

# Giap Offensive Aims at War's End by Midyear

By Douglas Pike

A U.S. Information Agency officer and author of "Vietcong," Pike prepared this analysis in a personal capacity. It is not an official U.S. Government assessment or policy statement.

THE LUNAR NEW YEAR offensive launched by the Communists against 36 major South Vietnamese population centers in the early hours of Jan. 31 bears the unmistakable stamp of North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap. Any assessment of the objectives, magnitude and subsequent developments of the campaign must attend closely to the mind and personality of this master tactician, victor of the Vietminh war against the French and supreme strategist of the present one.

Gen. Giap is one of the best tactical commanders of the 20th century, expert at seizing the local initiative and master of the surprise diversion. He is meticulous in his planning, imaginative and bold in executing his military strikes. Only Giap, among all North or South Vietnamese Communists, could have supervised the elaborate synchronization not only of the Tet offensive but of the broader winter-spring campaign of which it is part. For this audacious strike—and audacity is what carried it as far as it did—must not be viewed as something isolated nor unique, but rather as the intensified continuation of something under way at least since August, 1967.

The backdrop against which Gen. Giap planned and acted was both temporal and internally political. He was working against time, trying to cope with what he knows is in the long run a strategically hopeless situation in which American firepower eats deeper into his reserves of men and arms. And he faced, in the world of Politburo politics in Hanoi, increased pressure from younger members who see his preoccupation with military victory as a forlorn attempt to restage the Vietminh war under vastly changed conditions because a generation of military technology has outdated many of the military techniques that were successful against the French.

## Dissension in Hanoi

THE BROAD VIEW of the war, as Giap sees it, and as he outlined it in an important series of articles published in Hanoi last September, goes something like this:

The American military buildup in South Vietnam, beginning in mid-1965, resulted in two American military offensives in the dry seasons of 1965 and 1966. Both offensives failed, Giap believes, and resulted in a condition of stalemate which offered him un-

precedented opportunities. If only he considered that the Vietcong are doing virtually everything wrong, but also from the U.S.S.R., came muted but stronger criticism of the manner and means by which Gen. Giap was conducting the war.

In Hanoi, especially among younger Politburo members, Gen. Giap was in trouble. It was not serious trouble, for there is nothing definite to suggest that the dissension or dissatisfaction was at the level of a schism. But the stalemate condition which Gen. Giap had proclaimed did have the effect of putting him—as well as Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, the other two of the big three in Hanoi—on the defensive, and forced Gen. Giap to act more precipitately in commitment than he prefers, being by nature a cautious man reluctant to act while loose ends remain.

## Three Phases

THROUGHOUT the Vietminh war and during the present war Gen. Giap has pursued what he calls his Three Phase Strategy, namely: resistance, general offensive and general uprising. The Vietminh war is today divided by Hanoi historians into these stages, and the three also have been used in explaining the course of events of the present war.

In the summer of 1967, Gen. Giap decided that for political and personal reasons, if not for military ones, the moment had arrived when he must order the start of the general offensive and, subsequently, the general uprising phases in the south. He and his staff began work on what internally was called the winter-spring campaign. The broad characteristics of the campaign have been:

- An intensification of what Gen. Giap calls Co-ordinated Fighting Methods, manifested at Dakto in Kontum Province, Contien in Quangnai Province and Locninh in Binhlong Province, all three in the mountainous interior of South Vietnam along the Cambodian and Laotian borders;

- An intensification of what he calls Independent Fighting Methods, that is, revolutionary guerrilla war, aimed at the cities, airfields, military headquarters, and Allied military logistic, transportation and communication networks.

These were the military aspects. Also part of the winter-spring campaign was a stepped-up program of terrorism, especially against the government of Vietnam's pacification program, which largely had been ignored before this. And, by increased organizational and motivational work by political cadres employing the three longstanding Communist programs or techniques known as:

- *Dan van*, or motivating and harnessing the energies of those South Vietnamese people controlled by the



"It shouldn't be hard for either side to raise our standard of living now."

would be passed. Then, inexorably and irreversibly, the war would begin to work itself out to final victory, much like the situation in Europe in late 1944 when the fate of Germany was sealed and the final victory, no longer in doubt, became simply a matter of time although months of hard fighting lay ahead.

Seen lying along the route to this goal are the destruction of at least a portion of American military capability in South Vietnam, disintegration of the Vietnamese armed forces as a military organization, seizure of the governmental centers in South Vietnam down to and including the district or county level, establishment of a broad-based coalition government, although not one which would include present power holders in Saigon, and unification of North and South Vietnam.

The final objective is the goal which Gen. Giap and fellow members of his Politburo have been pursuing ceaselessly and relentlessly since 1954.

