The North Takes Over

In February and March 1968, reports reaching Hanoi from the Southern battlefields turned bleak. Following the initial success of attacks against population centers—provincial capitals, district towns, and five of six major cities, including a daring and highly visible sapper raid against the United States Embassy in Saigon—the People's Liberation Armed Forces had been beaten back. The general offensive and uprising of Tet Mau Than, phase two of the winter-spring campaign, had faltered. Losses in men and materiel were staggering.

The gambit at Khe Sanh alone cost some 10,000 lives. Around the encircled Marine base in the northwest corner of South Vietnam, some units suffered as much as 90 percent losses to a relentless downpour of American bombs and artillery; by U.S. admission, the bombardment exceeded anything that had ever been seen before in history. And yet the siege, launched ten days before the Tet offensive, had been intended as a diver-

sion, according to Chief of Staff Senior General Van Tien Dung. "The attack at Khe Sanh was aimed only at pulling in the United States Marines and the U.S. Cavalry," he said after the war. "Encircling them ... keeping them there as a diversion ... we never intended to take the base ... it was merely a tactic."

But it had not succeeded as a classic military diversion, for the U.S. and South Vietnamese response throughout the South, after the early surprise of the widespread attacks, had been ample and furious. Two months of fighting, by U.S. estimates, had cost the Communists some 57,000 lives.

The offensive had mainly been carried out by Southerners, the PLAF forces, and the losses proved devastating to this once formidable army. As a military force, the PLAF had been virtually destroyed, and the role played by the Southerners in their own cause declined sharply thereafter. Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, a Lao Dong party Central Committee member and military commander of COSVN, admitted, "We suffered large sacrifices and losses with regard to manpower and materiel, especially cadres at the various echelons, which clearly weakened us." Nguyen Tuong Lai, a PLAF regimental commander whose troops had attacked the U.S. base at Bien Hoa, explained the changes that took place after Tet. "The southern forces were decimated," he said, "and from that time on served mostly in intelligence, logistics and [as] saboteurs for the northerners."

Although PLAF units remained in the field and maintained their unit designations, they were increasingly reconstituted with "filler packets" of Northern soldiers. Between February and May, as PLAF units were carrying out the Tet offensive, an estimated 50,000 PAVN soldiers infiltrated into South Vietnam. In June 1968, U.S. intelligence estimated that 70 percent of all Communist forces in the South were Northerners. More and more of the combat burden fell to PAVN as opposed to NLF units. By 1972 PAVN was to account for about 90 percent of daily combat.

During Tet, main force PAVN units had remained in reserve throughout most of South Vietnam. But PAVN units of the Tri-Thien-Hue front did mount attacks against Khe Sanh and Hue. The gracious imperial city of Hue remained in the hands of PAVN for twenty-five days before the Northern soldiers were dislodged by U.S. Marines in street fighting that reduced much of the city to rubble.

During those twenty-five days the only activity connected to the principle of *Khoi Nghia*—the General Uprising—that the Communists hoped for had taken place in Hue. A North Vietnamese history of the battle in that citadel city described the event in positive, even glowing, terms: "The population ... turned out into the streets and, together with the guerrillas, broke down the apparatus of oppression." But the true story was a grisly one.

The underground NLF cadres who surfaced, along with NLF sympathizers and young PAVN soldiers, plunged into an orgy of killing. Parading through the streets with bullhorns, they rounded up suspected "counterrevolutionaries"—civil servants, military personnel, and "whoever works for the Americans." They dragged people out of their houses and shops. In one sweep they arrested several hundred Roman Catholics huddled in Phu Cam Cathedral, bound their hands behind their backs, and marched them out of sight of the general population to be killed. The Communist cadres ultimately massacred at least 2,800 civilians and dropped their bodies into large common graves.

The Communists denied committing the atrocities and variously blamed American bombings or South Vietnamese troops for the carnage. But their arguments were pure sophistry. "We were the people," a Communist officer named Nguyen Minh Ky who fought at Hue said after the war. "How could we kill ourselves? ... A few criminals may have been spontaneously eliminated by the people,

like stepping on a snake. But most of those bodies—if there were any—were probably patriots who helped us and were murdered by the puppets after we left." General Tran Do, deputy commander of COSVN, used the same jargon in rationalizing events at Hue. Some citizens of Hue may have liquidated "despots," he said, in the same way that "they would get rid of poisonous snakes who, if allowed to live, would commit further crimes."

Truong Nhu Tang, a founder of the NLF, later questioned front leader Huynh Tan Phat about Hue. According to Tang, Phat denied that the front had planned a massacre. Instead, frantic young soldiers had killed indiscriminately, and local citizens had taken justice into their own hands. Tang later wrote, in paraphrasing Phat, "It had simply been one of those terrible spontaneous tragedies that inevitably accompany war."

COSVN planners had expected popular uprisings to occur all over South Vietnam. They believed their solid supporters among the Southern people would welcome the Communist forces and instigate *Khoi Nghia*. But it never happened. "In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South," said General Tran Do.

In anticipation of uprisings, many underground cadres and NLF sympathizers had indeed surfaced during the attacks on the cities. They went about their assigned tasks, trying to rally friends and neighbors to welcome the Communist troops. But the city residents recoiled from the horror of the attacks. And as the tide turned against the Communists, these cadres found themselves isolated and exposed. When the PLAF forces were driven out of the cities, the NLF sympathizers were standing alone. They had to flee.

