This document pretty much revealed Hanoi's plans regarding the coming offensive, however it was deemed also untrustworthy by the MACV leadership. The fact, that the document was captured from the low to mid-level communist cadre, had led to the mistrust. It was hard to believe that: "a cadre member at this level having access to, or possession of, an order that would have come directly from Hanoi's politburo."³⁵

On January 4th one more documented proof of the offensive was obtained. The US troops captured the combat order for the Pleiku province, with the detailed instructions for the preparations of Tet.

All documents mentioned above were accordingly processed by the CDEC and the information passed forward for the consideration of the MACV command.

Other sources:

Warnings about the coming offensive were provided by other intelligence sources as well. SIGINT (Signal Intelligence) played a significant role in detecting the move-

ments of PAVN troops, on the Ho Chi Minh trail, going into positions around the Khe Sanh in November of 1967. After having acquired initial information through SIGINT, the air and ground surveillance assets were committed to observe the enemy movements. "6,315 trucks were sighted along the Ho Chi Minh trail during December, up from 3,823 sightings in November."³⁶ Obtained numbers were unprecedented before. Such record increase in movement of troops and materials should have been received as a clear sign of escalation.

As another important intelligence source served the CMIC interrogations. In January 1968 a defector interrogated directly indicated about the preparatory attacks in the Highlands and about the following major offensive on the Eve of Tet celebrations. Due to Westmorland's fixation on the battle of Khe Sanh, MACV again missed opportunity to properly utilise gained information. As mentioned above, he felt it more convenient to fight the enemy where he dominated the battlefield. "His analysis dismissed the possibility of the NV and Viet Cong attacking elsewhere or throughout the South Vietnam."³⁷ He tended to believe that the main offensive would occur at Khe Sanh and nowhere else, repeating the events of Dien Bien Puh.

More intelligence was acquired through the Saigon's security apparatus. Multiple warnings of the coming attacks were obtained through the prisoner interrogations. Of immense significance probably were the tapes obtained on the January 28th by the police forces in Qui Nohn province, which were supposed to be aired after the Capture of the local radio station. The tapes in advance were proclaiming the seizure of major South Vietnamese cities by the communist North and Viet Kong efforts, pressing the US to negotiate and accept a coalition government.³⁸ There could not be more direct indicator of the coming events but again the information was underplayed.

Not all the evidence of the imminent attack was brought to display in the section above. By utilising the whole spectrum of intelligence capabilities even more warnings were received. The captured documents, the prisoner interrogations, the defectors, the allied agents and the enemy activity all provided accurate information regarding the Communist North's intents for the coming Tet celebrations.³⁹ It was not even a puzzle any more, which needed to be put together, but a broad picture, at some point almost in detail, with only little portions of it yet unclear. The intelligence branch had provided a very credible warning, at some level even including the exact times and locations of the impending attack. "Although Americans received an ever-increasing amount of detailed information about the targets, tactics, and even timing of the Tet attacks, they generally downplayed the threat posed against urban areas, government installations, ARVN units and U.S. facilities."⁴⁰ Only a simple step was left as next, which should have been made by

32 Turner, 19
33 Ford, 87
34 Oberdorfer, 136
35 Ford, 100

36 Wirtz, 180
37 Turner, 26
38 Oberdorfer, 139
39 Wirtz, 180
40 Ibid., 222

the MACV command and the political leadership in Washington. That was to properly understand the intelligence obtained and plan respectively to counter the Hanoi's intents.

Conclusion:

In previous sections the essay has displayed the structure of the intelligence branch in South Vietnam and the flaws that existed in it. It was a mistake to run the intelligence operations separately by the different agencies. Even within the service the effort was not unified between the MACV J-2 and Army's other assets operating in the South East Asia. There was no synchronisation of intelligence efforts and no proper fusion of the collected information. However, those issues had no significant influence on the events of the Tet Offensive. They were not the main causes of the initial lame reaction of the allied forces on the massive attacks in the South Vietnam. The intelligence community did its best, and failed by no means, to provide the timely warning. It was the leadership failure to derive the right conclusions from the presented information and act accordingly.