The Co-ordinated Fighting Methods attacks at Dakto, Locninh and Contien, in the early winter, resulted in heavy North Vietnamese casualties and were, for Gen. Giap's purposes, inconclusive.

They served to increase the grumblings by the younger elements in the Politburo, joined perhaps by certain of the "professional" generals in Hanoi, the line commanders, who argued that they had lost a sizable number of good men in these moun-

war. Beginning in December of last year, Hanoi began its overtures directed at talking the Americans out of South Vietnam under the worst possible circumstances to them.

The second prong is aimed at the establishment of a coalition government in South Vietnam, a coalition government as that term is used peculiarly by the Communists. The vehicle for this is a series of specially designed interim Communist front organizations in South Vietnam, most important of which is the Alliance of National Peace Forces in Saigon. These sprang up in South Vietnam beginning in early February of this year. They are supposed to help establish a new ruling group in South Vietnam that excludes the present members of the government of Vietnam.

Implicit in this double-pronged salient strategy is a difference of opinion among members of the North Vietnamese politburo. Giap continues to see the route to victory as military—the way to win, he argues, is militarily, on the ground, in South Vietnam, not at the conference table and not as the result of the American presidential elections. This view, from all evidence, is shared by Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, who is Ho's most likely successor.

Le Duan, the fourth leading figure in the Politburo, probably supports the first three, but with some reservations. Truong Chinh, the fifth man, plays a role which, if it is important, is unclear.

(Some prisoners gave more than one explanation.)

An oblique indication of the direction in which the leadership believed the offensive would move lies in the fact that large numbers of the rank and file, especially in Central Vietnam, did not have any specific withdrawal plans. Some 47 per cent of the prisoners said they did not receive withdrawal plans as part of their individual assignment; 21 per cent did have some such plan; and 22 per cent either were given no instructions (although their officers may have received them) or were told that subsequent actions would depend on developments.

These troops may have been regarded by the leadership as expendable, but the pattern is quite unlike previous Communist military behavior in the war and most certainly will hurt future Communist leadership credibility.

## Battle Order

ONE OF THE BEST indications of the leadership's calculation can be found in the battle order of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front. The heart of this order was these specific instructions to the troops:

- "Wipe out a good deal of the enemy's potential, defeat the U.S. and satellite troops; cause disintegration of the puppet army.
- "Overthrow the lackey government at all echelons; drastically

offensive there was one political cadre in action. During individual city operations political cadres moved from house to house or among the early morning crowds, mingling with the people, explaining the general uprising and soliciting support. Many carried with them lists of names of persons ostensibly willing to take part in public demonstrations.

## Peace Theme

A COMMON THEME used by these cadres was that the National Liberation Front stood for democracy, social welfare, neutralism. Peace was a recurrent theme, directed especially toward Buddhist women. Commando units striking at specific targets in the cities had satellite political cadres circling, four or five blocks away, the installation under attack, keeping people out of the fire fight and soliciting support. A special "coalition" flag was flown.

Typical of this political activity was a "people's court" held at the intersection of Minh Mang and Suvanmanh streets in Cholon. A cadre on a soap box told an assembled crowd that standing next to him was a woman whose son was a government security agent. He asked the crowd what "justice" should be meted out. The crowd shouted: "Don't execute her." So the cadre replied that she would be let off with a warning to call her son back from the government ranks.

Then the cadre went on to explain the general uprising. A clique of other political cadres in the crowd applauded throughout the speech, urging those next to them to do likewise. No one of these incidents in itself may be significant. What is important is that the Communists expended a great deal of effort and allocated considerable resources, especially manpower, in creating them.

## No Aid From People

ALTHOUGH ALMOST ALL of the rank-and-file Communists were told to expect support from the population, either specific assistance or the general uprising, 90 per cent of the prisoners said they received no aid from the general population and only 2 per cent said they received unsolicited assistance. Six per cent of the reports did not touch on this matter.

The third expectation by Gen. Giap was that a strong punitive blow could be delivered against the Americans. Again, the pattern of the offensive suggests that he sought not to decimate large numbers of Americans—this being futile in a manpower sense, like trying to bail the ocean dry—but to cripple the American air strike ability, and to disrupt the American military and civilian network that ties central command centers with field

and 1966. Both offensives failed, Giap believes, and resulted in a condition of stalemate which offered him unprecedented opportunities if only they could be properly seized. Dissension was rising in the United States, he held, and pessimism was spreading in the American ranks in Vietnam. Foreign support for the Communist cause was growing abroad, in terms of increased hostility to American military activities in Vietnam.

But, at the same time, a sort of mirror-image condition was developing in Hanoi. The stalemate which Gen. Giap thought he saw was, of course, a stalemate in both directions. Dissension in the Politburo developed over the lack of progress and particularly over the "no-win" policy for which Gen. Giap held the chief responsibility.