Some of them took to the jungle and found their way to the area where COSVN was located. In April 1968 they formed the nucleus of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces, a nationalist organization whose function was to provide a public counterweight to the Communists in the NLF and in COSVN. The ANDPF was to be the forerunner of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. One of the PRG's tasks, ironically, would be to assuage fears among Southerners—arising from the Hue massacre—about the brand of "revolutionary justice" that might follow a Communist victory.

Political reverberations

At precisely 4:00 A.M. on May 5, 1968, a barrage of rockets and mortars slammed into the heart of Saigon, and the equivalent of two PAVN divisions launched an attack against the city. At 119 other locations throughout South

Marines leveled the house in background when Communist troops were discovered there during the battle of Hue. Communist casualties lie atop the wall in the foreground.

Vietnam, PAVN forces fired on provincial and district capitals and allied military installations, and in several places the Communist infantry followed up with attacks. The People's Army of Vietnam units had commenced phase three of the winter-spring campaign.

According to their plan, the North Vietnamese had intended it to be the climax of the winter-spring offensive—independent attacks nationwide with one psychologically shattering blow against a major target, perhaps Saigon. Since so much of the PLAF forces had been decimated in phase two, phase three had to be carried out by PAVN. Some analysts have suggested that PAVN was designated all along to execute phase three, and that is why those troops were held in reserve during the Tet offensive.

In any case, the two PAVN divisions attacking Saigon drove almost to the heart of the city. In a week of vicious fighting, ARVN and U.S. troops drove most of the invaders out, only to have the Communists reappear two weeks later in a second surge of attacks. The allied forces eventually cleared the city, but the tactical air support called in by the defenders, as well as the shelling and street fighting, left much of the city in a shambles.

When phase three was over, PAVN was shown to have paid dearly, in Saigon and throughout South Vietnam. U.S. and ARVN forces had not been caught by surprise. The Tet II (phase three) wave of attacks had been predicted by intelligence, and allied forces this time were on the alert. U.S. and ARVN troops had intercepted many PAVN units as they maneuvered into position close to the cities, thus preempting many of the planned attacks. During the month of May, PAVN/PLAF lost an average of 4,000 per week. Overall the nine-month winter-spring campaign—comprising the late 1967 border battles at Con Thien, Loc Ninh, and Dak To; the offensive of Tet Mau Than; and the so-called Tet II—had cost General Giap 85,000 of his best soldiers, and he had little military gain to show for the sacrifice.

This military failure, especially the maiming of the PLAF, altered the strategic balance in the South against the Communists. For the two years that followed, U.S. and ARVN forces conducted a nationwide counteroffensive. PLAF and PAVN troops were forced to recede from the cities and villages. A history of the war published in Hanoi in 1982 provides a glimpse into the strategic realignment:

> In the rural areas we were vulnerable and were strongly counterattacked by the enemy, so our forces were depleted and in some places the liberated area was reduced. The revolutionary movement in the Nam Bo lowlands [Mekong Delta] encountered many difficulties and our offensive posture weakened. When the enemy launched a fierce counteroffensive our weaknesses and deficiencies caused the situation to undergo complicated changes after Tet Mau Than.

If the Vietnam War had been conventional, it might well have been winding down toward its conclusion after the 1968 Tet offensive. Having killed so many enemy troops, the U.S./ARVN forces would have been on the verge of victory. But the *dau tranh* strategy employed by the Lao Dong party, with its military and political components, precluded such a conventional conclusion. For the Americans and South Vietnamese to achieve victory, they had to defeat both *armed* and *political dau tranh*, and in fact they had defeated neither. Communist forces were able to retreat to their sanctuaries to refit and prepare for future battles. Their military setbacks at Tet produced not defeat for the Communists but military stalemate. Political *dau tranh* meanwhile suffered no such setback; and its *dich van* aspect—action among the enemy—produced dramatic results 10,000 miles away in Washington.

Only months before, Americans had been told by their leaders—General Westmoreland and other officials—of great progress being made against the Communists. Coming as it did on the heels of that orchestrated "success offensive" by the White House, the Tet offensive, while militarily devastating to the Communists, was psychologically catastrophic to the United States. It widened the credibility gap between the American people and their government. The attacks and their psychological impact on American public opinion so shook President Lyndon Johnson that on March 31 he announced he would not seek reelection. In order to remove his office from the "partisan divisions" of the 1968 electoral campaign while the United States sought peace talks, he was quitting the race for the presidency.

This sensational development the Communists had not anticipated, but they welcomed it as a by-product of *dau tranh*. "As for making an impact in the United States," said General Tran Do, "it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result." In an article in *Foreign Affairs* published just before he joined President Richard Nixon's government as national security adviser, Henry Kissinger wryly acknowledged: "The Tet Offensive brought to a head the compounded weaknesses—or, as the North Vietnamese say, the internal contradictions—of the American position."

Faction bashing

The Communists were not without contradictions in their own camp. May 5, the day the phase three offensive burst in Saigon, also marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. In the Northern capital, Truong Chinh, the third-ranking member of the Political Bureau, rose before a congress of middle- and senior-level party leaders to present what at first seemed to be a routine commemorative speech. But the *eminence grise* of the Lao Dong party, one of the original quadrumvirate that included Pham Van Dong, Ho Chi Minh, and Vo Nguyen Giap, had a stern message to deliver.

He quickly plunged into a scathing criticism of the war

effort, especially the "quick victory" policy embraced by Le Duan and the Southern-first faction and their costly winter-spring campaign. Exaggerated importance had been paid to military *dau tranh*, he argued, while political *dau tranh* had been neglected. "We must grasp the slogan 'protracted war and reliance mainly upon oneself,'" Chinh declared. He was calling for a return to orthodox revolutionary warfare. By this he meant military retrenchment coupled with renewed political struggle—a new emphasis on political over military *dau tranh*. In Chinh's analysis, President Johnson's abdication had proven the validity of political *dau tranh*. "We are currently taking advantage of the contradictions between the hawks and the doves in the American ruling class," he said.

