

# Tet Seen as Vietcong's Peak

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SAIGON— The National Liberation Front was a model of successful insurgency. Tightly organized, brilliantly led, resourceful and ingenious, the Vietcong first stole the countryside from under the noses of Saigon's many governments and their American allies, then defied them to take it back.

Americans in Vietnam took a long time to agree on it, but today such a definition of the Vietcong is a cliché here. Through 1967, many American officials insisted on underestimating their enemy, but the Tet offensive of early 1968 changed that.

If the Tet offensive changed the conventional

wisdom about the Vietcong, it also changed—and drastically weakened—the Vietcong itself, that is the new conventional wisdom of today. There is a new optimism among American officials here that is based largely on the increasingly popular theory that the Vietcong are now too weak to prevail in South Vietnam.

This theory has gained wide currency in the American mission here, and it is being reported to Washington. It is probably one of the factors President Nixon is weighing most carefully as he tries to find a way out of Vietnam.

The new optimists in Vietnam are not predicting that the war is about to be won, though they often leave that

impression. Rather, they insist that things are going much better now than ever before, and that an independent Saigon government can prevail—with continued U.S. support—because the enemy is losing its strength inside South Vietnam.

Some American officials, here, including high-ranking diplomats, believe that the enemy's apparently deteriorating position in the countryside could bring a change in Hanoi's attitude at the Paris peace talks. These officials speculate that the Communists may conclude that they can salvage more by negotiating than by sitting by while the remainder of their local forces are decimated.

See OPTIMISTS, A14, Col. 1

## OPTIMISTS, From A1

But this view is sharply disputed by other officials in Vietnam, especially military officers, who reason that Hanoi would be well advised to remain obstinate while the United States is withdrawing troops under increasing pressure from American public opinion.

In its most popular form, the theory of the Vietcong's demise goes something like this:

The Tet attacks of 1968 cost the Vietcong thousands of their most valuable cadre, including irreplaceable veterans of the 10 to 20 years of revolutionary activity. Thus the boldness and ingenuity that made the Tet offensive possible was largely eliminated in the bloody toll of the offensive itself.

The incredibly determined troops who fought suicidally into the American Embassy compound, the leaders of assaults on the cities throughout the country, the political cadre who came into the open for the first time to lead the "general uprising"—all these were lost.

Since then, the theory continues, the local Vietcong have become progressively weaker. Thousands have "chieu hoi" or rallied to the government side rather than fight on against increasingly adverse odds. Thousands more have been eliminated by the Phoenix program which tracks down, arrests and jails Vietcong cadre.

### Front in Disarray

The NLF has lost control of most populated areas of the countryside, therefore losing its base for recruiting new personnel. Today the Front's vaunted organization is in disarray or worse; in many areas it is said to be nonexistent, or dependent on a handful of local cadres where once there were hundreds.

To support the theory, of

points, but the new optimists make them, too. They are willing to acknowledge possible flaws in their arguments, still insisting that on balance, their optimism is justified.

Typical of these confident optimists is an American official who has been in Vietnam for most of a decade. His early years here were spent as a critic of American policy. Then a pessimist about the outcome of the war, he now exudes optimism, and offers a detailed defense of his new position—but not, please, for quotation.

His might be called the advanced optimists' theory, supported in part or completely by a number of the most knowledgeable Americans here and by many Vietnamese government officials.

Implicit in this optimism is a belief that the conditions which existed in the first half of the 1960s when the NLF built its strength and organized local administrations that "clearly outperformed the government's on every count," as Bernard Fall once wrote—have now virtually disappeared. Vietnamese society has changed radically since 1963, almost entirely in ways that work against the Vietcong, according to the analysis.

### Conditions in 1961

One experienced official gave this example: "When I came into the Delta in 1961, I found that people believed ridiculous lies that the Vietcong told them. Their propaganda was unchallenged." Peasants believed that Saigon had been almost destroyed, that Americans in Dien Bien Phu ran the government and other tales, he said.

But today, thousands of television sets and hundreds of thousands of radios later, the Vietnamese peasantry is

spirit" has made it possible to pacify most of the province.

More practically, it is said, there are no longer any advantages to life under the Vietcong but there are numerous apparent disadvantages. Now that they are on the defensive, the Vietcong must press into service whoever they can find. Their taxes are now extremely high, much higher than the government's. Vietcong areas are subject to military sweeps, air strikes and artillery fire and the NLF's shadow government has disappeared or gone underground, offering few if any benefits to its followers.

Moreover, the optimistic analysis continues, South Vietnam has been transformed from a quiet agrarian economy into a bustling marketplace of consumer goods. Motorbikes, radios, televisions and other appliances have transformed the lives and ambitions of urban Vietnamese and many peasants, too.

One can find television aerials in the deepest corners of the Mekong Delta. Even where there is no electricity and radios can be found in almost any hamlet in Vietnam. Motorbikes have become a way of life in Vietnam. Capitalism has come to the scene of the revolution, and the revolution has suffered—at least temporarily—as a result.

### Vietnam Is Changed

This analysis is not easily tested, for its assumptions about what appealed originally to followers of the NLF cannot be proved. But there is no doubt that the war has radically changed Vietnam. There is widespread agreement among the Vietnamese and knowledgeable outsiders here that the Vietcong have largely

to support the theory, officials here generally cite the same bits of evidence: The self-evident fact that Vietcong losses at Tet were enormous, the self-evident fact that the Vietcong now control very few populated areas, the increasing percentage of North Vietnamese troops in nominally Vietcong units, reports from prisoners and ralliers about the desperate straits the Communists are in, and statistics showing how many thousands of the "VCI" (members of the Vietcong infrastructure) have been neutralized, and how drastically pacification is progressing, almost without opposition.

