Richard Falk

Appropriating Tet

I guess information ricochet
is getting more rapid.

Tom Wolfe

In Vietnam there was a war
inside a country in which one side,
not the other, was entirely
paid, recruited, etc.[2]

Daniel Ellsberg

THE TET OFFENSIVE MORE THAN twenty years ago was, most agree, a decisive moment in the American involvement in the Vietnam War. But the interpretation of that decisiveness remains murky, obscure, contested. In this essay, my attempt is to explore Tet as a symbolic event, to describe varying interpretations of its military and political impact upon the Vietnam War, and to suggest its legacy for United States Government policy and practice with regard to armed intervention in the Third World.

I. Points of Departure

No one has yet addressed the life history of international symbolic events that resonate in the public mind: Munich, Pearl Harbor, Yalta, Auschwitz, Hiroshima. Each name conjures up its own images. The appropriation of the name to impart a particular lesson of history can sometimes shape, even deform, public debate, as well as help

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[1]"Interview," *Rolling Stone*, 20th Anniversary Issue, 1987, p. 219.

[2]"Interview," *Rolling Stone*, 20th Anniversary Issue, 1987, p. 221.

establish the societal boundaries of acceptable belief. Relying on symbolic utterance to form policy in place of argument and analysis is a way of closing off the mind to the complexity of reality, including the exclusion of possibly more constructive alternative courses of action.

The Tet Offensive—or simply Tet— is one such symbolic and paradoxical event. But unlike most of the others, its meaning remains as obscure and controverted as the war of which it was a part. Revealingly, Norman Podhoretz and Noam Chomsky, in the course of comments on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, invoked Tet for their own contradictory reconstructions of what the Vietnam War signified. For Podhoretz Tet was the moment when the public, Congress, and the media gave up on the war ("Only after the 1968 Tet offensive did that support begin to ebb as people felt the war was being lost, or simply not winnable").[1] For Chomsky Tet is invoked, not for the event itself, but as a disclosure of American reliance on unrestrained violence in the aftermath of the surprise attack upon US positions ("After the murderous post-Tet pacification campaigns and other atrocities in Laos and Cambodia..").[2] And so it goes, to recall Vonnegut's world-weary refrain in *Slaughterhouse Five.*

In the symbolic landscape of Tet, the secondary related symbolic presence is Dienbienphu, the decisive Vietminh victory in 1954 that lead directly to defeat for French colonial rule in Indochina. There is an initial disposition to seek the equivalent of Dienbienphu in the second Indochina war to signal the American defeat. Certainly, Tet, especially at the time of its occurrence, was commonly and insistently linked up with Dienbienphu in the political imagination, and as insistently de-linked by those who wanted the war to go on. Also, there was a literalism about Dienbienphu that preoccupied and misled war planners and seems to have been exploited brilliantly by the Vietnamese adversary, setting up the siege of Khe Sanh weeks earlier as an apparent decisive testing-ground, diverting American troops from other war zones, preoccupying the policy-makers with the prospect of a literal repetition (the siege of an American stronghold leading to surrender and a loss of commitment to the war) and thereby adding to the surprise and lack of preparation for the actuality of the Tet offensive. Weeks after Tet, American air power broke the siege at Khe Sanh. There is no indication that the North Vietnamese ever attached much strategic significance to this isolated garrison town in the northwestern part of South Vietnam, but the Americans did!

And, then, there are other symbolic and sometimes romanticized military events that invite comparison. The Battle of Algiers is an obvious one, as it shared with Tet the sense of the diehards, that the French political leadership misunderstood their own success.[3] John Talbott assesses a relevant handwritten memorandum on Algeria composed by General Charles de Gaulle in 1959 on the day after Christmas:

> He reviewed the advantages the French held over the revolutionaries: crushing military superiority; officers and noncommissioned officers "incomparably better trained than the illiterates of the insurrection"; a much lower casualty rate; a vastly superior propaganda apparatus; an influence in world politics beyond comparison with that of the FLN. "It is perfectly true," he went on, "that our crushing military superiority is putting an end to the greater part of the [guerrilla] bands. But, morally and politically, it is less than ever toward us that Algerian Muslims are turning. To claim that they are French, or that they want to be, is a dreadful mockery... It is simply mad to believe that our forced domination has any future whatsoever."[4]

This excerpt from DeGaulle's reflections helps set the stage for an exploration of the American presence in Vietnam, and for a rendering of who won what at Tet, as well as for a broader realization of the cruel fatuousness of the view that by military means the United States (or France or the Soviet Union) can always work its bloody will against the weight of nationalist tendencies in the Third World.

There is also the elusive connection between a battle and a war that Tolstoy depicts memorably in *War and Peace.* In defending one's own sacred territory losing battles may be the gateway to victory. Tolstoy in one of his excursions into the philosophy of history notes this:

> But then, in 1812, the French gain a victory near Moscow. Moscow is taken and after that, with no further battles, it is not Russia that ceases to exist, but the French army of six hundred thousand, and then Napoleonic France itself... The period of the campaign of 1812 from the Battle of Borodino to the expulsion of the French proved that the winning of a battle does not produce a conquest and is not even an invariable indication of conquest, it proved that the force which decides the fate of peoples lies not in the conquerors, not even in armies or battles, *but in something else.* (emphasis added).

In examining Tet, the search to identify this "something else" may

help us gain insight into its significance, or in a more totalist or Tolstoyan spirit, its significance.

As events in Central America, southern Africa, and Asia suggest, revolutionary nationalist movements and imperial interventions are very much part of our world. In certain respects the Iran-contra disclosures added yet another chapter in the unfinished, written and rewritten story of Vietnam, as much fictionalized in the annals of foreign policy as in the stream of films and novels that seek to transmit the experience of Vietnam in the form of a particular message to Americans, for America. The reality of Vietnam, of course, transcends and eludes these many interpretive forays, but at their best insights and some greater appreciation can emerge.

My outlook is sympathetic with Gloria Emerson's important insistence that the essential failure of the American presence in Vietnam was its total impotence, regardless of motive: "...even the most well-meaning plans and gestures did not help the Vietnamese, since, nearly always, it was we who had injured them and made them helpless." As she put it, at once, clearly and eloquently, "But so huge, so rich, so powerful were the foreigners, their presence became a poison in the Vietnamese blood."[5] The armed resistance movement was one way of expelling this poison from the body politic of Vietnam. It was not quick or pretty, but in time, it got the job done.

"With 1968, a new phase is now starting. We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view." These words were spoken by General William C. Westmoreland, then Commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, in an address back in the United States on November 21, 1967. Following the expected completion of the current phase Westmoreland went on with his notorious prediction that victory will ensue. According to Westmoreland, we will shortly "see the conclusion of our plan to weaken the enemy and strengthen our friends until we become progressively superfluous. The object will be to show the world that guerrilla war and invasion do not pay as a new means of Communist aggression."[6]

Against this background of American optimism and official reassurance, the extreme shock of the Tet Offensive was registered as political trauma. In the mainstream literature this attitude is expressed by the phrase "then came Tet" that one finds repeated over and over again in textbook discussions of the Vietnam War to express an assault on expectations and attitudes that was as harsh as that on battlefield positions.[7] Frequently quoted, also, as indication

of the impact of Tet, was the reaction of CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, who exclaimed, "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war." Lyndon Johnson recognized Cronkite as a barometer of public opinion, saying privately at the time, "Well, if I've lost Walter, I've lost middle America."[8]

Often left out of account is the degree to which the waning of popular support for the war in 1967 encouraged a campaign orchestrated from the Oval Office to rebuild public confidence designed to convince citizens and Congress that the war policies were, despite appearances, moving toward success at an impressive rate. And here Lyndon Johnson's sense of American political culture was on target, as America can be made to swallow an ugly war with promises of "victory," especially if the process does not intrude too greatly on the normalcy of domestic life. And so the need to build confidence on the home front by exaggerating battlefield prospects also created a vulnerability of the sort exposed by the Tet Offensive, whether knowingly or fortuitously by the timing of the Vietcong/DRV attacks. The dynamics of hopes raised can quickly shift to the dynamics of hopes crushed.