Truong Chinh also applied his rigorous ideology to North Vietnam, where he felt the building of orthodox socialism had to take priority over liberating the South. Le Duan had relaxed the standards of socialism by proposing material incentives for production and allowing private agricultural plots to weaken collectivization. These were ideological drifts Truong Chinh deplored. To implement true socialism, he said, the party had to adhere to orthodoxy and purify itself by enrolling zealous new members while expelling "provocative elements who oppose the Party, are partisans, and are depraved in their politics as well as in their virtues and qualities." Without a firm basis of socialist construction, he warned, the strain of war might give rise to counterrevolution.

At the upper levels of the party, Truong Chinh's "faction-bashing" broadside provoked, as Hanoi Radio later admitted in a decided understatement, "several sessions of heated debate." To admit to debate in the Political Bureau was rare indeed for Hanoi—particularly on such a sensitive issue as overall strategy. Those prolonged sessions stretched over four months as the senior party officials reexamined their strategy in the light of Truong Chinh's corrective analysis. Though it is not certain, they must also have debated Le Duan's leadership of the party, for Truong Chinh's report was a challenge to the authority of Le Duan as apostle of the flawed strategy.

In August, Truong Chinh's report was accepted by the party. Published in Hanoi and broadcast by Hanoi Radio, it was praised as "a new contribution to the treasury of theoretical works on the Vietnamese revolution." The report, it seemed, had been accepted in its entirety. Chinh had effected a wholesale shift in strategy and at the same time had restored himself to prominence as a leading revolutionary war strategist and the party's ideological conscience.

Meeting the enemy in Paris

As the debate raged in the Political Bureau following Truong Chinh's speech, a significant element of political *dau tranh* was taking shape in Paris. There, on May 13, 1968, delegations from North Vietnam and the United States met to begin peace talks. The event held such promise that 1,300 expectant news reporters from thirty-nine nations covered the opening. The American negotiators, headed by Ambassador-at-Large W. Averell Harriman, had high hopes that an agreement might be concluded in a matter of months, perhaps before the November presidential elections.

The North Vietnamese entertained no such illusions. They considered negotiation a technique of *dau tranh*, not a method of resolving conflict. Peace talks fit into a scheme they called Talk/Fight, which was neatly summarized by the Central Committee's Thirteenth Plenum in 1967: "We can only win at the conference table what we have won on the battlefield." (After he became U.S. negotiator, Henry Kissinger expressed his frustration in confronting that attitude: "Acts of goodwill [by the United States] that did not reflect the existing balance of forces were treated as signs of moral weakness, even as they scorned them.")

Led by Xuan Thuy, a Central Committee member and veteran propagandist, the delegation from Hanoi included newspapermen such as Nguyen Thanh Le, editor of the party daily *Nhan Dan*. Their purpose was to conduct a propaganda offensive against the United States and South Vietnam.

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on the arduous task of proselytizing and organizing the peasantry in the Hanoi region. This was the formative experience of his revolutionary career. Working among the people convinced Truong Chinh of the primary importance of political mobilization; not incidentally, it allowed him to construct a personal power base that ensured him a position in the future of the party.

After the Second World War, Truong Chinh published two theoretical works that solidified his reputation as the party's leading intellectual. Both were bluntly critical of the party. In *The August Revolution* (1946), a blueprint for revolution, he analyzed his experiences engineering the 1945 Communist resistance against the Japanese. Then after the Japanese relinquished Vietnam to the Vietminh at the end of World War II, he wrote, the party had been "conciliatory to the point of weakness," ignoring Lenin's dictum that "a victorious party must always be dictatorial."

Truong Chinh published *The Resistance Will Win*, a program for guerrilla warfare, in 1947, when the Vietminh struggle against the French was at a low ebb. In this tract Truong Chinh reviewed the importance of his political experiences among the people and excoriated party leaders who believed "everything can be settled by armed forces." In these two works Truong Chinh showed himself to be more concerned with the correct interpretation and application of Marxist theory than with any short-term expedient.

Following the Communists' consolidation of power in North Vietnam in 1954, Truong Chinh was given the responsibility for agrarian reform, considered to be the first step in the socialization of agriculture. He threw himself into the task, although as the realities of land reform took shape, thousands of people classified as "feudal elements" were executed. Popular opinion turned against the Communists, and by 1956 peasant revolts had broken out all over North Vietnam.

To restore the party's credibility, Ho Chi Minh instigated a "rectification of errors" campaign. Truong Chinh admitted publicly to shortcomings, including "leftist deviationism," and as a result lost his post as secretary-general.

His eclipse was, however, short-lived. In 1958 Truong Chinh was appointed vice-premier and in 1960 was elected chairman of the National Assembly. His speedy rehabilitation was primarily brought about by his supporters on the Central Committee, who had worked with him during the resistance.

As the outspoken leader of the left wing of the Lao Dong party, Truong Chinh often clashed with the pragmatic party members led by Le Duan. On every major issue the two leaders found themselves at odds. While Truong Chinh thundered against PAVN involvement in the South, Le Duan argued for stepped-up Northern involvement. Truong Chinh insisted that the war in the South be fought by indigenous guerrillas; Le Duan advocated conventional war. Truong Chinh demanded that industry and agriculture be collectivized, but Le Duan pushed for individual production.

