

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Vietnamese Perspective on Tet

From the South Vietnamese, anti-Communist perspective

From Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (also known as VNQDD, or Vietnamese National Party). <http://www.vietquoc.com/tet68rev.htm>

More About the 1968 Tet Offensive

For several thousand years, Vietnamese Lunar New Year has been a traditional celebration that brings the Vietnamese a sense of happiness, hope and peace. However, in recent years, it also brings back a bitter memory full of tears. It reminds them of the 1968 bloodshed, the bloodiest military campaign of the Vietnam War the North Communists launched against the South.

The “general offensive and general uprising” of the north marked the sharp turn of the Vietnam War. Today there have been a great number of writings about this event. However, it seems that many key facts in the Communist campaign are still misinterpreted or neglected.

In the mid-80s, living in Saigon after being released from the Communist “re-education camp,” I read a book published in the early 1980s in America about the story of the 1968 Tet Offensive. It said that the North Vietnamese Army supreme command had imitated one of the greatest heroes of Vietnam, King Quang Trung—who won the most spectacular victory over the Chinese aggressors in the 1789 counter-attack—in planning the 1968 operations.

The book quoted King Quang Trung’s tactic of surprise. He let the troops celebrate the 1789 Tet Festival one day ahead so that he could launch the attacks on the first three days of the lunar new year while the Chinese troops were still feasting and not ready to organize their defense.

Those who claimed the similarity between the two campaigns certainly did not know the whole truth, but jumped into conclusion with wild imagination after learning that the North Vietnamese attacking units also celebrated Tet “one day ahead” before the attacks.

In fact, the Tet Offensive broke out on the Tet’s Eve - in the early morning of January 30, 1968, at many cities of central Vietnam, such as Da Nang and Qui Nhon, as well as cities in the central coastal and highland areas, that lied within the Communist 5th Military Region. The other cities to the south that included Saigon, were attacked 24 hours later in the small hours of January 31. Thus the offensive lost its element of total surprise that



every tactician has to respect.

But it surprised me that some in the American media were still unaware of such a tragic story.

The story started some 5 months previously. On August 8, 1967, the North Vietnam government approved a lunar calendar specifically compiled for the 7th time zone that covers all Vietnam, replacing the traditional lunar calendar that had been in use in Asia for hundreds of years.

That old calendar was calculated for the 8th time zone that Beijing falls right in the middle. It was accepted in general by a few nations such as China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and somewhat in Japan and Korea, mostly for traditional celebrations and religious purposes. South Vietnam used this calendar. With common cultural origin, these countries needed not have their own calendar, particularly it has not been used for scientific and administrative activities.

The North Vietnam new lunar calendar differs from the common calendar about some dates, such as the leap months of certain years (1984 and 1987) and the Tet's Eve of the three Lunar New Years: Mau Than (1968), Ky Dau (1969) and At Suu (1985). South Vietnam celebrated the first day of the Mau Than lunar year on January 30, 1968, while North Vietnam celebrated it on Jan 29, 1968.

It was obviously that the North Vietnamese leaders had ordered the offensives to be launched on the night of the first day of Tet to take the objectives by total surprise. For some reason, the North Vietnamese Army Supreme Command was not aware of the fact that there were different dates for Tet between North and South Vietnam. Therefore, most NVA units in the Communist 5th Military Region - closer to North Vietnam - probably used North Vietnamese calendar, and conducted their attacks in the night between Jan 29 and 30, while their comrades farther to the south attacked in the night from Jan 30 to 31.

Many in the intelligence branch of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were well aware of the reason why the Communist forces launched their attacks at two different dates. Information from sources among NVA prisoners of war and ralliers about the new calendar of North Vietnam should not have been neglected by the American side. The information was also available in broadcast from Hanoi Radio.

In military operations, nothing is more important than surprise. So the Communist forces lost their advantage of surprise on more than half of the objectives. Had the Vietnamese Communists conducted their coordinated attacks at the same H-hour, South Vietnam would have been in much more trouble.

