

Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap: Military Genius or Communist Butcher?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap: Military Genius or Communist Butcher?

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Thesis: General Vo Nguyen Giap organized the first Viet Minh military force in 1944, a thirty-four man armed propaganda “brigade.” Over the next thirty-five years, Giap created an army of over one million people, a force that would defeat the French, Americans, South Vietnamese, Cambodians and Chinese. Some historians refer to Giap as a military genius. Others point to his willingness to sacrifice his soldiers in the face of superior firepower, and dismiss Giap as a butcher. Based on these conflicting views, it is prudent and timely to determine if Giap is truly one of history’s greatest military geniuses.

Discussion: As a tactician, Giap had mixed results. His actions in 1951, 1968 and 1972 gained his army little and cost them dearly. In these three campaigns alone, Giap lost an estimated 180,000 troops. In the wars against the French and the Americans, Giap was obliged to accept high casualties to compensate for his lack of equivalent firepower: it was a matter of men balanced against material, but if losses were not balanced by results, Giap called off the action. When he realized his ledger was not balanced during the campaigns of 1951, 1968, and 1972, Giap stopped his attacks. When the results justified the sacrifice, as at Dien Bien Phu, Giap pressed for a victory.

Critics of Giap’s “butcher bill” tend to discount the very nature of warfare. Slaughter in wholesale fashion has been the reality of most wars. During the Civil War when Grant faced Lee at Cold Harbor, 7,000 Union soldiers died in less than half an hour. In the battle of the Somme, 1 July to 19 November 1916, approximately 1,250,000 German, French, and British soldiers fell. The British suffered 60,000 killed or wounded on the first day. The Communist casualties resulting from the Tet and Easter offensives can not be laid at Giap’s feet, as he opposed both of the operations and strenuously argued against them. Had the North Vietnamese Politburo listened to Giap and his fervent arguments for protracted revolutionary war, they would have achieved their victory with fewer casualties.

Conclusion(s) or Recommendation(s): Giap’s genius resides in his firm grasp of strategy, specifically revolutionary war or “people’s war”, as Giap prefers to call it. Giap’s strategy of revolutionary war totally integrated two principal forms of force—armed force and political force, military *dau tranh* and political *dau tranh*. Their combined use created a kind of war unseen before: a single war waged simultaneously on several fronts—not geographical fronts, but programmatic fronts—all conducted by one and the same authority, all carefully meshed. It was a war in which military campaigns were waged for political and diplomatic reasons; economic measures such as land reform were adopted to further political ends; political or diplomatic losses were accepted to forward military campaigns; and psychological campaigns were launched to lower enemy military effectiveness. All actions; political, military, economic, and diplomatic, were weighed for their impact on the other elements of *dau tranh* and on the

advance towards the final goal—victory. Giap’s grasp and application of grand strategy clearly characterizes him as a genius and one of the premier strategists of the twentieth century.

Table of Contents

	<i>Page</i>
ILLUSTRATIONS	IV
TABLES	V
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	VI
A LOOK AT GENIUS.....	1
The Early Years	2
WAR AGAINST THE FRENCH.....	6
The Campaigns of 1951-1954.	6
Dien Bien Phu.....	13
WAR AGAINST THE AMERICANS	24
The Tet Offensive.....	30
The Easter Offensive.	38
ANOTHER LOOK AT GENIUS	433
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	47

Illustrations

	<i>Page</i>
Figure 1	8
Figure 2	17
Figure 3	32
Figure 4	39

Tables

	<i>Page</i>
Table 1	19

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Chapter 1

A Look at Genius

*Now an Army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness.*¹

- Sun Tzu

In his definitive biography of General Vo Nguyen Giap, military historian Cecil B. Currey refers to Giap as “...not only a legend, but perhaps the single greatest military genius of the twentieth century and one of the greatest of all time.”² One definition of a genius is “one possessing exceptional intellectual and creative power.”³ Vietnam historian Douglas Pike takes the definition a step further stating, “The great geniuses of history ...contributed little new knowledge to their respective fields. They had instead the rare ability to take what was already known and synthesize it—by seeing relationships and connections no one else noticed—into a field theory or new coherent whole, obvious to all once it was stated.”⁴ Such champions of Giap contend he possesses in abundance the aforementioned attributes. Ultimately they point to the bottom line, victory.