Though the vote often went against him, Truong Chinh never compromised. Since revolutionaries rely heavily on theory to legitimize their regimes, Truong Chinh, as the party's foremost theoretician, proved indispensable; throughout the vicissitudes of war and postwar reconstruction, he performed the role of watchdog, signaling the Communists whenever their hard line softened.

A central disagreement at the outset concerned the legitimacy of the Saigon regime and the National Liberation Front and whether either should be included in the talks. The public talks quickly reached impasse as the spokesmen for both sides repeated the same arguments, though couched in diplomatic niceties. "Never have I heard two nations call each other sons of bitches so politely," remarked one seasoned U.S. diplomat. Neither side budged.

In June, Le Duc Tho arrived in Paris as a special adviser to the North Vietnamese delegation, bringing the authority of the Political Bureau to the peace talks. He held no government post—the only Political Bureau member without one—and therefore was little known in the West. Yet Le Duc Tho (a nom de guerre meaning virtue and longevity chosen by the man born Phan Dinh Khai) wielded considerable power in the party.

A Northerner by birth, Le Duc Tho had been a deputy to Le Duan in COSVN during the French Indochina War. He returned to the North in 1955 and joined the Political Bureau. A close ally of his former COSVN patron, Le Duc Tho joined Le Duan's Southern-first faction in urging armed struggle in the South.

Appointed head of the Lao Dong party's important Organization Department, Le Duc Tho gained control over appointments and promotions; he thus also shouldered responsibility for the quality and performance of the party's cadres. Another of his roles seemed to be that of party trouble-shooter. For example, he had carried out several diplomatic missions to other Communist capitals. Although Le Duc Tho customarily worked in obscurity, his presence in Paris was soon to make him the most visible of North Vietnam's leaders.

After his arrival, a series of private meetings began between the North Vietnamese and Americans. Away from the public posturing of the weekly meetings, the tough North Vietnamese negotiators seemed to the Americans to be more accommodating and flexible. The adversaries shared tea and made pointed small talk. Progress made in private, although limited, encouraged the Americans and provoked an exaggeration of the normal diplomatic exigency of interpretative analysis—contrasting public and private behaviors and statements. Each North Vietnamese gesture, inflection, or action was carefully scrutinized for meaning.

A major question of interpretation soon intruded. In July and August 1968, Communist attacks in South Vietnam decreased sharply. In September, a number of main force PAVN units began pulling back from South Vietnam into sanctuaries in Cambodia, Laos, and across the demilitarized zone into North Vietnam. Hanoi's action was interpreted by hopeful United States officials as restraint, a gesture of good will in return for Lyndon Johnson's partial bombing halt. Then on October 9, Le Duc Tho placed an important item on the table: he asked whether the United States would agree to a total bombing halt if the North Vietnamese admitted the South Vietnamese as a party to the talks.

Coming after months of diplomatic wrangling, Tho's question precipitated a burst of activity. "The lights went on throughout the government," said one U.S. official. But it also induced misplaced optimism. From Saigon, U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker cabled Washington that he believed the initiative to be a "fairly clear indication that Hanoi is ready for a tactical shift from the battlefield to the conference table."

By October 27 a compromise agreement had been hammered out to the satisfaction of Washington. But the South Vietnamese, now to be admitted to the peace talks along with the National Liberation Front, raised objections. A major difficulty was Saigon's demand for guarantees from the North that a bombing halt would be matched by a de-escalation of military activity in South Vietnam. Hanoi would give no written guarantees but agreed verbally to respect the demilitarized zone and to refrain from attacking South Vietnam's cities. Despite the absence of a written agreement, Ambassador Harriman assured Washington that the North Vietnamese understood that to violate the terms risked a resumption of the bombing. Saigon remained unsatisfied, but Washington threatened to act alone, so the South Vietnamese relented.

On October 31, President Johnson announced an end to "all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam," effective the following day. He had ordered the halt in the hope that "this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war." Although Johnson threatened to resume bombing if North Vietnam took advantage of the halt, the prospect was unlikely so long as the talks in Paris continued.

The North Vietnamese were delighted, for in a relatively short time their diplomatic offensive had reaped tremendous results. By pitting the United States and South Vietnamese governments against each other, and by appealing to Johnson's hunger for peace before the end of his term, they had sown suspicion between the allies and exploited the contradictions between them. Henceforth, Saigon had to be wary of Washington's tendency to act unilaterally and in its own interests.

Hanoi had been forced to recognize the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government by allowing its participation in the talks, but that had always seemed inevitable, and now the National Liberation Front was included as well. Most important, Hanoi had obtained an end to the bombing.

Dau tranh strategy had brought surprising results in 1968, in a kind of payout of inverse dividends. Military *dau tranh*, in the form of the failed Tet offensive, had been

The smiles of Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, as they leave a negotiating session in Neuilly, France, belie the tensions between the two nations.

translated into political capital with the downfall of the American president and an invitation to peace talks. Then political *dau tranh* had scored a strategic military victory by securing a total bombing halt in return for an inevitable concession and other vague promises.

In an appeal issued November 3, after the skies over North Vietnam had been quiet for two days, President Ho Chi Minh called the bombing halt only an initial victory. He continued unequivocally:

> A sacred mission of our entire population at present is to manifest a spirit of determination to fight and win, and of determination to liberate the South, defend the North, and advance to the peaceful unification of the homeland. As long as there are aggressors in our country we must continue to fight and sweep them out.