A sense of impotency developed as American planes continued to pound away at the North Vietnamese transportation and communication centers, curtailing the flow of food, consumer goods and people throughout the country as well as military material in from China and out to South Vietnam.

From the Communist capitals, especially from Peking (where the Chinese Communists appear to con-

known as:

- *Dan van*, or motivating and harnessing the energies of those South Vietnamese people controlled by the Communists:

- *Dich van*, or nonmilitary activities by the Communists in areas controlled by the government of South Vietnam — specifically, in this case, social organization work by covert cadres to form the people of the towns and cities into mass movements that would engage in public disorders and, eventually, the general uprising, thus supporting the military assault;

- *Binh van*, or proselyting efforts among members of the Vietnamese armed forces and civil service.

#### Decision by Midyear

GEN. GIAP'S campaign had three phases following the initial planning, training and indoctrinational work, which began in July of last year. The first phase came in October, November and December, the second is taking place in the first three months of 1968 and phase three is scheduled for April, May and June. The scenario therefore calls for an end to the war by mid-1968.

This is not to say Giap anticipated peace arriving by mid-year, rather that a decisive point of no return

of the "professional generals in Hanoi, the line commanders, who argued that they had lost a sizable number of good men in these mountain battles to no very good purpose in a campaign large enough to extract a real price but too small to be decisive.

Nevertheless, the campaign ground on and the plans went forward for the general offensive, which was to deal a major or, it was hoped, catastrophic blow at the enemy—in actuality the South Vietnamese rather than the Americans.

#### Peace Overtures.

MEANWHILE, the diplomats and propagandists in Hanoi were busy developing a peace overture campaign, which was a fabric woven of many threads.

Peace or "talks" overtures—the difference between the two being lost as the word "peace" spread around the world—served propaganda ends, possibly could achieve a cessation of air strikes into North Vietnam, helped reduce the grumbling in the Politburo and, above all, formed the right hook which together with the left jab was to assure victory.

Thus, in the broadest terms, the grand strategy of Hanoi, which goes beyond Gen. Giap's military contributions. Is a two-salient thrust, one salient being military and the other being diplomatic-negotiational.

The military salient has two prongs. Employing independent fighting methods, a maximum strike is being mounted in South Vietnam and focused on the cities. It is billed as the general uprising and portrayed to the rank and file as Armageddon. General Giap used at least 50 per cent of his main strike forces, estimated at 118,000 total, although he employed southern Vietcong soldiers rather than Northern troops wherever possible. The Tet offensive, heart of the general offensive, concentrated on airfields and air support activities, military headquarters, civilian governmental complexes, material and logistic centers, as well, of course, as the 36 largest towns and cities of the country.

Gen. Giap hopes the general offensive will have these results: the Americans will crack, militarily and psychologically, a significant portion of what he regards as the real American, strength—aircraft, communication and transportation techniques and well-coordinated command centers—will be destroyed; the Vietnamese armed forces will disintegrate, and the population will rise up in massive support of the Communist (if not enthusiastically at least because it appears to be the wise individual thing to do).

Employing concentrated fighting methods, the other prong of the salient, comes the Dienbienphu gambit probably at Khcsanh. The essence of the military salient is a play for time—take and hold is the order, so that time will run out, especially for the Americans.

#### Political Attack

THE DIPLOMATIC - negotiation salient is the political attack. Its first prong is the negotiational ploy, offering a political "settlement" of the

.Cuong Chinh, the fifth man. plays a frole which, if it is important, is unclear.

The younger members of the Politburo, while subscribing to the twofalient approach, argue for greater emphasis on the diplomatic-negotiatioial salient, regarding the military jsalient as valuable chiefly as a means «Bf closing the ring.

Essentially this fighting-negotiating method was the pattern during the 1954 Indochina Conference in Geneva and, in Korea, during the period prior Bo and during the armistice talks that ended Korean hostilities.

#### Mylli of Uprising

THE TET offensive, within this context, quickly became many things to many men. Assessment of the degree of failure must be built on an assessment of the enemy's intentions. If intentions in the offensive were

- limited, then the failure was a limited one; if more ambitious, then the failure was a major one. And if the enemy intention was a knock-out punch then, quite obviously, the failure was monumental. In short, intentions are a continuum.

The Tet offensive was wrapped in the great Vietnamese Communist social myth of the general uprising (the same myth, in an agrarian setting, as French sociologist Georges Sorel's idea of the General Strike: the day when all the workers of the world simultaneously strike, bringing society to a standstill and allowing the workers to take over). Like all social myths, that of the general uprising essentially is something existing in men's minds, not in the finite world. What counts is not truth but what it believed to be true,

In Communist public statements, the events of early February generally were termed "the offensive campaign and uprising campaign." Internal documents called it a "general offensive to culminate in the general uprising." During indoctrination sessions for the rank and file, in previous months, it was most frequently billed as a general uprising: and the political cadres mingling with the population during the offensive almost universally said or implied it was the general uprising.