II. The Impact of Tet: Contending Images

What, then, was Tet? As decisive, spectacular battles go, it was not very impressive by the criterion of battlefield numbers. Fewer than 100,000 troops of the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam participated, no permanent shift of territorial control was achieved, not even the retention by the attacking forces of any position captured. And yet in its way it was a spectacular moment in military history. In a 48-hour period starting on January 29, 1968 Communist forces launched military attacks on five of South Vietnam's six major cities, on 36 of its 44 provincial capitals, on at least 64 district capitals, and on more than 50 villages.[9] A surprise, coordinated attack on this scale by an enemy supposedly on the ropes was by its very character an extraordinary logistical feat without precedent in the history of revolutionary warfare. Much of the visual damage to the American war effort was done in Saigon, especially by a group of NLF fighters who entered U.S. Embassy grounds, where they remained in partial control for more than six hours until they were killed. Tan Son Nhut Airport, the presidential palace, and the staff headquarters of South Vietnamese military forces were other prominent targets in Saigon. The ancient city of Hue was invaded

and held by 7500 troops for over three weeks. In the end all Communist forces were dislodged. Losses during the Tet offensive were definitely heavy, although estimates of Communist casualties may have been inflated. Western experts accept these figures for the period: 3895 U.S. soldiers killed, plus 214 Australian, New Zealand, South Korean, and Thais killed, 4954 Republic of Vietnam killed, and 58,373 forces of the NLF/DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) killed.[10] In addition, at least 14,300 Vietnamese civilians were killed. In the military encounter, then, the attacking side suffered seven times as many fatalities, including a large proportion of its overall strength and many of its most experienced cadres, especially in the southern, agriculturally rich part of the country. And to begin with the NLF/DRV were greatly outnumbered in the war. At the time of Tet there were 492,000 American soldiers in the country, augmented by 626,000 South Vietnamese and another 61,000 troops belonging to the armed forces of Asian allies.[11] As well, during Tet the South Vietnamese military units generally fought well, better than expected, and the civilian population revealed no disposition to rise up and welcome the attackers as liberators. In fact, mounting the offensive during the Tet holidays might have had an alienating effect on overall Vietnamese attitudes in the South, as did, most certainly, the mass execution in Hue of alleged civilian collaborators with the Saigon government. I shall return to these dimensions of Tet later.

It remains intriguing to speculate about why such a defeat as Tet could have been transmuted into a decisive victory for NLF/DRV forces, what is described in the literature on the war as "the Johnson administration's Dienbienphu." Recalling Dienbienphu even in this restricted sense is, at once, unavoidable and misleading. Unavoidable because the French, like the Americans, had been officially presented as "winning" the war until General Giap in 1954 laid siege on a French garrison trapped in the relatively unimportant and geographically remote town of Dienbienphu. Also, the Americans who were by then paying most of the costs of the French war, resisted, but barely, a French midnight appeal in 1954 to enter their war directly by mounting air strikes, possibly with atomic bombs to be used against the entrenched Viet Minh forces in the surrounding area. But the comparison between Dienbienphu and Tet is misleading, as well. The French were outnumbered and outgunned at Dienbienphu, and the siege led to a surrender. And the surrender led to an ending of the war in a matter of weeks,

culminating in negotiations that produced the Geneva Accords in June 1954. In contrast, Tet produced no American surrender, and the narrow battlefield result could certainly, but not necessarily, be viewed as an American victory. True, Tet induced a change of political leadership in the United States, but arguably the shift from Johnson to Nixon included a new and stronger resolve to escalate American involvement in Vietnam and find a way to prevail; Nixon's electoral promise of "a secret plan" to end the Vietnam War was really a scenario for renewing the war effort based on a proposed shift of tactics and a concealed reassertion of maximal goals. Many commentators reject my argument, contending that everything after Tet was a wind-down, and the only issues left were matters on the pace of disengagement and the maintenance of appearances.[12] In fact, the Vietnam War went on for seven years after Tet, the negotiations subsequently initiated in Paris during 1968 were protracted and inconclusive, and it remains unclear (and perhaps indeterminate) as to whether, without the immobilizing effects of the Watergate disclosures upon Nixon's capacity for action, the war would have ended as it did in 1975. There is no reason to doubt Nixon's resolve to keep the Thieu government in power even if it meant an abrupt American reentry into the war in the form of highly punitive aerial bombardment. Few to this day realize that American casualties were greater in the period after Tet than they were in the preceding six war years.

Should we, then, call Tet the Dienbienphu of the Vietnam War? Should it even be understood as a turning-point in American involvement? Unlike most other decisive battles, the ramifications of Tet remain difficult to establish even if we consider only its effects on the character of American involvement in Vietnam. We tend to distort the Vietnam War by treating it primarily as an American experience whether we think of ourselves as hawks or doves. But this Americanization of the war's importance is itself part of the imperial mindset. Tet was and remains overwhelmingly a Vietnamese experience—as noted in the grisly statistics of war, the dying and most of the grieving was done in Vietnam and by Vietnamese, and it was their cities, their lunar new year, and their ancient buildings and traditions that were the scene and subject of the Tet Offensive.

Yes, as Americans, we are bound to emphasize the importance of Tet for us. If the imperial tendency to appropriate the event is indulged for purposes of reflection, it then becomes possible, even

healthy, to learn from the experience, provided we understand that our relationship to the overall experience was necessarily marginal, partial, and of dubious legitimacy, as compared to that of the Vietnamese.

The American debate about Tet continues. It remains a mirror for restating opposed preconceptions and validating contending ideological biases. In effect, we look at Tet and see various partisan images of ourselves, and yet seek to foster an impression of sorting out what happened in an objective, realistic manner that yields a coherent interpretation. And, of course, there is the further complexity of time—Tet in 1968 versus Tet as understood in 1988. Our interpretative agenda shifts, and putting Tet on the agenda is itself a kind of political statement. There has developed a tendency by those who look back on the Vietnam War as a whole to regard Tet as a milestone along the way, not as a decisive turning-point or watershed. Nevertheless, reactions by American policy-makers and others remain instructive.

Take, Robert Komer, for instance, the flamboyant head of the pacification program directed at the countryside (aptly known as "Blowtorch Bob," a nickname that well conveys his gruesome enthusiasm for "the other war," that of pacification), who gives his assessment in the following vivid language:

> What really surprised us about Tet—and boy it was a surprise, lemme tell you, I was there at Westy's elbow—was that they abandoned the time-tested Mao rural strategy where the guerrillas slowly strangle the city, and only at the end do they attack the seat of imperial power directly... They abandoned the countryside where they were doing very well, and boy did they get creamed in the city... I always felt that the Tet offensive was a desperate gamble on the part of Hanoi... We had a startling success in pacification after the Tet offensive because the enemy had sacrificed the core of his guerrilla movement. After Tet it really became an NVA war.[13]

Or consider Colonel Harry Summers widely studied strategic analysis of the Vietnam War as a military experience:

> The North Vietnamese offensive was a resounding tactical failure. They expended what one analyst described as about half of their entire strength—over 100,000 fighting men—without any apparent gain.[14]

According to such readings, Tet presented the United States with "a golden opportunity" to gain the decisive advantage in the war. This opportunity never materialized due to "wavering" in Washington and an alleged general misconstruction of the post-Tet true correlation of forces in Vietnam.