Neorevolutionary warfare

The shift in emphasis to political *dau tranh*, and the beginning of Talk/Fight, did not mean an end to armed *dau tranh*, only an adaptation. From the very first moments that peace talks became likely, COSVN issued a situation report that cautioned the battered PLAF forces against "deviationist thoughts." They should not think, for example, that the bombing halt indicated a United States desire for peace. The document warned, "We should absolutely not entertain peace illusions, wait-and-see attitudes, or lower our fighting will."

After a period of doctrinal argument among members of the PAVN High Command, a new form of military *dau tranh* emerged. American analysts called it neorevolutionary warfare. A compromise between proponents of guerrilla and big-unit warfare, it combined a sophisticated form of guerrilla war by highly trained sappers with occasional assaults by massed forces, either single attacks or a coordinated series over a wide area. The Americans came to label these surges "military high points," presumably because of the way they appeared on their graphs of Communist activity.

The objective of neorevolutionary war was to buy time for Hanoi while keeping the enemy on the strategic defensive. Although no documents have emerged from these discussions, it is clear the Political Bureau realized that its only alternative after the decimation of the Southern PLAF forces was to send more and more Northern soldiers to fight in the South. PAVN would carry the burden of combat.

Freed now from the merciless pounding of Rolling Thunder attacks, the North Vietnamese could re-form and refit their main forces, battered in the winter-spring offensive, in Quang Binh, the southernmost province, just above the DMZ. The Northerners could also set about extending lines of communication to the DMZ, reconstructing their bomb-shattered country, and building socialism in the "great rear base."

The tactics of neorevolutionary warfare called for sappers, armed with the latest weapons and explosive devices from the Soviet Union, to strike into the heart of enemy installations, causing extensive damage and demoralizing enemy troops. But sapper attacks alone, while conserving manpower and reducing the Communists' risks, could not defeat the enemy. Intermittent large-unit attacks were planned to inflict significant casualties on the enemy.

As if to initiate the new U.S. President Richard M. Nixon to the war, the first major attacks came in February 1969. Just after the Tet holiday, PAVN launched a coordinated offensive throughout South Vietnam. But this time, unlike the Tet 1968 attacks, the Communists moved conservatively, seldom using units larger than companies. The targets were mostly U.S. installations rather than South Vietnamese military bases or population centers.

The new tactics succeeded admirably. In three weeks the Communists killed 1,140 American soldiers, while enduring, comparatively, only a third of the losses they had suffered the previous year. But the numbers were still high. In February 1968, the Communists lost 40,000 men, by U.S. count; in February 1969, 14,000.

A sequence of three policy decisions made by the United States in the early summer of 1969 underscored the wisdom of Hanoi's neorevolutionary war strategy. After meeting on Midway Island on June 8 with South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu, President Nixon announced the beginning of U.S. troop withdrawals, the first an increment of 25,000 troops. The decision was posited on the negotiating progress in Paris, the tapering of Communist military activity, and improved South Vietnamese military capability.

This was the start of what became the Nixon policy of "Vietnamization" of the war. A three-phase program without time limit, Vietnamization was supposed to upgrade South Vietnamese ground forces, develop Vietnamese combat support capabilities, and gradually reduce the American presence to a military advisory mission.

Nixon's third policy decision emerged from his chat with reporters on Guam during a tour of Asia. He suggested that although the United States would honor its existing treaties, in the future military defense in Asia "will be increasingly handled by, and responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves." Although the Nixon Doctrine, as the pronouncement came to be called, did not bear specifically on the situation in Vietnam, it raised the principle of the Vietnamization program to the level of foreign policy doctrine. Frustrated by Vietnam, the United States would no longer risk its manpower in another nation's fight. For the United States in Vietnam, Hanoi might have assumed, there would likely be no reversal of its military retrenchment. Time was on the side of Hanoi.

COSVN analyzed Nixon's troop withdrawal announcement and Vietnamization policy in a document entitled Resolution 9, disseminated in July. Vietnamization, said

COSVN analysts, was an insidious attempt to appease American public opinion by slowly withdrawing troops. The Communists intended to foil such a plan by increasing U.S. and South Vietnamese casualties so as to raise antiwar fervor in the United States and thereby force Nixon to accelerate withdrawal. (Henry Kissinger later wrote: "The withdrawal increased the demoralization of those families whose sons remained at risk, and it brought no respite from the critics, the majority of whom believed that since their pressure had produced the initial decision to withdraw, more pressure could speed up the process.") The United States might then consent to a neutralist, coalition government that the Communists could come to dominate.

To prepare for that eventuality, the NLF on June 10, shortly after the Nixon-Thieu Midway meeting, had announced the creation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. An ostensibly nationalist government-in-waiting, the PRG superseded the NLF as a political entity and competed with Saigon's claim that it was the autonomous and legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people. The PRG, according to one of its founders, Justice Minister Truong Nhu Tang, was soon "fighting hard in every international forum to establish its own claim to legitimacy."

In fact, the PRG was little more than another front directly answerable to COSVN and dependent upon the Communist military for its sustenance in the jungle. But the PRG, under President Huynh Tan Phat, was nonetheless soon recognized by fifteen Communist-bloc nations and allies as the legitimate government of South Vietnam. Armed with a twelve-point "Action Program" quite similar to that of the NLF, the PRG supplanted the NLF delegation at the Paris peace talks. Led by the shrewd but charming foreign minister, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, the PRG embarked on what Justice Minister Tang called "full-scale diplomatic warfare."