An indication of what the offensive meant to the rank-and-file Commuunists can be found in a tabulation of prisoner interrogation reports.

With respect to the basic purpose of the assignment given individuals, a sample shows 40 per cent were told this was to be the general uprising; 32 per cent were told simply they were to take part in an attack of unspecified dimensions (overwhelmingly, this is what those who attacked Saigon in individual actions, such as the attack on the U.S. Embassy, were told); 26 per cent were told they were to seize and hold the cities (chiefly the explanation in Central Vietnam area); about 20 per cent were told the purpose of the attack was "to drive out the American"; and about 15 per cent were given to understand that the military attack would culminate in establishment of a coalition govern-

or the puppet army.

- "Overthrow the lackey government at all echelons; drastically punish all high-level traitors and all tyrants.

- "Establish a People's Revolutionary Government at all levels, strive to defend this government and resolutely smash all enemy counteroffensive attempts.

- "Implement all policies set down by the National Liberation Front."

The major anticipated results of the Tet offensive and the winter-spring campaign appear to be threefold. First, that the Vietnamese armed forces would disintegrate as a coherent military organization, that is, reach a condition in which individual military units might remain intact but in which the system would be in disarray, fragmented and chaotic—its officers receiving no orders since higher headquarters would have been overrun, its troops disoriented and demoralized. The pattern of the attacks, it is clear from documents, consisted of strikes at the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) chain of command rather than at the decimation of large numbers of troops. The documents and prisoner reports also indicate the leadership counted heavily on the soldiers of the Vietnamese armed forces, not only not fighting, but joining the Communists en masse. The creation of the paper organization, the Patriotic Armed Forces, was for the purpose of quickly employing the services of vast numbers of defecting ARVN soldiers.

Second, the calculation of Gen. Giap was that a great deal of public support would be forthcoming. This is the political dimension of the Tet offensive.

It is a safe estimate that for every five Communist soldiers in the of-

## 'Greatest Battle Ever Fought'

*Excerpts from an Order of the Day issued by the 'South Vietnam Liberation Army.' to be read to all combatants and cadres before they began their offensive on Tet, the Vietnamese New Year:*

To all cadre and combatants, "Move forward to achieve final victory."

The Tet greeting of Chairman Ho is actually a combat order for our entire Army and population.

And in compliance with the attack order of the Presidium, Central Committee SVN Liberation Front, all cadre and combatants of all South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces should have move forward to:

Carry out direct attacks on all the headquarters of the enemy to disrupt the U.S. Imperialists' will for aggression and to smash the Puppet Government and Puppet Army, the

ability, and to dislrupt the American military and civilian network that ties central command centers with field headquarters through an elaborate communication network. In short, the target was the American ability to assess and respond quickly to attack.

Beyond this lies the domain of the unknowable: how much Gen. Giap was the victim of overly optimistic reports from his commanders in the South and to what degree Politburo politics caused him to override his better judgment. Only historians, far into the future, will be able to answer these questions with certainty.

#### Future Prospects

AT THIS WRITING the prospects for the remainder of the winter-spring offensive, in a very tentative way, appear to be these:

1. Communist assertion of victory and the semblance of continuity, the "all is going according to plan" approach. Doctrinally, increased emphasis can be expected on the protracted conflict theme.

2. Continued public reference to a negotiated settlement but actually, for the short run, a tapering off of negotiational overtures.

3. An effort to maintain the appearance of high-tempo military activity—especially political work and military pressure on the urban centers—while the obviously necessary regrouping, resupplying and retraining missions are pursued. Military activity by North Vietnamese troops can be expected, especially at Khesanh, although this need not involve a full closing of the battle of Khesanh.

4. Possible introduction of new, more sophisticated weapons by the Communists. Possibly there may be Hanoi requests for more foreign assistance from Communist nations.

lackeys of the U.S. [We will restore power to the people, completely liberate 14 million people of South Vietnam, fulfill our revolutionary task of establishing "democracy throughout the country.

This will be the greatest battle ever fought throughout the history of our country. It will bring forth world-wide change but will also require many sacrifices. It will decide the fate and the survival of our Fatherland and will shake the world and cause the most bitter failure to the imperialist ringleaders.

Dear comrades.

It is evident that the American aggressors are losing.

The call for assault to achieve independence and liberty has sounded.

You, comrades, should act as heroes of Vietnam and with the spirit and pride of combatants of the Liberation Army.

The final victory will be with us.