Yet for other observers, Giap’s willingness to sacrifice his soldiers in the face of superior firepower qualify him simply as a “butcher” rather than a brilliant military strategist and

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 101.

² Cecil B. Currey, *Victory At Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam’s Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap* (Washington: Brassey’s, Inc., 1997), 318.

³ *Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary*, under the word “genius.”

tactician. Giap's critics refer to his remark to Bernard Fall; "Every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, or tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represents really very little."⁵ In his war against the Americans, Giap admits to losing over six hundred thousand casualties. In all, nearly two and a half million Vietnamese died, out of a combined population of thirty-two million.⁶

Based upon these conflicting views, it is prudent and timely to scrutinize Cecil Currey's evaluation of General Vo Nguyen Giap. By examining four of Giap's significant campaigns and his role in influencing North Vietnamese strategy during the First and Second Indochina Wars, this paper will attempt to determine if Giap is truly one of history's greatest military geniuses.

The Early Years

Born in 1912 in Quang Binh Province in the French protectorate of Annam (which was to become North Vietnam's southernmost province after the Geneva Conference of 1954), Vo Nguyen Giap graduated from the French-run Lycee Albert Sarraut and University of Hanoi Law School in the mid 1930s. A high school history teacher, he was active in the communist underground. He reportedly devoted an inordinate amount of time teaching the French Revolution and Napoleon's tactics and strategy.⁷ In addition to Napoleon, Giap's military thought was influenced by Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and T.E. Lawrence.⁸ His anti-French sentiments were further hardened by the death of his wife in a French jail in 1941. Recruited by Ho Chi Minh in the early 1940s to help shape the Viet Minh movement, Giap

⁴ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army on Vietnam* (New York: Presidio Press, 1986), 214.

⁵ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Praeger, 1962), xxxvii.

⁶ Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), 332.

⁷ Currey, 34.

⁸ Currey, 152-155.

organized his first military force in 1944, a thirty-four man armed propaganda “brigade.”⁹ Over the next 35 years, Giap would create an army of over a 1,000,000 people, a force that would defeat the French, Americans, South Vietnamese, Cambodians and Chinese.¹⁰

During these early years Giap, Ho Chi Minh, and Pham Van Dong laid down organizational laws for the Viet Minh:¹¹

- Fragment the opposition’s (either foreign or anticommunist) leadership, if necessary using assassination and torture.
- Do not destroy the opposition, take it over.
- Do not smash the existing social system entirely.
- Do not try for too much.
- Appear outwardly reasonable while working secretly against the opposition.
- Use overt and covert groups, with little contact between them.
- Do not antagonize if it can be helped, for doing so creates rival groupings.
- Work from small to large, from the specific to the general.
- Win small gains by communism, large gains by nationalism.

Also during this time, Giap formulated the Viet Minh strategy for warfare. This strategy used as its pillar the theory of *dau tranh* (struggle). The two elements of the strategy, political and armed *dau tranh* are the jaws of the pincers used to attack the enemy. The dualism of *dau tranh* is essential. Neither political *dau tranh* nor armed *dau tranh* can be successful alone, only when combined can victory be achieved.¹²

Military *dau tranh* encompasses all forms of military action from the assassination of a government official by a lone terrorist to the employment of armies, navies, and air forces in a massive conventional war campaign. Due to its nature, revolutionary war is a changing war. In theory, military *dau tranh* progresses through three distinct phases of warfare. During the first phase, where the opponents of the revolutionary warrior are stronger, the revolutionaries adopt

⁹ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 177.

¹⁰ Pike, 2.

¹¹ Macdonald, 82.