Those who promote this line of interpretation are not oblivious to the strategic dimension of Tet, which is understood to center upon Washington and American public opinion. There are various ways of explaining why Washington, Johnson, the media, and the American people reacted as they did. Komer reflects a consensus among policy-makers when he makes this assessment: "Now I wasn't born yesterday, and I knew in one day that whatever had happened out there, Tet had changed absolutely everything in Washington."[15] Similarly, Colonel Summers realizes that something profound was changed by Tet: "With this disastrous tactical defeat North Vietnam struck what was to prove a fatal blow against our center of gravity—the alliance between the United States and South Vietnam." Of course, in the background is the Clausewitzian understanding of war as a form of politics. Tet induced a split in the ranks of the war-makers. It divided those who believed Tet to have been a successful blow against the American war because it provided evidence that the war could not be won for an acceptable cost and those who believed Tet produced a mental breakdown in Washington by somehow confusing most political leaders, and making them incapable of realizing that Tet made it far easier than previously to reach American goals in Vietnam.

General Westmoreland has been a champion of this latter line. As he puts it in his memoirs, no one "foresaw that, in terms of public opinion, press and television would transform what was undeniably a catastrophic military defeat for the enemy into a presumed debacle for Americans and South Vietnamese." Properly perceived, Tet should have been perceived as a last-gasp desperate gamble by a defeated enemy, comparable in Westmoreland's view to Nazi Germany's effort in the Battle of the Bulge at the close of World War II, a prelude to defeat that reflected the true military outcome. But instead Tet was treated as if it were a kind of replay of Dienbienphu, an unexpectedly formidable challenge by the militarily weaker side that finally broke the political will to persist on the part of the stronger side. Westmoreland, seeking in part to justify his own pre-Tet optimism about the war, even in retrospect, berates his adversary for their foolishness: "Why would the enemy

give away his major advantage," he asks, "which was his ability to be elusive and avoid heavy casualties?" Such a rhetorical question is hardly rhetorical in light of the outcome of the war. If the war was correctly analyzed as being won or lost in the minds of the Washington elite, then the Tet costs for Hanoi were in military terms modest if assessed by their dramatic effects on American attitudes. And Westmoreland explains the lack of full readiness for the Tet attacks by claiming that he never suspected that the North Vietnamese and NLF would so odiously offend the Vietnamese people by mounting their offensive in the midst of a sacred holiday that had been declared by both sides to be a time of truce.[16]

There is an element of moral absurdity here. Westmoreland, it should be remembered, was associated with heartless war-fighting tactics that tended to obliterate the distinction between civilian and combatant, between those on our side and Vietnamese society as a whole. For him to pass judgment on the moral propriety of the Tet Offensive is an instance of extreme hypocrisy. And yet Westmoreland may have unwittingly correctly identified a long-term weakness of the Tet strategy, not in his analysis of the war, but so far as its bearing on the peace that followed upon the eventual North Vietnamese victory. As we will consider later, the haunting possibility exists that the North by its tactics could have prevailed over the Americans in a heroic struggle and yet still manage to lose out as liberators with their own people.

Perhaps the most self-serving of all American readings of Tet is that of Richard Nixon. In his book *No More Vietnams* Nixon pushes the logic of the Komer/Westmoreland position to its full policy conclusions. He seets Tet not as defeating Johnson's approach to the war, but as creating a real opportunity to win the war in a manner that would be acceptable to the American people. In essence, Nixon believes that Tet created an extraordinary opportunity to move the strategy of American war-fighting from attrition to pacification. In his words, "the decisive defeat of the 1968 Tet Offensive changed the balance of power in South Vietnam."[17] With the enemy infrastructure decimated and exposed, Tet so thinned the NLF presence in the countryside as to provide a basis for successful pacification managed by American advisors. At the same time, the military campaign could be carried forward by primary reliance on modernized South Vietnamese troops supported in battle by uncontested high-tech U.S. air and naval power. The additional Nixon tactic was to extend the war zone to hit cross-border

sanctuaries and logistical supply lines. Nixon definitely believed that his approach was succeeding in the post-Tet years, but as with Westmoreland before him, that American political ineptitude managed to produce a defeat in the context of real victory. For Nixon "Pacification had worked wonders in South Vietnam.. We had won the political struggle for the allegiance of the South Vietnamese people." Tet, then, led to a defeat that was really a victory: "We won the war in Vietnam, but we lost the peace. All that we had achieved in twelve years of fighting was thrown away in a spasm of congressional irresponsibility."[18] This outcome, then, was conceived by Nixon as a consequence of "the outcry over Watergate and the backlash against Vietnam in Congress." In effect, in Nixon's eyes, Watergate became America's Dienbienphu!

The American bureaucratic center and "the wise men" of the Eastern Establishment didn't see Tet at all the way Nixon or Westmoreland did, and this despite earlier solid backing for the war. For many of them Tet was tantamount to an American Dienbienphu, an eye-opening development that confirmed gnawing prior doubts about the war's overall viability. As the influential mainstream interpretation by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts explains, "Tet 1968, like Dien Bien Phu 1954, was a symbol. It signified that Washington-Saigon progress toward ending the war was without foundation and could be swept away in weeks." "Tet exposed the extreme vulnerability of the GVN that lay beneath the veneer of military progress, but it also exposed the vulnerability of administration policy at home."[19] The whole concept of the Vietnam War as a military struggle against a Communist adversary who was being defeated without any huge American mobilization of resources or war fever was what had made this war in a remote Asian country politically acceptable in the first instance. The Johnson Administration had deliberately sought a blank check for escalation in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (in 1964), but had not wanted to declare war and put the country on a war footing.

Such ambivalence toward war has its justifications, but it also has pitfalls, especially if things don't work out. Possibly, the political leadership didn't want to go to war in the full sense in a distant country where there was no claim of self-defense. More central, undoubtedly, were the convictions of LBJ, in particular, that Vietnam was a sideshow and that his real challenges for his presidency involved race and poverty at home. It was Johnson's genuine liberalism on these issues, the ones he cared and knew most about,

that made it necessary to fight overseas without diverting resources and energies from these domestic "battlefields." While understandable, succumbing to the temptation to engage half-heartedly in war reflects a flawed political and moral imagination, as well as dramatic underestimation of the resolve and skill of the other side. These underlying miscalculations help us understand better the bitterness of so many American combat veterans. To be asked, as a citizen to risk life and limb for a struggle that was never removed from the backburner is to be told that one's life meant little except as one form of currency available to power-wielders for their casual practice of diplomacy of calculated gains and losses. Such an outlook also makes the war policy quite abruptly reversible if the balance sheet is read differently. A free society cannot summon its young to fight in a sustained and ambiguous war that is regarded as worthwhile only if the costs can be kept low, and for reasons of practical efficiency and domestic politics, the draft was abandoned after Vietnam as a source of American manpower. In effect, interventionary diplomacy has rested since Vietnam on a professional army, largely a mercenary undertaking. Only on an occasion of unprecedented national emergency can this supreme sacrifice be exacted over time without generating a backlash. Such an unconditional commitment was never made in relation to Vietnam, and many veterans of all political persuasion continue to feel betrayed to this day.