Death of a president

Throughout America's involvement in the war, Ho Chi Minh had played a central, though largely misunderstood, role in North Vietnamese politics. To most westerners, especially Americans, Ho Chi Minh was the personification of the war, and his resilience in spite of bombing and punishing defeats of his troops in the field proved maddeningly frustrating, and not a little awe-inspiring. In the words of a respectful South Vietnamese newspaper, he was "a legendary, almost mythological figure" who had founded a nation and who had led that nation to victory over one great power and to stalemate with another. Even as his health declined in 1969 and he dropped out of sight for months at a time, Ho remained the symbol of the North Vietnamese war effort, a revolutionary Wizard of Oz manipulating all the levers of resistance in the private councils of the Lao Dong party. "Until his [final] illness," commented the *New York Times*, "he held the reins of state firmly."

But in holding the reins of state, he exerted the gentlest of pulls. As founder and symbol of the country, Ho Chi Minh towered above his colleagues, and as such he remained above the mechanics of governing or even of running the war. Ho had set the party agenda, on which all were unanimously agreed, even if they disagreed, sometimes vociferously, on the means to achieve those goals. They argued along the lines of Marxist-Leninist dialectics, exposing the flaws, or the contradictions, in the opposing position. Their arguments, by and large, were fraternal, certainly not fratricidal. Ho once calculated that the thirty-one members of the pre-1960 Central Committee had been imprisoned a cumulative total of 222 years by a common enemy, and their experiences had undoubtedly visited on them the importance of group solidarity and party discipline. For this revolutionary band, Ho Chi Minh served as visionary, adviser, counselor, and, ultimately, as arbiter, one who could tip debates one way or the other.

Ho Chi Minh's immense presence came to its physical end on September 3, 1969, when, twenty-four years and one day after proclaiming the birth of the nation, he died at the age of seventy-nine of an apparent heart attack. While the khaki-clad body of "Bac Ho" (Uncle Ho) lay in state in Ba Dinh Congress Hall, and tributes poured in from around the world and foreign delegations arrived for the September 10 funeral, many wondered what his death would mean to the war effort. And who would succeed him? The answer was: no one person.

In Hanoi the succession proceeded smoothly. Ton Duc Thang, the obscure eighty-one-year-old vice president, ascended to the presidency of the Democratic Republic, a largely ceremonial post. And on September 6, Radio Hanoi announced Ho's successor in the Lao Dong party, and hence in the rule of the nation:

> A collective leadership of officials and fighters, who have been selected and well trained by our beloved President Ho Chi Minh, will continue to battle for freedom and independence of all our people and all our nation until the last American aggressor is driven from our land, the South is completely liberated, and our fatherland united once again.

Although the broadcast mentioned no names, the ranking members of the Political Bureau were First Secretary Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Premier Pham Van Dong, Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Duc Tho. Another ranking member, Pham Hung, had been away from Hanoi for two years, dispatched to the South to run COSVN. With the exception of two deaths—of General Nguyen Chi Thanh and now Ho Chi Minh—the party leadership remained essentially the same in 1969 as it was in 1950. The eleven-man Political Bureau had been reduced to nine men, who despite their differences of opinion, were joined in what Confucians called a unity of opposites. (The remaining three members were Foreign Minister Nguyen

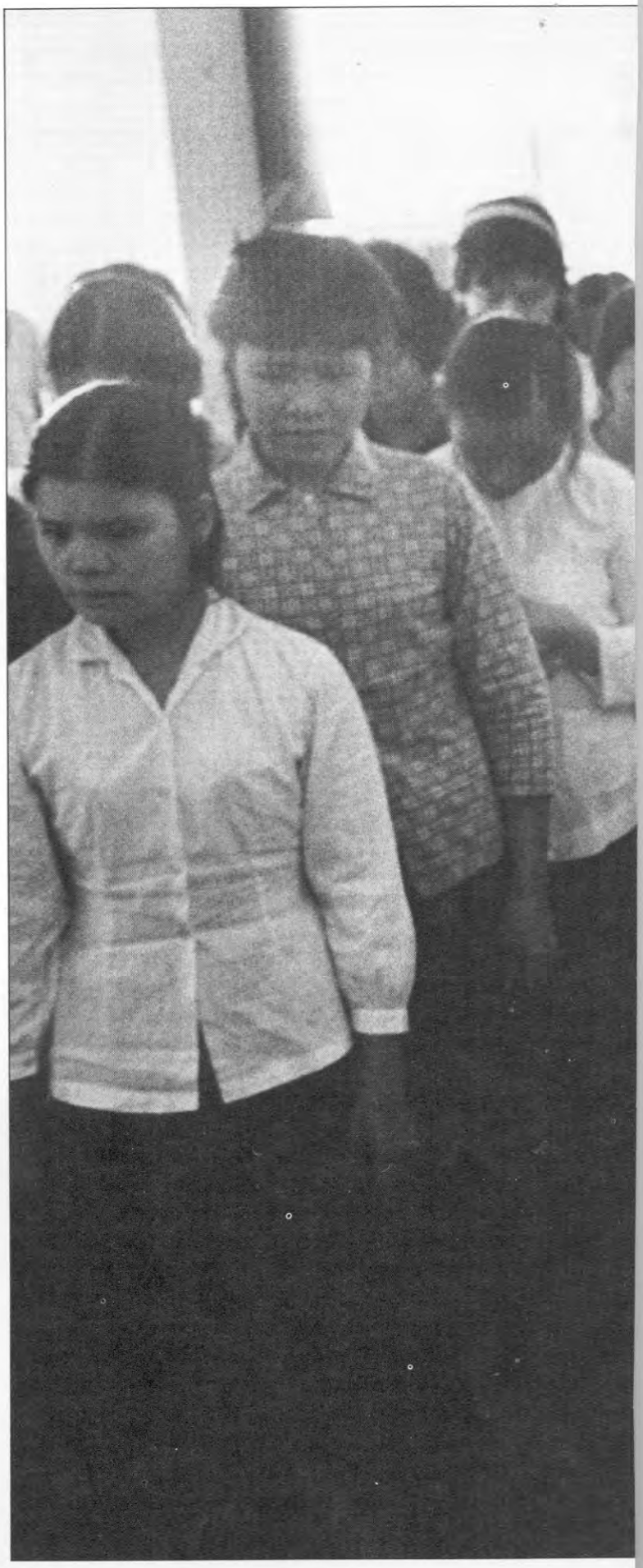
Duy Trinh; Le Thanh Nghi, chairman of the State Planning Commission; and Hoang Van Hoan, vice chairman of the National Assembly.) The Political Bureau had decided unanimously not to replace Ho Chi Minh but to elevate him to the status of chairman emeritus. His memory sustained an inspirational cult, making Ho Chi Minh useful even in death.