¹² Pike, 216.

guerrilla warfare (raids and small attacks) to avoid decisive combat. As the revolutionary military arm increases in strength and achieves rough parity with the state's forces, the revolution enters into the "mobile war" phase, a blend of conventional war and guerrilla actions. Finally, in the third phase, the military arm of the revolution becomes stronger than the government forces and enters into the "offensive" stage, where the revolutionaries use large conventional forces to do battle with the state forces. Military *dau tranh* culminates, in Giap's strategy, with the "General Counteroffensive" in which the government forces are totally defeated and the State is overthrown. Revolutionary War is by its nature a protracted war. The revolutionary needs time to build his forces. The protracted war erodes the morale and resolution of the revolutionary's enemy.¹³

Political *dau tranh* encompasses a much broader spectrum of nonmilitary weapons than the term would imply. Included in the term political *dau tranh* are not only political and diplomatic weapons, but psychological, ideological, sociological, and economic weapons as well. Political *dau tranh* consists of three separate programs: first, action among the people and troops in Communist-controlled areas; second, action against the enemy soldiers, called "troop proselytizing"; and third, action among the enemy people. All of these campaigns employ a mixture of terrorism, subversion, propaganda, diplomacy, misinformation, riots, and uprisings to weaken the enemy's will to resist and to strengthen the revolutionary force's will to victory.¹⁴

Thus armed with a strategy for warfare and organizational laws for his army, Giap prepared to make war with the French. The period of 1946 through 1949 was characterized by the first phase of military *dau tranh*. Giap used this time to indoctrinate his troops, train and supply them, and conduct guerrilla warfare. A critical part of this phase was driving the French away

¹³ Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War; The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 26.

¹⁴ Davidson, 27.

from the Chinese-Vietnam border in an area known as the Viet Bac. Giap would use this area as a sanctuary and a staging base, free to build and protect his forces from the French Army. Despite several forays into the region, the French were unable to wrest its control from the Viet Minh forces.¹⁵

During 1949 an event took place that dramatically influenced Giap's army. This event was the victory of the Chinese Communists and their arrival at the northern border of Vietnam. The Chinese Communist victory opened an avenue through which Giap's army would eventually receive the supplies and arms necessary for Giap to move to the second phase of his strategy, the combination of conventional and guerrilla warfare. During 1950, Giap launched his second phase, aimed at destroying the French forts located near the Chinese border. The French posts were isolated and difficult to reinforce and supply. The Viet Minh drove the French from their forts and cleared Giap's lines of communications from China. As 1950 ended, Giap concluded that the time had arrived to transition into the third phase of military *dau tranh* and to mount an even larger offensive in 1951, an offensive that would drive the French from the Tonkin Delta, perhaps even all of Vietnam.¹⁶

¹⁵ Davidson, 35-75.

¹⁶ Davidson, 75-92.

Chapter 2

War Against the French

The Campaigns of 1951-1954.

Nine-tenths of tactics are certain, and taught in books: but the irrational tenth is like the kingfisher flashing across the pool and that is the test of generals. It can only be ensured by instinct, sharpened by thought practicing the stroke so often that at the crisis it is as natural as a reflex.¹⁷

-T. E. Lawrence

The Red River Campaign is also known as the General Counteroffensive (Ton Tan Tong or TTC) of 1951. Giap's objectives for the TTC were to destroy French forces in the Tonkin Delta region, isolate Ha Noi, and gain needed popular support and food stocks.¹⁸ Giap and the Viet Minh leadership felt compelled to launch the Red River Campaign because of military, political and economic imperatives. The Viet Minh were acutely aware of the growing American military aid to the French. French defenses in the Tonkin Delta region were constantly improving, and they were consolidating their control of the populace in the region. Yet, Viet Minh morale was high after driving French forces from the Vietnam-China border region and they felt they had the initiative. Finally, the Viet Minh believed that, with the influx of support and advisors from China, their military strength was at its peak.

¹⁷ U.S. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-3, *Tactics*, PCN 142 000002 00, July 1997, 111.

¹⁸ Davidson, 106.

Economically, the Viet Minh were suffering from a chronic shortage of rice. Indeed, its troops were on half rations. The Viet Minh possessed control over some rural areas, but these areas were economically insignificant. They desperately needed an economic base to fund their military requirements and to give legitimacy to their cause. Economic aid from Communist China and Russia was insufficient because of their assistance to what they perceived as the more important Korean War.

Politically, the Viet Minh's population control problems persisted. They desperately needed more manpower for military and other purposes, primarily coolies. Additionally, they needed a large number of people to govern if their claim to represent the Vietnamese people was to be creditable.