The large scale offensive resulted in drastic human and morale losses of the Communist forces. However, the offensive caused an extreme negative effect in the American public opinion and boosted the more bitter protests against the war.

Until lately, the Ha Noi propaganda and political indoctrination system has always



claimed the Tet offensive their military victory, and never insisted on their victory over the morale of the American public. Obviously, Ha Noi leaders won a priceless victory at an unintended objective.

In South Vietnam, on the contrary, the offensive created an unexpected attitude among the people.

After the first few hours of panic, the South Vietnamese armed forces reacted fiercely. There were hundreds of stories of brave soldiers and small units who fought their enemies with incredible courage.

A large number of those who were playing fence-sitters especially in the region around Hue City then took sides with the nationalist government.

Several mass graves were found where thousands of unarmed soldiers, civil servants and civilians were shot, stabbed, or with skulls mashed by clubs and buried in strings of ropes, even buried alive. A large number of VC-sympathizers who saw the horrible graves, undeniable evidence of the Communist barbarian crimes, changed sides.

The most significant indication of such attitudes could be observed from the figures of young volunteers to join the army. After the first wave of Communist attacks, a great number of youth under draft age - below 20 years old - voluntarily enrolled in the army for combat units, so high that thousands of young draftees were delayed reporting for boot camps.

On the Communist side, the number of ralliers known as “chieu hoi” increased about four times. The offensive planners apparently expected the so-called “people uprising,” so most secret cells were ordered to emerge. When the attacking units were crushed, cell members had to flee to the green forests. Thus the Tet offensive helped South Vietnam neutralize much of the Communist infrastructure before the Phoenix Campaign got rid of many others.

Unfortunately, such achievements were nullified by the waves of protests in America. As in any other developing countries, nobody takes heed of a speech from a Vietnamese official. But the same thing from an American statesman or even a protester could be well listened to and trusted. So information from the Western media produced rumors that the USA was about to sell off South Vietnam to the Communist blocks.

The rumors were almost absolutely credible to the Vietnamese—particularly the military servicemen of all ranks—because of another hearsay that until now have a very powerful impact on the mind of a great number of the South Vietnamese. There have been no polls on the subject, but it was estimated that more than half of the soldiers strongly believed that “it was the Americans who helped the Communist attack the South Vietnamese cities.”

Hundreds of officers from all over South Vietnam asserted that they “saw” NVA soldiers moving into the cities on U.S. Army trucks, or American helicopters transporting supplies to NVA units. In



Saigon, most people accepted the allegation that the Americans deliberately let the Communists infiltrate the capital city because the American electronic sensor defense system around Saigon was able to detect things as small as a mouse crossing the hi-tech fences.

Another hearsay among the South Vietnamese military ran that “none of the American military units or installation and agencies - military or civilian - was under Communist first phase of the offensive (February) except for the U.S. Embassy. And only after nearly three weeks did the U.S. Marines engage in the battle of Hue, in the old Royal Palace” The allegation seemed to be true. The American combat units, however, were fighting fierce battles in phase 2 (May 1968) and phase 3 (September 1968).

Similar rumors might have been of no importance if they were in America. But in Vietnam, they did convince a lot of people. In the military, they dealt deadly blows on the soldiers' morale. Their impacts still lingered on until the last days of April 1975.

The truth in the rumors did not matter much. But the fact that great numbers of the fighting men strongly believed the rumors turned them into a deadly psychological weapon which very few or maybe none has ever properly treated in writings about the Vietnam War. Most authors studied the war at high echelons, but neglected the morale of the buck privates and the effect of the media in the Vietnam War. No military plan even by top strategists in the White House could succeed if half of the privates believed that they would be defeated before long. So why should they go on fighting?

For years, I have been wondering how much the American public was uninformed about the Vietnam War.

From “My War” (unpublished) by L.T.

