

The Tet Offensive: The Vietnamese people turn the tide of history

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Forty years ago, the Tet Offensive changed the course of the Vietnam War and world history. On January 31, 1968, fighters of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) — known dismissively as the “Vietcong” — launched an all-out assault on cities and towns throughout US-occupied South Vietnam, catching the US and its puppet regime completely by surprise, and stunning the world with their courage and audacity.

This offensive forced the beginning of the US’s long retreat that eventually led to the victory of the national liberation forces against the world’s biggest superpower with the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

The Tet Offensive was the first major event during revolutionary 1968, described by writer Tariq Ali as “the year that changed the world”. The offensive turned the tide of the US war drive, which, if successful in Vietnam, threatened to reverse the gains of the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutions of the post-World War II era.

The heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people for national liberation and socialist transformation opened up a period of struggle and radical change around the world, including in the US and other advanced capitalist countries.

All-out assault

Preceded by a wave of attacks on military bases in the countryside on January 30, 1968, the main offensive began on the morning of January 31 — the Tet lunar new year holiday in Vietnam. It was well coordinated, with more than 80,000 NLF and NVA troops striking over 100 towns and cities, including the national capital, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).

“In Saigon the attack ... was launched by some 5000 troops who had infiltrated the city in the weeks prior to the offensive”, Douglas Welsh wrote in *The History of the Vietnam War*.

Welsh wrote that the fighters entered Saigon disguised as peasants celebrating the Tet holiday “and carried no weapons, or any other objects that could betray them. Weapons and uniforms were smuggled in separately in laundry trucks, by vendors and even through staging bogus funerals for South Vietnamese soldiers. Once inside the city the troops assembled in predetermined areas to form their units and be issued with their equipment.

“The preparations were managed so well that no-one suspected. One NVA soldier revealed under interrogation after the offensive that many units test fired their weapons in the evenings during fireworks displays.

“When the attack began, Saigon was taken completely by surprise. The entire city came under attack simultaneously.”

The liberation forces targeted key institutions of US and South Vietnamese government rule in order to have the biggest political impact, including the US embassy, as John Pimlott described in *Vietnam: The decisive battles*.

“The embassy assault was easily countered, but not before the press had a field day. Pictures of US civilian staff helping to dislodge enemy guerrillas, followed by photographs of those same guerrillas lying dead on the well-kept lawns of the embassy building, came as a shock to the American public.

“Any belief in [US Army supreme commander General] Westmoreland’s recent claim that the war was being won rapidly faded as people began to ask an obvious question: ‘If we are winning, how come the Communists are still active in downtown Saigon?’ President [Lyndon] Johnson had no ready answer and, as even more shocking pictures emerged — such as that of a VC suspect being summarily executed in the street or of US helicopters pouring rockets into residential sectors of the city — the ‘credibility gap’ between the administration and the people widened.”

Dramatic effect

The Tet Offensive changed the direction of the Vietnamese national liberation struggle, aiming at drawing in the entire population of the south. Steve Forrest explained in an article on Marxist.com that the campaign had been “in preparation since a study carried out by [North Vietnamese military commander] General Giap in September 1967 had concluded that the war had reached a ‘stalemate’ situation and that something needed to be done ... Vietcong leaders had carried out a vigorous propaganda campaign in order to prepare their forces.”

“As a minimum the Tet outbreak would force the halting of the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam and force the Americans into negotiations”, Forrest wrote. “As a maximum the offensive could drive the Americans out of Vietnam all together, opening up the path to liberation and unification.”

While not meeting its major objectives, the offensive was a major turning point. “According to US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, ‘Henceforth, no matter how effective our action, the prevalent strategy could no longer achieve its objectives within a period or within force levels politically acceptable to the American people’.”

“The Vietcong”, Forrest explained, “had hoped their liberation of towns and cities would lead to an uprising against the Americans; they believed that the South’s weary soldiers, dislocated peasantry, fractious youth and widely discontented layers of South Vietnamese society were ready to join the struggle. However, this only occurred on a sporadic basis.”