Hard evidence to contradict the theory is not easily found, though there are a number of seasoned cynics, especially among the Vietnamese, who still are unwilling to believe that the Vietcong is in such precarious straits.

#### Some American Views

One Vietnamese-speaking official believes that the Vietcong have gone underground deliberately, perhaps expressly to induce the sort of optimism that is now flourishing on the allied side. But he has no evidence to support his hypothesis and none of the notorious captured documents confirm it.

There is evidence that the boasts made for the Chieu Hoi and Phoenix programs may be misleading. American officials in the field acknowledge that a substantial number of ralliers are only draft dodgers or insignificant figures looking for a temporary accommodation with the government.

Many of the suspected Vietcong arrested by the Phoenix program are able to bribe their way out of prison, others get off with prison terms of a few months. Some skeptics think reports of the enemy's hardships can be attributed to ralliers and prisoners who tell Americans and South Vietnamese officials only what they want to hear.

There are pessimists in Vietnam who make these

arguments. To support the theory, officials here generally cite the same bits of evidence: The self-evident fact that Vietcong losses at Tet were enormous, the self-evident fact that the Vietcong now control very few populated areas, the increasing percentage of North Vietnamese troops in nominally Vietcong units, reports from prisoners and ralliers about the desperate straits the Communists are in, and statistics showing how many thousands of the "VCI" (members of the Vietcong infrastructure) have been neutralized, and how drastically pacification is progressing, almost without opposition.

Since 1965, this analysis continues, the Vietcong have also lost their popular support. In the early days of the insurgency there were real benefits to life under the Vietcong: Land was distributed to farmers, social services that Saigon had never provided were available, reasonably free local elections (suspended by Diem) were held.

#### NLF Support Estimated

"I am convinced," says one American who was here at the time, "that in 1964 and 1965, at least 50 per cent of the people actively supported the Vietcong and expected them to win the war."

The same official thinks the number of NLF supporters now is no more than 10 or 15 per cent of the population. He attributes much of the change to the experience of the Tet offensive. Tet is much the most important holiday of the year in Vietnam. Superstitious Vietnamese—of whom there are many—believe that the luck of the whole year will be determined by their luck during Tet. The Vietcong assured that Tet in 1968 was as bad a holiday as it could have been for millions of Vietnamese when it launched nationwide attacks.

In many parts of Vietnam the Tet attacks resulted in Vietcong occupation of territories that had been controlled by Saigon. "Three to six months under VC control," says Col. Duong Hien Nghia, the province chief of Vinhlong, "gave the people a chance to make a comparison between communism and nationalism."

Much of Col. Nghia's province was under Vietcong control for several months after Tet. He is now convinced that the experience convinced many people in Vinhlong to opt for "nationalism," and that this change of the "popular

edgeable outsiders here that the Vietcong have largely lost their claim to the affections, of their old followers.

The revolution used to be easy and attractive. Now it is rigorous, dangerous and uncomfortable. Many South Vietnamese are apparently no longer interested.

What could reverse the trend and put the Vietcong back in the ascendancy? The new optimists offer few answers to that question.

"If President Thieu were assassinated, that might do it," says one, foreseeing a possible unravelling of the Saigon government that would both encourage the Vietcong and discourage the populace.

Some officials believe the enemy do serious, though perhaps only temporary, damage to the pacification program by targeting its forces against such vulnerable pacification targets. U.S. local forces in marginally secure areas, new village development programs, and local officials. But many of the optimists believe that purely military action, even an attempt to repeat the Tet offensive, could have only a fleeting effect. "Really, that would only weaken them more," said one.

#### Limits to Optimism

Nevertheless, a trip around the country reveals that the new optimism has its limits. Despite the widespread feeling that the local Vietcong will soon be beaten, this reporter found no one on several recent trips who would predict when this might happen.

How long will it take to completely pacify Rachkien district in Longan Province, an historic Vietminh and NLF stronghold just south of Saigon? "I hope we will have all C hamlets by the end of next year," replies the district chief, Capt. Vuong Van Hoa. In the rating system of the pacification program (A through E or V for Vietcong-controlled), C means relatively secure, but not fully pacified.

How long would it take to really pacify Rachkien, to bring the hamlets all up at A

# Enemy's High-Water Mark

or B? Capt. Hoa giggled self-consciously and showed the fine, gold trimmings of his teeth. But he did not answer. How long? "You know, it is very hard to bring a hamlet up to B..."

The new optimism is also limited by what Henry Kissinger has described as "one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: The guerrilla wins if he does not lose..."

For the guerrillas to lose in Vietnam, they must acknowledge defeat or be eliminated. None of the officials interviewed for this series of articles anticipate

the former or will yet predict the latter.

If the local Vietcong can maintain the barest pretense of a presence in much of the country while North Vietnam's 100,000-odd troops in or near the South continue to attack and kill allied forces, the war will continue. It may well appear in the United States to be relatively unchanged.

Recent intelligence assessments suggest that North Vietnam may be about to increase the number of its troops within striking distance of the South. In re-

cent months, North Vietnamese soldiers have moved into the Mekong Delta for the first time. "They may lose the revolution but still win the war," one American here says.

The frustration of this situation was summarized recently by a senior U.S. official in the pacification program. "If we could just eliminate the Vietcong infrastructure," he said, "then the war would be won." The words were barely out of his mouth when he smiled and shrugged: "But of course, it wouldn't be."