Johnson's restraint was not a matter of respecting popular will in the form of the restraining hand of the American people. Indeed, the Johnson presidency conceived of itself all along as moderate, resisting right-wing war fever, while prosecuting the war in a manner that was effective enough to yield victory without imposing a heavy cost on the United States. Up through Tet, and beyond, the American people generally supported a military solution in Vietnam, although the support began to weaken and splinter in mid-1967 as it became evident that the adversary was formidable and no end was in sight. More of the supporters of the war policies came to object to a leadership and an approach to Vietnam that seemed indecisive; most Americans even before Tet wanted either victory or withdrawal. The post-Tet political signals revealed a new stage of this process of polarization. By 1968 Americans increasingly felt that in retrospect the Vietnam involvement was a mistake, but even after Tet they favored an invasion of North Vietnam over withdrawal by a 5:3 ratio. What is more, Gene McCarthy's New Hampshire campaign

astonishingly attracted more votes from hawks than doves, as shown by exit polls and by the later shift of his supporters after he dropped out of the race for the presidency to super-hawk candidate George Wallace in greater numbers than to Hubert Humphrey.

But the Washington establishment saw the issues differently than the public. They saw the rising tide of intense opposition of the anti-war movement as dividing the country in a dangerous way, often reaching into their own homes, creating severe tensions between fathers and sons, especially among the families of "the best and brightest" still in charge of the war at the time of Tet. Furthermore, they assessed the balance of forces in Vietnam differently. They began to appreciate that comparable battlefield casualties were of less consequence than the comparative will and capability of the leadership in Hanoi and Saigon. They realized that whatever the losses at Tet, Hanoi retained the manpower, will, and logistical means to replenish its capabilities in the South, and could continue to do so for an indefinite future. In essence, the light at the end of the tunnel, always dim and distant, disappeared altogether. In this regard, the magnitude of Tet convinced many who had earlier been civilian hardliners that the actual American war-makers were either deceived or incompetent, or both. After Tet, the consensus of wise men was that this was no longer a war that could be won at an acceptable cost.[20]

LBJ was non-commital to the end, stuck with these conflicting consequences of Tet and yet unable to act on their basis with any effective resolve; whereas he gave up on the war emotionally, he stuck with it tactically. As Gelb and Betts note, the choice posed by Tet for the Johnson Administration was one of either "decisive escalation" or "moderate deescalation." Earlier in the war, Johnson had actually seemed to welcome far lesser challenges to American primacy in the Indochina region as pretexts for dramatic escalation of military involvement. In the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 North Vietnamese torpedo boats were charged with attacks upon American warships that had been gathering intelligence for air operations against the North; these charges exaggerated the North Vietnamese attack and suppressed the military mission of the ships, and may well have fabricated part of the event.[21] This incident became the occasion for a major U.S. military response by way of heavy bombardment of the torpedo bases in the North and for rallying the U.S. Senate to give Johnson a virtually unanimous congressional mandate by way of resolution to use whatever force he deemed

necessary to safeguard American interests in the area. Later in February 1965 an NLF attack on American barracks in Pleiku was seized upon by Washington as an occasion to initiate Rolling Thunder, the sustained, massive, and overt extension of the air war to North Vietnam, which was correctly perceived at the time as a massive escalation of American involvement. In both instances, DRV/NLF actions directed at blunting the American combat role in their own country were treated in Washington as if they were malicious and outrageous provocations directed at the legitimate imperial role of the United States.

Why, then, was Tet treated so differently? Tet was, indeed, by this same imperial logic a far more malicious provocation—it was a massive military attack initiated during an official period of truce that inflicted heavy casualties and humiliated the United States by penetrating even its embassy compound. In light of the past U.S. pattern of response, why such a wimpy response to Tet? Of course, timing and confidence are the answer. If Tet had occurred two years earlier, it seems reasonable to assume it would have produced a massive escalatory response by the United States almost as a matter of strategic reflex—conceivably, the aerial and naval bombardment of an equivalent number of cities and towns in the North. Franz Schurmann notes that "Johnson's restraint was indeed remarkable. But seen in terms of available policy options his restraint appears more as a paralysis in the face of choices all of which were bad."[22] If the war was being won, how could Tet have occurred? By 1968 the American investment in the war had peaked for the leadership in Washington. If it couldn't be won at that level. then it certainly wasn't worth getting in deeper. It was, instead, time to get out. This latter attitude was what made the post-Tet request by Westmoreland and Earle Wheeler, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for a 206,000 increase in troop deployment such a colossal bureaucratic blunder on the part of those who continued to believe in the Vietnam policy, as it significantly hardened the impression among those on the fence in Washington that Tet was a massive, unacknowledged American defeat and that the war if it went on would be an even greater drain than it already was, and this the United States could not long afford either politically or economically.[23] Already the dollar strain of the war was beginning to be felt, and the financial community was becoming worried about inflationary deficits at home, which it started to associate with the added outflows of currency caused by the war. In Paul Johnson's

words, "It was a significant turning-point in American history: the first time the Great Republic, the richest nation on earth, came up against the limits on its financial resources."[24] Additionally, Atlanticists who were still preeminent in the counsels of government, increasingly believed that Vietnam was pulling America away from its proper emphasis on the Euro-American alliance.

These considerations help us understand the way Tet was perceived by a preponderance among policy-makers: relative costs are the Achilles Heel of imperial war. Vietnam was not a struggle for the defense of territory, or even of close allies, neighbors, or traditional spheres of influence. Of course, it was sold at home by a series of arguments put forth in sequence: as a "crusade" against Communism, as a way to avoid falling dominoes in the region, as a challenge to containment diplomacy, as a test of American credibility, as a test of Southeastern Asian regionalism, as a parallel to the defense of South Korea, as a test response to the challenge of wars of liberation. But these were abstract claims that were, in part, ideological and, in part, geopolitical, and were never fully endorsed or widely accepted. The wearying succession of primary reasons for the Vietnam War itself suggested a lack of clear conviction and purpose, and undermined the rationale for its continuation.

These imperial bureaucrats with their mental sliderules can pull the switch at any point without any loss of sleep. Tet was such a point, but probably not as definitively as appearanced at the time, because Nixon did successfully, if deceptively, revive the war once elected in 1968. An imperial mentality based on calculations of gains and losses, including the balance sheet on the home front, collided with the crusader mentality characteristic of his extreme right and given credence in war propaganda, resurfacing in the form of a fictive superhero named Rambo, a dedicated warrior ready to die for the cause of anti-Communism on behalf of his beloved country, but betrayed again and again by passionless civilian bureaucrats. The fury of this rightist disenchantment with Washington is also at the center of Oliver North's saga, both his vision of purity on the battlefields of anti-Communist resistance and his contempt for inhibiting constitutional arrangements and the confining routines of standard governmental practices. Col. North epitomizes a contradictory attitude toward authority: willing to stand on his head, as he put it, to show obedience to presidential wishes while simultaneously upholding a discretion to disobey the law, lie, cheat,

and work with organized crime to carry out his self-construed mission to sustain the contras. Tet was a time when many rational bureaucrats reassessed the Vietnam commitment, and wanted to end it. As Richard Holbrooke notes, it was Johnson's personal ambivalence that might have cost Humphrey the election in 1968 and made it necessary years later for Nixon to experience his own version of Tet—The Great Spring Offensive of 1975, the final shattering of South Vietnam's military resistance.[25] But there is a big difference between getting out of Vietnam and renouncing the counterrevolutionary mission of imperial geopolitics. The Vietnam diehards in the Washington bureaucracy might have lost out in Indochina, but their "wisdom" has persisted and, during the Reagan years, has been reasserted, most spectacularly in the campaign to reverse the outcomes of the Nicaraguan Revolution by reliance on the contras, but more widely through the adoption of the Reagan Doctrine. In this long view, Tet remains not a defeat, but a victory misunderstood!