The first problem was in the MACV command itself. One is for sure, that Westmorland was well aware of the coming major offensive as a part of Mao's final phase of war. He was not just sure about the exact timing. "At this time, General Westmorland put the odds at six to four that the communists would attack before Tet, and his intelligence officer, General Davidson, put the same odds that the big offensive would come after the Tet holidays."⁴¹ However, to be a good intelligence analyst, and a good user of intelligence, one must share the fantasy of the opposition. Westmorland failed to do so. He could not imagine that his opponent would risk everything: weapons, equipment and the most important - the lives of hundreds of thousands of his soldiers in a move that had some major chances to fail.

"Despite all the theories that can be hatched to explain why Generals Westmoreland, Davidson, and others, would not, or could not, believe that a series of coordinated attacks on the cities was a serious part of Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967-68, the truth of the matter is that no one really believed that the planners in Hanoi were that stupid."⁴² Presumably Westmorland just could not believe in the scale of the attack and Hanoi's attempt of general uprising throughout the urban areas. Furthermore he could not believe that not the US military would be the primary target in the days to come, but the Southern government structures and more vulnerable ARVN units. He felt more comfortable to confront the conventional attacks conducted by the PAVN regular units, against which he could exercise the whole superiority of the American military, and to easily measure the success by accounting for destroyed enemy units. "To him the threat was not the South Vietnamese popular uprising but Communist military aggression against South Vietnam."⁴³ All commanders should remember a simple advice that Stalin gave to his generals

during the WWII: "An intelligence hypothesis may become your hobby-horse on which you will ride into a self-made trap."⁴⁴ It was such a trap where Westmorland appeared by overthinking the enemy. He made a mistake which is quite frequent in the intelligence community. In an attempt of setting himself in the mind of the enemy commander to anticipate his plans, he came up to such conclusions, that he wanted the enemy to reach, and to such moves that he favoured them to commit.

Even more severe was the reluctance of Washington to plan for the further escalation. Westmorland tried really hard to cancel the Tet truce, which served as solid evidence that he was aware of the coming attack. In order to achieve this, he even approached the South Vietnam's president Thieu, without informing his political leadership about it. "His efforts resulted in a reduction of the proposed cease fire to 36 hours in South Vietnam and a complete cancellation of the truce in I Corps where something was apparently brewing."⁴⁵ However those actions of Westmorland infuriated the Johnson Administration, which had just recently announced the restrictions on Bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, as an attempt to show some good will regarding so called "Trinh Initiative", the most recent politico-diplomatic part of Hanoi's strategy to fight while negotiating. Washington assumed that the truce cancellation would send the wrong signal to Hanoi. "In late January, senior members of the Johnson Administration pressured Westmorland not only to honour but not to reduce the duration of Tet cease fire."⁴⁶ Westmorland knowing that Washington was misled by the faulty negotiations tactics of the North had even attempted to warn the political leadership about the impending offensive. In late December 1967 during the communications with Washington he stated that the enemy was planning decisive actions and that Hanoi was just about to "undertake an intensified countrywide effort, perhaps a maximum effort, over a short period of time."⁴⁷ Unfortunately the Johnson Administration, due to the wishful thinking of ending the war as soon as possible through the negotiations with the Communist North, was reluctant to listen to any advice of further escalation.

The essay has accounted for the multidimensional intelligence efforts committed by the United States in the South Vietnam. The wide array of the collected information, warnings and indicators, obtained by the various intelligence assets, were listed. The essay has exposed that the MACV was in possession of all required information that clearly indicated on the impending Tet Offensive. All the evidence presented has proved that it was not the failure of intelligence to provide the timely warning but that of the US military and Political leadership that failed to act accordingly and to counter Communist efforts effectively before and during the initial phases of the Tet Offensive.

41 Ford, 103
42 Cubbage, 76
43 Ford, 101

44 Cubbage, 77
45 Ford, 103
46 Wirtz, 196
47 Oberdorfer, 138

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