To American analysts familiar with Soviet battles of succession in which Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev all emerged victorious from leadership troikas, the prospect of collective leadership in Hanoi promised intraparty strife, if not outright power struggles. "It would be most unusual if [Hanoi's leaders] were devoid of personal ambition," noted an official U.S. government assessment. But Hanoi's leaders moved quickly to dispel any hint of disunity. Two weeks after Ho's funeral, Truong Chinh appeared before the National Assembly, of which he was chairman, and addressed the matter squarely: "Our enemies fancy that after President Ho Chi Minh's death we will be bewildered and divided, or will depart from his revolutionary line. But they are grossly mistaken." Coming from Truong Chinh, who had publicly rebuked Le Duan for his handling of the war, such a declaration was particularly significant.

As party first secretary, Le Duan became the first among equals; if he had been personally ambitious, he might have been in a position to consolidate power. But in a February 1970 paper commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Indochinese Communist party, Le Duan first praised Truong Chinh, his erstwhile political opponent, and then affirmed his own adherence to the new status quo. Citing the benefits of a collective intellect in making collective decisions, Le Duan reiterated, "The Party's leadership rests upon *the principle of collective leadership.*" An enemy awaiting a sign of weakness or listening for the rumble of a power struggle in Hanoi was going to be disappointed.

Modernizing PAVN

In his exhaustive February disquisition on the Vietnamese revolution, Le Duan stressed the need for flexibility and pragmatism in prosecuting the war. "There has never been nor will there ever be a single formula for carrying out the revolution that is appropriate to all circumstances and times," he wrote. His remarks reflected the influence of a series of three articles by North Vietnam's three leading military strategists—Vo Nguyen Giap, Chief of Staff General Van Tien Dung, and Lieutenant General Song Hao, head of the General Political Directorate—that had appeared in *Nhan Dan* in December. They had argued for



Somber textile workers in Hanoi listen to a reading of Ho Chi Minh's last will and testament published in the party newspaper Nhan Dan.

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The scenario for modernizing PAVN came in North Vietnam's 1970 state plan, which emphasized technical development. Such advances, along with economic and industrial improvements and the purification of the Lao Dong party by creation of the "Ho Chi Minh class" of dedicated cadres, would lay the groundwork for the upgrading of PAVN as a conventional force. Mobilization of the North could be counted on to expand the army and bring in men with more technical experience. The actual expansion of combat capability would take place with the acquisition of more sophisticated weaponry and training from the Soviet Union and China.

In late 1969, DRV engineers had completed construction of a four-inch pipeline from the Mu Gia Pass to the A Shau Valley in Thua Thien Province. This extended logistical nose protruding into South Vietnam permitted an improved transportation network along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Gone were the days of porters pushing supplies forward on bicycles and of oil traveling downstream in fifty-five-gallon drums. Truck convoys carrying war materiel and soldiers soon moved to the front faster and in greater quantities, pausing to refuel at jungle filling stations. Tanks, armored personnel carriers, and soon 130MM long-range artillery, mostly supplied by the Soviet Union, cruised toward the Southern battlefields. By 1972 some 25,000 Vietnamese had received training abroad, most of them in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. More than 3,000 North Vietnamese tank crews trained for up to five months at the Soviet armor school in Odessa.

General Giap, noted especially for his logistical abilities and his preparation of the battlefield, patiently moved this improved war machine into position in Laos and Cambodia. Main force PAVN and PLAF units withdrew into sanctuaries to rest and refit, saved for the larger battles to come. In South Vietnam Giap employed the tactics of neorevolutionary warfare, sending his remaining troops sparingly into battle. In all of 1970 and 1971, U.S. and ARVN forces recorded only fifteen battalion-sized attacks against them; sapper raids were the norm of Communist military activity.

Somber textile workers in Hanoi listen to a reading of Ho Chi Minh's last will and testament published in the party newspaper Nhan Dan.

War of the sanctuaries

In March 1970, Hanoi's planners faced a crisis in Cambodia when right-wing Defense Minister Lon Nol ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk in a coup d'état. Lon Nol closed the port of Sihanoukville to the Soviet, Chinese, and East European ships that carried materiel destined for the Cambodian sanctuaries. In response, Hanoi hurriedly put into effect a plan called "Campaign X." It combined military with political goals. Four divisions from South Vietnam—the PLAF 5th and 9th and the PAVN 1st and 7th—entered Cambodia to protect supply lines while political cadres worked with the Khmer Communists to expand the revolutionary force formally named FUNK (Front Uni National du Kampuchea) but known as the Khmer Rouge.