The Vietnamese attitude toward the Tet Offensive is unclear. The official writing on all aspects of the war is self-serving, uncritical, and hence, in the end, unilluminating. Every single encounter during the long course of the warfare is presented as an instance of a smashing Communist victory. Losses are never acknowledged, claims of damage to the other side are wildly exaggerated. Despite this, some elements of the DRV attitude toward Tet can be inferred, and are an important part of the story. Tet is presented in Vietnamese Communist interpretations as a key stage in the process of achieving victory rather than as a turning-point in the war, but it is not highlighted. For instance, in the *History of the Communist Party of Vietnam* the Tet experience is discussed in a few pages under the rather bland title, "Frustrating the U.S. Strategy in Limited War in the South and Foiling the First War of Destruction While Continuing to Build Socialism in the North (1965–1968)." In contrast, the end of the French war is described in a lengthy chapter entitled "Strategic Offensive in 1953–54—the Dien Bien Phu Victory," and the end of the second war in a chapter of its own under the title, "The Spring 1975 General Offensive—The Complete Liberation of the South (Feb. 1973–April 1975)."[26]

In discussing Tet, the official history attributes the undertaking to a plan launched at the 14th plenum of the Party Central Committee in January 1968 "to deal a stunning blow to American aggressors." The account reports that any one of three results was

expected to flow from the offensive: total victory at once; some specific successes, but the war would go on; the United States would feel challenged and would respond by augmenting "its forces and expanding the war to North Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea." The official assessment concluded that "the Tet 1968 offensive and uprising had a great and all-embracing significance; it upset the enemy's strategic position, shook the U.S. aggressive will, foiled the strategy of limited war in the South and compelled him to end the war of destruction against North Vietnam and to accept negotiation with us." A more measured assessment of Tet was made by the Lao Dong (Communist) Party Headquarters in the South in a document dated March 1968 in which "great and unprecedented successes" were claimed, but also disappointments acknowledged, including a failure to destroy "much of the enemy's live force" or to create "favorable conditions for motivating the masses to arise in towns and cities." [27] The essence of Tet's combat success was the recapture of control over the countryside by disrupting pacification efforts, thereby forcing the South Vietnamese armed forces to retreat temporarily to the towns and cities. As Le Duan indicates, *"the orientation for our offensive and uprising is aimed at the towns but we should bear in mind that the greatest and most important result is to conquer and keep the countryside."*[28]

With the shift in U.S. tactics after Tet, including Johnson's replacement by Nixon and Westmoreland's by Abrams, the Vietnam War remained unresolved. From the perspective of 1975 and later, the Vietnamese definitely did not look back on Tet as decisive in the manner of Dienbienphu. It shifted the course of the war, but didn't end it. Le Duan, the important party leader, writing in 1970, said that Tet "forced the U.S. imperialists to deescalate the war, and then by default, to expand it to Kampuchea," which produced "the offensive and uprisings in Kampuchea" leading to a revolutionary process there that "was beyond our calculations."[29]

All in all, then, Tet was more like Johnson's personal Dienbienphu than it was a decisive battle for the overall war effort. As Nixon makes clear, his plan was packaged for domestic political reasons as one to end the war, but in actuality it represented a renewed effort to prevail in the war. Even if Nixon had not been elected, it remains ambiguous whether Humphrey would have pursued a very different course in the war.[30] After rejecting Westmoreland's request for more troops and announcing a partial bombing halt, the Johnson strategy in the remaining months of his presidency was to seek negotiations

on more favorable terms than Nixon/Kissinger agreed upon in the 1973 Paris Agreements, and to shift the burden of the ground war to the greatly strengthened South Vietnamese military forces. These were surely postures unacceptable to Hanoi. They were correctly perceived in Hanoi as a search in Washington for new ways to gain leverage in the war by fighting.

But if Tet wasn't Dienbienphu neither was it the Battle of the Bulge. It was not a desperate last-ditch gamble by an otherwise defeated adversary. Bernard Brodie, in one of the more balanced and illuminating interpretations of Tet, concludes that the Communist planners of Tet knew what they were doing, and that their plan was to shock Washington into a change of heart on the war so as to hasten American withdrawal from the ground war, such withdrawal being the necessary and sufficient condition for victory in the South.[31] Conservative interpreters of the period have tried to suggest that the shock-effect of Tet on the Johnson administration was a windfall result that compensated the North Vietnamese for their battlefield miscalculations, that it was not, in other words, part of their plan.

Stanley Karnow's influential PBS series on the Vietnam War and subsequent book lends support to the view that the North Vietnamese were disappointed by the results of Tet in the combat zones and never considered or expected overseas impacts. He, and others who adhere to this line of interpretation, rely on material based upon interviews with North Vietnamese military participants, especially General Tran Do, who was Deputy Commander of the forces of North Vietnam operating in the South. General Tran Do has said of Tet, "In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings in the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and that was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result."[32] I don't find such commentary persuasive. The perspective of a theater commander may be confined to the battlefield context, but the overall planners of Tet in Hanoi were quite likely to have a broader conception of belligerent objectives than those in the field. The timing of the offensive in an election year after a period of intense U.S. government propaganda to show that it was winning the war, as well as the prior history of the Vietnamese approach to revolutionary warfare—including spectacular success on an earlier occasion by resorting to the device of the decisive battle—

makes it more plausible to follow Brodie than Karnow with respect to our identification of the general orbit of North Vietnamese intentions. General Vo Nguyen Giap who, along with Ho Chi Minh, was the architect of Hanoi's strategy, has been both praised and criticized for his reliance on high risk tactical maneuvers that are intended to have a decisive impact on the conflict.[33] He was the guiding force behind Dienbienphu, as well as Tet. Such drastic challenges directed at a militarily stronger overall adversary do accept the danger of provoking a punishing escalation. For instance, had the United States intervened at the time of Dienbienphu with an atomic bomb, or had a massive escalation of the war aginst the North occurred after Tet, our perception of these events and General Giap would be quite different. But these responses did not occur, and we must, I think, credit Giap with an understanding that the knockout blow cannot be attempted until the imperial power's resolve to go on with the war has been very much weakened. Even so, the North Vietnamese can be criticized for Tet—for its disastrous, disabling effects on the NLF in the South and because it didn't knock the Americans altogether out of the war. The Vietnamese political leadership seemed always acutely conscious of outside public opinion and the American peace movement as dimensions of the war, and realized clearly in their struggle against the French that raising the direct and indirect costs to the colonial power was alone what made the war eventually winnable, that is, reversing the locus of attrition, and thereby striking a dagger into the Achilles Heel of the basic imperial undertaking.