Although US and South Vietnamese forces managed to retake most of Saigon within days, the mainly Chinese area of Cholon was occupied by NLF and NVA fighters for weeks. The US was forced to destroy the entire suburb in order to drive out the resistance forces, and many thousands of civilians were killed and wounded.

Hue overrun

The second main target of the Tet Offensive was the ancient city of Hue to the north, which had been the historic capital of the Annam civilisation. In contrast to Saigon, Hue was overrun and captured by the NLF and NVA within hours on January 31.

According to Welsh, "By the afternoon of that first day, the NVA/VC had raised their flag over the Citadel of the city and had freed more than 2000 political prisoners and 400 of their own troops from the jails".

Radio broadcasts were made throughout the south calling on the people to rise up against the US and its puppet regime. "It was in Hue that the largest demonstration of support was given to the NVA/VC", wrote Welsh. "Students and professors rallied to support their 'liberators', while most of the local population tried to flee the city before the Americans and South Vietnamese began their counterattack. As in Saigon, the Buddhists, who felt they had no representation in the South Vietnamese government, aligned themselves with the Communist forces."

The liberation forces held on to Hue for a month, until pushed out by massive military firepower and troop concentrations. The struggle for Hue became one of the longest and bloodiest battles in the Vietnam War.

Another key battle took place at the strategic US base of Khe Sanh, near the Laotian border. Although the NVA began its assault there on January 21, before the Tet Offensive proper began, the struggle continued until April, tying down a large number of US troops, aircraft and equipment.

It was during the Tet Offensive that a US army major, standing in the midst of a provincial city levelled by US bombing, made the infamous statement: "It was necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." Broadcast globally, this remark helped to further erode public support for the US war.

The Tet Offensive followed five years of continual escalation of the US's invasion and occupation of South Vietnam. In early 1964, the US launched "Operation Rolling Thunder" — the largest bombing campaign in history, during which more bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than were expended in the whole of World War II. In the following five years, the US dropped 7 million tonnes of bombs and defoliants. Some 2.6 million Vietnamese people were killed.

In 1963, the US deployment in Vietnam was 23,300 personnel. This jumped to 184,000 in 1966 and peaked at 542,000 in January 1969. Around 50,000 US soldiers were killed during the Vietnam War and around 250,000 wounded.

During the Tet Offensive, some 6000 US and South Vietnamese puppet regime troops were killed, and there were an estimated 30,000-50,000 NVA and NLF deaths. Civilian deaths were much higher.

While North Vietnam and the NLF suffered enormous losses during the Tet campaign, and were largely unable to ignite a popular uprising in the southern cities, the political impact on the US and its allies was devastating.

Johnson was forced to withdraw from the 1968 US presidential poll. The road was opened for the commencement of peace talks with North Vietnam, which began under Richard Nixon's presidency in 1969.

The US began a five-year-long retreat, which ended in total defeat.

Lessons for today

Today, the US is again mired in unwinnable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The administration of President George Bush has re-launched the longstanding US imperialist dream of an “American Century” of neo-colonial world domination, this time under the guise of the “war on terror”.

The Iraqi popular resistance to US occupation again reminds us that peoples of the Third World will always rise up and fight resolutely against imperialist aggression. The ongoing US-led war for oil in the Middle East will be defeated, just as the Vietnamese people overcame the mighty US war machine four decades ago.

In Latin America, Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution is battling against US imperialism and inspiring popular upsurges in Bolivia and elsewhere in the continent, and proving an increasing inspiration to struggling peoples all over the world.

Forty years after the dazzling achievements of the Vietnamese people in the Tet Offensive, and their unrelenting struggle that smashed the US war drive of the 1960s and early 1970s, we must learn from their example. The anti-war movement of today can take heart from Tet, just as the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s was given enormous impetus from those events.

Just as the Tet Offensive in Vietnam changed the course of modern history, the struggle against US imperialism in the Middle East and Latin America today can open a new era of radical social change in the 21st Century.

P.S.

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