Hanoi did not permit its intervention in Cambodia to detract from its strategy in South Vietnam. It viewed the Communist insurgency in Cambodia as secondary to the liberation of South Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists had paid fraternal lip service to the Khmer Rouge struggle against Sihanouk, but Hanoi never endorsed the Cambodians' strategy or tactics and provided precious few arms or other aid to the insurgency. Even now, as the Vietnamese Communists allied themselves with the Khmer Rouge, they did so to protect their own supply lines and to keep the U.S.-supported Lon Nol regime on the defensive. Policy was to guard resources for the war in Vietnam. As one internal party document stressed, "We will not let ourselves get into trouble" in Cambodia.

General Giap's logistical build-up in the sanctuaries had not gone unnoticed by the Americans and South Vietnamese. Following the overthrow of Sihanouk, ARVN forces made several forays into Cambodia to destroy Communist supply caches. One of those helicopter as-

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saults landed virtually atop the PRG's jungle encampment and near COSVN headquarters. While soldiers from the PLAF 7th Division held off the South Vietnamese attackers, COSVN and PRG members fled west along prearranged escape routes. After weeks on the run they regrouped near Kratie, deep inside Cambodia. PRG Justice Minister Truong Nhu Tang, who had joined the exodus, later described his and his comrades' relief at their near miss. "With an opportunity to relax and begin recuperating from this ordeal, spirits began to revive," he wrote. "COSVN's Pham Hung and General [Tran Nam] Trung joked that 'Even though we ran like hell, still we'll win.' "

On April 30, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces poured across the Cambodian border in an invasion designed, according to President Nixon, "to guarantee the continued success of the withdrawal and Vietnamization programs." Operating for two months within a self-imposed limit of thirty kilometers, the combined U.S./ARVN forces, 78,000 strong, seized sufficient weapons and ammunition to equip an estimated fifty-five main force battalions and perhaps ninety artillery battalions. They also killed some 10,000 Communist troops, even though most Communist troops had retreated west beyond the thirty-kilometer limit.

The tactical military success of the Cambodian invasion translated, in the terminology of *dau tranh*, into a strategic defeat for President Nixon. This came about because the Cambodian invasion provoked a whirlwind of protest and student strikes in the United States, culminating in the killing of four students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio. The contradictions between the American government and the governed had widened to an unbridgeable distance.

An indignant Congress soon passed the Cooper-Church amendment, barring any further use of U.S. ground forces beyond the borders of South Vietnam. Moreover, the incursion contributed to the passage in 1973 of the Church-Case amendment, barring any form of U.S. military action in Indochina. Later the same year, the War Powers Act became law. This prevented an American president from committing troops to action anywhere for more than sixty days without approval from Congress.

President Nixon hailed the Cambodian incursion as a victory that set back Communist offensive plans for a year. But as Truong Nhu Tang later wrote:

> This "victory" arguably did more to undermine American unity than any other event of the war. . . . [H]ow does one judge the cumulative effects on one's own body politic of ingrained distrust and ill will? To achieve a year or so of battlefield grace, Nixon and Kissinger incurred a propaganda defeat. . . . Whatever the facts of who first infringed on Cambodian neutrality, the significance of that engagement was that it helped separate the American leadership from its internal support and instilled among many Americans a lasting skepticism about their government's morality. It was—to Vietnam's revolution and to the revolutions that have followed Vietnam—an enduring gift.

Half a year later, the North Vietnamese base areas in Laos, stocked with conventional war materiel and petroleum, became inviting targets. For the Americans, the same rationales that held for Laos held for Cambodia. Disruption of the Communist supply system might interfere with North Vietnam's ability to launch a dry-season offensive for another year, and that, in turn, would permit the continuing withdrawal of U.S. troops. But there was an added factor. With U.S. ground troops barred from Laos by the Cooper-Church amendment, U.S. participation was restricted to air and helicopter support. The policy of Vietnamization came to a dramatic test with Operation Lam Son 719, carried out in February and March 1971 entirely by South Vietnamese ground troops.

In Lam Son 719, the stakes for the North were different. The rupture of Cambodian supply lines in 1970 had enhanced the strategic importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, and Hanoi had chosen to upgrade its defenses against a preemptive attack. There would be no retreat in Laos as there had been in Cambodia. PAVN would stand and fight.

When the South Vietnamese invaded, Hanoi responded with what it termed "counter-punch warfare" and brought its tanks to bear against ARVN firebases. Although accustomed to meticulous planning and even rehearsals before an attack, PAVN performed well in unaccustomed reaction. Its artillery, infantry, and armor forced ARVN first into a retreat, then into headlong flight.

For North Vietnam, the results of Lam Son 719 were gratifying. Using fundamental conventional principles of mass maneuver, PAVN had driven the South's best troops from Laos. PAVN now seemed more than a match for South Vietnam's forces in conventional battle. Its tank attacks against ARVN firebases verified PAVN's progress toward conventional war—and demonstrated ARVN's susceptibility. Lam Son 719 identified a major flaw of Vietnamization's phase one: though ARVN troops were well trained, their officers performed poorly without American advisers by their sides.

When caught under fire with their Vietnamese units, impatient American advisers had often grabbed the telephone to orchestrate supporting artillery fire. Their Vietnamese counterparts had not gained experience in that essential skill. So when stripped of the reassuring presence of the Americans, ARVN leaders in Lam Son 719 lost their poise; when confronted with mass enemy formations, they failed to coordinate fire properly against the attackers. The battle dramatized that ARVN was not an army ready to stand on its own.

PAVN soldiers overrun South Vietnamese positions during the 1971 ARVN invasion of Laos, Operation Lam Son 719. North Vietnam's triumph paved the way for the next year's Easter offensive.