The historical actuality of Tet remains mystifying twenty years later. Only two sets of results seem clear beyond controversy:

—the shock of Tet pushed Johnson from the White House, Westmoreland from his command post; with this push went an abandonment of reliance on a ground war fought by American troops; also clear was the post-Tet effort to change the color of the bodies by invigorating Saigon's will and capability, as well as some need to reassure the American public and most of its leadership that the post-Tet emphasis would be on "honorable" disengagement by way of negotiations rather than a continuing quest for victory or endless stalemate; in actuality, this reassurance may itself have been a deception, buying time to find some means by which to impose upon Vietnam a diplomatic solution that left the South in anti-Communist hands, permanently perpetuating the temporary partition originally accepted by Hanoi as a short-term expedient in

1954 to enable the French to save face. (Indeed, the most tragic consequence of Tet may have been registered in Kampuchea. The determination by the Nixon Administration to compensate for the gradual loss of U.S. firepower on the ground by expanding the theater of operations to include Kampuchea (and Laos), contributed directly to the conditions that lead to the establishment of the Pol Pot regime and its reign of terror.)[34]

—the battlefield and political consequences of Tet also decisively shifted control over subsequent conduct of the war to Hanoi, and removed the NLF from its former prominence, in the countryside of the South, and altered the situation in the Mekong Delta; after Tet the war ironically became what the Americans had claimed it was from the outset, when indeed it wasn't, namely, a war by the North to conquer the South.

Beyond these agreed developments, there is confusion, controversy, and indeterminacy. It seems as if pacification was successful, if brutal, in rural South Vietnam after Tet, mainly because the NLF was weakened and exposed by the Tet Offensive. In the end, this didn't alter the overall outcome because the war came to be decided in the northern provinces of South Vietnam by combat between unequally matched main forces units of North and South in the 1972–1975 period.

III. Two Tales of Criminality

Except in passing references, little attention is devoted by scholarly interpreters to the conduct of the two adversaries during and after Tet. In my view, although much more research and analysis needs to be done, troublesome questions are posed by the ways in which both sides treated the Vietnamese people and the cultural reality within which the struggle for the future was unfolding. Tet disclosed, in my view, acute alienation of the sort that destroys the very things that make struggle meaningful, and scarred badly the whole sense of what the war was about for either side.

Further, it seems as if both sides alienated the civilian population in the Vietnamese cities and countryside through their behavior during and after Tet. The Communist side violated a truce and encroached violently upon a sacred holiday. It is difficult to tell whether this issue of timing and shock was disturbing at the time to Vietnamese civilian sentiment. Westmoreland claimed so, but he is hardly a credible witness on matters of Vietnamese cultural

sensitivity. There is also some testimony collected by Al Santoli, supporter of the American effort in Vietnam, that must be received skeptically. Tran Van Luu, a student in Saigon evidently spoke to Santoli as follows:

> Tet has always been a very sacred time for Vietnamese families. People got very angry at the Viet Cong attack during this time... Everybody was shocked and surprised. Because the holiday ceasefire was first suggested by the VC. So the Viet Cong played a trick by asking for a longer ceasefire than in previous years. And they used this to launch the attack on the cities.[35]

And yet the issue of civilian hearts and minds cannot be ignored. The DRV/NLF claimed the mantle of nationalist authenticity for their war of liberation and condemned the GVN/US coalition as a mixture of domestic puppets and residues of colonialism. To sustain these claims, a deep show of respect for cultural symbols seems indispensable.

More serious in this regard, were the overall effects of civilian executions carried out by the invading troops who arrived in Hue with death lists of those who collaborated with Saigon or the Americans. Of course, collaboration in a bitter internal war has often been treated as a crime by those who resist alien rule, and yet the civilians executed in Hue seemed to include "innocent" minor functionaries, including schoolteachers and minor civic officials. Perhaps, the harshness of this conduct was designed to convey a message to all Vietnamese that they must side with authentic nationalist forces at a time of critical struggle. Even if this was the motive for such brutality, it nevertheless discloses a criminal mentality in the guise of military necessity, and must have been deeply frightening to Buddhists and those in the middle, as well as to those who were overtly siding with the Americans.

The subsequent history of Vietnam makes one wonder whether the shadow cast by Tet did not add significantly to the fear and hostility of Southerners toward the North, to the mass exodus after liberation, and even to the phenomenon of "the boat people" that undercut the basic claim of national liberation and reunification. Undoubtedly, also, a vicious circle extended the cycle of fear and suspicion, each round validating the hostile outlook of the other side. Of course, there were other factors at work. The Catholics who had fled South after 1954 were inclined to flee again in the face

of a Marxist-Leninist prospect, and then there were hordes of war profiteers in the South who could not imagine life without the Americans. In terrifying the population of Hue, and by extension, giving credibility to fears of a post-war bloodbath throughout South Vietnam, did not the victorious side in the war years later make itself exceedingly vulnerable to propaganda that besmirches its image, perhaps unfairly, to this day? In this regard, the Hue executions—about which there is still no significant interpretation—remains an important, if only dimly understood, aspect of the legacy of Tet.

But there is another complementary story of human abuse, also largely untold. The response to Tet by Saigon and by U.S. forces showed a total disregard for life and for Vietnamese tradition. To drive the invading Vietnamese out of the cities and towns, firepower and bombing was used as if the war was still located primarily in the jungle. The ancient sections of Hue city were devastated from the air, and numerous civilian casualties resulted. Civilians caught in the crossfire of Tet were assimilated to enemy forces and indiscriminately attacked, destroying entire towns and large sections of cities in the name of freeing them. No account of post-Tet is complete without that spontaneous insight of a marine major asked about the destruction of Ben Tre: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it." For opponents of the American involvement, and even for some of those undecided, detached media voices, these few words said it all. In assessing the devastation of Tet it is almost impossible to apportion blame and responsibility between the adversaries. Both sides were substantially, perhaps irreparably discredited as responsible constructive actors to Vietnamese political development by their behavior during and after Tet.

But it was not merely the bloody character of American/GVN (Government of South Vietnam) effort to dislodge the Vietnamese fighters from entrenched positions in this cities and towns, it was the quality of the pacification campaign that was put into operation in the countryside in the months after Tet. The United States relied heavily on a tactic of widespread civilian assassination, supposedly to decimate the NLF infrastructure that survived the Tet Offensive. David MacMichael, a former CIA analyst. who split with the government on the issue of disinformation relating to Sandinista support for revolutionary activity in El Salvador, has estimated that 40,000 Vietnamese were killed in this assassination program.[36] The "success" claimed for these post-Tet tactics have been influential in recasting subsequent counter-insurgency theory and practice, to be

considered in the next section.

Yet there is one comparison that seems to challenge the temptation to conclude that both sides showed their true colors at Tet. The attacking NLF cadres invariably fought with courage and resolve unmatched by their adversaries. Whatever the basis of this extraordinary display of commitment, and it could not be explained as entirely a matter of indoctrination, the attackers acted as if their cause was sacred and worth dying for, and the defenders, at most, did their professional duty as soldiers. Such an asymmetry of motivation and commitment often expresses a historical judgment by the participants about the relative degree of legitimacy that two opposed sides in a conflict possess, and prefigures, as a consequence, the outcome of the struggle itself, even if long deferred, especially if there exists an offsetting inequality of military capabilities. When the Americans partially disengaged after Tet, it was evident that Saigon, even with vast assistance in every form, could not mobilize the people of the South to anything like a comparable degree to that achieved by both Hanoi and the NLF. It was not surprising that the Thieu government was opposed at every stage to any further U.S. disengagement and seemed mortally afraid of negotiations or coalition arrangements despite access to superior weaponry and its possession of far greater financial resources than its adversary.

IV. From Post-Tet to Low Intensity Conflict

Refighting the Vietnam War remains a preoccupation in Washington. Neither Tet, nor the subsequent failures of Vietnamization, did much to convince the Komer/Nixon pacification school of thought. Looking backward they viewed Vietnam (and Tet) as pseudo-defeats that generated the occasion for learning better how to protect U.S. interests in the Third World, while looking ahead they established doctrinal redesign as a foreign policy priority in their concern to avoid repeating the Vietnam outcome. In Nixon's words, "In Vietnam, we tried and failed in a just cause. 'No more Vietnams' can mean we will not *try* again. It *should* mean that we will not *fail* again."[37]

In an important speech on the tenth anniversary of the American defeat in Vietnam, the Secretary of State, George P. Shultz, echoes these sentiments: "the President has called our effort a noble cause, and he was right. Whatever mistakes in how the war was fought, whatever one's view of the strategic rationale for our intervention,

the *morality* of our effort must now be clear."[38] In effect, the moral case for intervention is sanctified, opening the way for two elements in subsequent instances of interventionary practice: a sufficient strategic rationale by way of national interests and a mastery of the tactics of struggle that will assure a reasonable prospect of victory (and that takes into account the vulnerability of sustained imperial interventions to domestic backlash). In his speech Secretary Shultz explicitly linked Vietnam to the latest testing ground for American policy: Nicaragua. In the background was the notion that "the ordeal of Indochina...should teach us something"; "the larger lesson of the past decade is that when America lost faith in itself, world stability suffered and freedom lost ground." Underneath this call for activism was the realization that it was desirable to apply the post-Tet approach to Nicaragua and other conflict zones in the Third World—that is, avoid battlefield deaths for Americans and keep the American combat role as low-profile as possible, while using covert action to got after the civilian infrastructure of the revolutionary side (the Phoenix approach). It is precisely this set of inferences from the Vietnam era—both the supposed nobility of the cause and the unnecessary failure—that helped produce the pathological excesses of the Casey/Poindexter/North approach to interventionary diplomacy.[39]

The persisting vitality of this commitment to interventionary diplomacy in the Third World is evident in a recent government sponsored study: the Report of the Commission on Integrated Long-Range Strategy chaired by Fred Ikle and Albert Wohlstetter, and including such national security stalwarts as Kissinger, Brezinski, and Samuel Huntington. The report, released in January 1988, was signed by all its members without even any dissenting comments, and published under the title "Discriminate Deterrence." Although it includes a discussion of nuclear strategy, a surprisingly strong emphasis is accorded to rehabilitating interventionary diplomacy in the Third World: "Our failure in Vietnam still casts a shadow over U.S. intervention anywhere...and have left some predisposed to pessimism about our ability to promote U.S. interests in the Third World." The report sets out to overcome this pessimism and proposes a cluster of policies that is put forward to gain this result. The stakes are high, the text argues, nothing less than the global position of the United States. The report contends that unless the United States adopts an activist role in the Third World it "will have an adverse cumulative affect on U.S. access to critical regions, on American

credibility among allies and friends, and on American self-confidence." It goes on, "if this cumulative effect cannot be checked or reversed in the future, it will gradually undermine America's ability to defend its interests in the most vital regions, in the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean and the Western Pacific." Note, especially, the geopolitical logic prominent here. This report is not a Cold War tract (although it relies on some anti-Communist suppositions to depict U.S. interests) as much as it is a primer by the national security elite on what must be done with the military instrument to sustain America's global preeminence, or more precisely, to avoid the consequence of what is now widely regarded as a period of imperial decline. It associates this new activism with a grasp of the character of low-intensity conflict, which it describes as the brunt of the challenge to U.S. interests, and it suggests that the approach advocated "could be funded with about 4 percent of the defense budget, requiring annual outlays of perhaps $12 billion." These amounts, the report suggests, could be provided by reallocations within the frame of current defense appropriations "without significantly impairing our ability to prosecute higher-intensity wars."[40]

The approach advocated for low intensity conflict is based on "six basic propositions"[41] that can be briefly set forth here:

1—"U.S. forces will not in general be combatants," i.e. sustain Vietnamization if at all possible by limiting the U.S. role to security assistance programs, including "military training, technical training and intelligence and logistical support."

2—"The United States should support anti-Communist insurgencies." This broad mandate, in effect, endorses the Reagan Doctrine, although it is limited in application to "carefully selected situations, where important U.S. objectives would be served and U.S. support might favorably affect outcomes." A flexible approach is recommended, that includes many varieties of support, including provision for its non-acknowledgment by way of covert action, whenever a distancing seems desirable. It is important, the report notes, to provide the government with an option to "maintain official silence." Herein the rationale for secret government based on lies and deception directed toward the American people and their selected representatives.

3—"Security assistance requires new legislation and more resources." In effect, the report suggests more resources be made available to friendly regimes and appropriate insurgencies, and that the current

proportion of assistance given Israel and Egypt is too high, given the global array of U.S. interests. It seeks legislative cooperation, including the elimination of current inhibiting constraints (for instance, "legislation from the post-Vietnam era unwisely continues to bar U.S. training for police forces").

4—"The United States needs to work with its Third World allies at developing 'cooperative forces'." This proposal extends the notion of not involving the Unites States in protracted combat roles, but also laments that the United States is acting on the basis of "competitive disadvantages" vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in these matters. The Soviet Union is better placed "...both on minimizing its own risks of confrontation with the West and on making available troops that blend readily into the environment." What seems noteworthy here, as compared to earlier documents on U.S. strategic interests, for instance, NSC-68, is the absence of any kind of moral or legal censure of Soviet practices. On the contrary, the United States Government is goaded to find appropriate equivalent means to project its power to Third World settings. We have definitely entered a period of imperialist coexistence, possibly at the expense of the Third World.

5—"In the Third World, no less than in developed countries, U.S. strategy should seek to maximize our technological advantages." In effect, the government is instructed to fine-tune high tech capabilities to fit the specific features of various low-intensity conflict arenas. Illustrative technological emphases are specified, including "advanced information-processing systems," "low-cost space systems, long-endurance aircraft and robotic reconnaissance vehicles," "networks of sensors and other microelectronic equipment," "bio- and micro-mechanical sensors," and "vivid digital graphics of dangerous areas." There is a caveat attached that compulsive reliance on high tech is ill-advised in some situations—"Providing canned field rations a means of manufacturing boot sales may be more important to the mobility of a Third World army than advanced aircraft."

6—"The United States must develop alternatives to overseas bases." Here is a realization that access to Third World countries has in the post-1945 era often depended on foreign bases, and that these facilities are coming under a rising tide of nationalist pressures. The report recommends that high tech can again provide a fix by way of replacement facilities: using space more for monitoring purposes, developing "impressive naval options," as well as "the use of standard merchant ships to support especially configured units, with containers carrying all military equipment needed."

It is notable that the revival of this line of thinking, so well depicted over the years in the work of Michael Klare, is virtually uncontested in its current form.[42] To be sure, there are persisting anxieties about being drawn into losing efforts even along the lines proposed above, accounting for some of the reluctance by some low-intensity enthusiasts to side fully with Reagan on the contras. But, in general, there is an acceptance of what is essentially the pre-Vietnam view that American interests and Third World revolutionary nationalism are on a permanent collision course such that the United States must do its best to crush the latter by reliance on its ever new and superior technologies of destruction to control political outcomes. Except for some adjustments based on a wider geopolitical screen, the new thinking on Third World issues is indistinguishable from either Komer's approach to pacification or Nixon's general call for successful Vietnam-style interventions. Daniel Ellsberg's insistence that we shift our sense of role from being *on* the wrong side to *being* the wrong side, quoted as an inscription to this essay, pertains here. He extends his observation by saying, "And the U.S. is the wrong side again today—in Central America."[43] The continuity of policy also relies on this delusion that we are taking sides in a civil war rather than understanding our action as one of intervening imperially against revolutionary nationalist movements, using some compromised and antagonized elements of the target society as protective cover.[44]

V. A Concluding Comment

On this twentieth anniversary of Tet we seem still caught up in the Vietnam maelstrom of deadly illusion, being reenacted in a series of Third World countries. History has placed a thick jungle canopy over the whole Tet phenomenon, depriving us of the satisfaction of clear imagery, and yet this very obscurity invites wider meditation and reflection. We cannot any longer plausibly dismiss Tet with some literal designation such as, The battle that turned the war around for the Vietnamese, or The battle that the Americans really won even though they acted as if they lost it.

Tolstoy's reflections can help us attain moral focus: "On the twelfth of June, 1812, the forces of Western Europe crossed the Russian frontier and war began, that is, an event took place opposed to human reason and to human nature. Millions of men perpetrated against one another such innumerable crimes, frauds, treacheries,

thefts, forgeries, issues of false money, burglaries, incendiarisms, and murders as in whole centuries are not recorded in the annals of all the law courts of the world, but which those who committed them did not at the time regard as being crimes." It is, in the end, the sheer criminality of these imperial interventions and the human suffering that they entail, which must be the basis of reassessment. As long as analysis is limited to a pragmatic debate on tactics and prospects for victory, the inevitable tendency will be to repeat the pattern, each time vindicating intervention by a particular contextual rationale and hoping against hope that this time military superiority can be translated into a positive political outcome, which is not, of course, inherently precluded. Intervention can succeed, but in the overwhelming generality of cases, it shouldn't.

A final point of assessment is this. The Tet Offensive both broke the psychological resistance by the political leadership to anti-war sentiments in the United States during the latter stages of the Vietnam War *and* provided a text for war planners who could look back at the violent encounter and its bloody aftermath to show how revolutionary nationalism can indeed be crushed by military and paramilitary means. The reality of Tet is more a point of intense light and of persisting mystery than it is an event whose significance can be elucidated once and forever.

NOTES

[1]Podhoretz, "Impotence," *Granta* 15: 125–128, at 125 (1985).

[2]Chomsky, "Dominoes," *Granta* 15: 129–133, at 131 (1985).

[3]cf John Talbott, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria 1954–62* (New York, Knopf, 1980), esp. pp. 78–89.

[4]Talbott, p. 153.

[5]*Winners and Losers* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 242.

[6]In G. Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (Pine Plains, NY: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1979), pp. 352–53.

[7]E.g. Stephen F. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 228; Loven Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: Morrow, 1985), p. 179.

[8]As quoted in Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), p. 35.

[9]George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 189.

[10]Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), figures given on unnumbered dedication page; see Herring, pp. 190–91.

[11]Oberdorfer, p. 8; on military capabilities of North Vietnam, p. 53.

[12]Such analysis is well stated in Jonathan Schell, *The Real War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), esp. pp. 30–31.

[13]Komer interview, in Kim Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 95.

[14]Harry G. Summers, Jr., *(On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Navato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 184.

[15]Willenson, p. 97. Komer's pet explanation is the mistake of using Tet as an occasion to recommend a call up strategic reserve and an additional request for 206,000 troops; "The goddamn Chiefs of Staff, Wheeler's the evil genius of the Vietnam war in my opinion." p. 97.

[16]*A Soldier Reports*, pp. 422, 421, 418.

[17]Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), p. 131.

[18]Nixon, pp. 133, 165. Consider also this revealing passage about illusion and reality that is like walking into a hall of mirrors: "As Kissinger saw it, we were up against a paradoxical situation in which North Vietnam, which had in effect lost the war, was acting as if it had won, while South Vietnam, which had effectively won the war was acting as if it had lost" (p. 153). Paradoxical, yes, but an alignment of mirrors is suspect if it yields such a clear image.

[19]Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979), pp. 171, 333, 172.

[20]Ably recounted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Man: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp. 696–713; cf also account in Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 74–176, 256–265.

[21]See Joseph C. Gouldsen, *Truth is the First Casualty—The Gulf of Tonkin Affair: Illusion and Reality* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969; Anthony Austin, *The President's War* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1971).

[22]ranz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 524.

[23]Those who interpret Tet as a suppressed victory for the American side hold Wheeler responsible for making it impossible to recover political momentum after Tet. Robert Komer's rage has not subsided with the passage of time; in an interview in the mid-1980s he burst forth with invective—"The goddamn Chiefs of Staff. Wheeler's the evil genius of the Vietnam War in my judgment." Komer, in Willenson (p. 97). Komer believed that Wheeler discounted Westmoreland's confident assessment of the post-Tet situation and believed that additional American troops were needed in Vietnam to stave off defeat (and also used the occasion to obtain additional forces for assignment at other overseas locations). Such a tactic inflated the size of the troop increase at the very worst time and shook decisive what little faith American policy-makers and opinion-makers had in the course of American involvement. Well-narrated in Schandler, pp. 105–176.

[24]Paul Johnson, *A History of the Modern World* (London: Weindenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 637. A significant gloss by such an avid anti-Communist, anti-left observer.

[25]In Willenson, p. 151.

[26]For an account by the Chief of Staff, Vietnam People's Army, see General Van Dien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 5.

[27]Porter (note 8), pp. 201, 201, 202, 363.

[28]Le Duan, *Letters to the South* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Press, 1986), p. 99.

[29]Le Duan, p. 123.

[30]See e.g. telegram from Nicholas Katzenbach to U.S. ambassadors on U.S. post-Tet war policies, in Porter, pp. 365–6.

[31]See B. Brodie, "The Tet Offensive," in Noble Frankland and Christopher Dowling, eds., *Decisive Battles* (New York: David McKay, 1976), 321–334.

[32]Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 523.

[33]See, e.g., Chalmers Johnson, *Autopsy on People's War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 50.

[34]This story is best told by William Shawcross in *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). How history would have otherwise unfolded cannot, of course, be known, but conditions for a Kampuchean bloodbath were certainly created by American's way of continuing the Vietnam War in the post-Tet years.

[35]Al Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden* (New York: Dutton, 1985), pp. 172–73.

[36]Others have used even higher figures, but the magnitude of the Phoenix Program or its essential tactic is not in serious doubt. Cf Richard Ryan, "Christic Institute Attacked by Right and Not-So-Right," *In These Times*, Feb. 24–March 8, 1988, p. 5.

[37]Nixon, p. 237.

[38]From "The Meaning of Vietnam," delivered April 25, 1985, in U.S. Dept. of State Bulletin, Vol. 85, Nos. 2094–2099, 1985, pp. 13–16.

[39]For an instructive early account see Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott, and Jane Hunter, *The Iran-Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era* (Boston, South End Press, 1987).

[40]*Discriminate Deterrence* (Report of The Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy) Department of Defense, Jan. 1988, pp. 13, 16.

[41]*Discriminate Deterrence*, pp. 16–22.

[42]For his recent interpretation of these matters see Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Low Intensity Warfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

[43]"Interview," *Rolling Stone*, 20th Anniversary Issue, 1987, p. 221.

[44]For a mainstream critique along similar lines see Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).