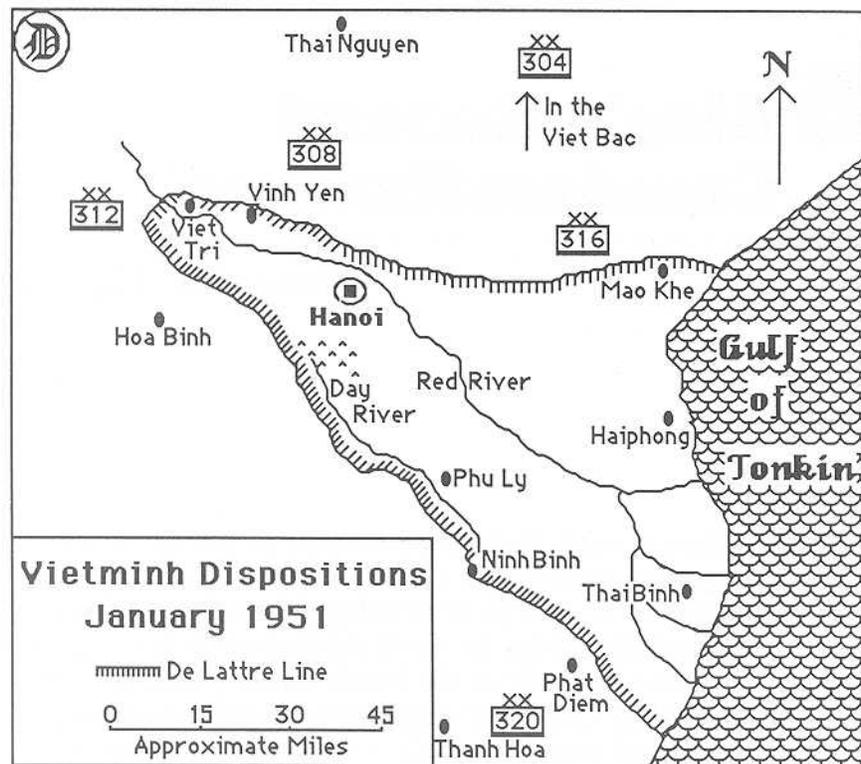
The TTC marked the first use of Viet Minh Division organizational units and the first significant influx of Communist Chinese supplies and advisors. These advisors were in favor of the use of "human wave" assaults, recently successfully employed in the Korean War to blunt the allied offensive. Assaults of this nature were costly in terms of casualties, but Giap and his advisors knew of no other way to counter the French advantage in firepower.

The first battle of the TTC began at Vinh Yen, 40 kilometers north of Ha Noi. The town was a key road junction leading to Ha Noi from the northwest and west, and the terrain appeared favorable for attacking forces. On 13 January 1951 two Viet Minh divisions launched the opening attack. Initially, the French defended Vinh Yen with six infantry battalions and an artillery battalion. The battle raged for four days, with the French reinforcing their forces with additional infantry, armor and artillery. Finally, Giap ordered his battered forces to withdraw,

leaving nearly 9,000 of his dead on the field of battle. The French were too exhausted to mount a pursuit, and the battle ended.¹⁹

The key to the French victory was their application of a mobile defense, reinforcement, and the use of firepower, most notably that of close air support. The Viet Minh defeat rests on the shoulders of Giap. He underestimated the French ability to coordinate and conduct combined arms actions, failed to consolidate and hold the key terrain wrestled from the French, and failed to synchronize the attacks of his units. In committing his forces piecemeal, Giap allowed the French to reinforce threatened positions and employ combined arms.

Figure 1



Source: Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War; The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 106.

¹⁹ Davidson, 110-113.

After this defeat, Giap shifted his supply bases eastward and rebuilt his battered divisions. On 23 March, he ordered three divisions to strike the eastern edge of the region at Mao Khe. Operationally, the selection of Mao Khe was sound as it was only 20 miles north of Haiphong, the northeastern anchor of the French lifeline in the Delta. The loss of Haiphong, or even a serious threat to it, could force the French from the entire Delta region. Unfortunately for Giap, the attacks at Mao Khe followed the same pattern as the battle at Vinh Yen. The French reinforced threatened positions at will, employed firepower effectively, especially naval gunfire, and were victorious. Giap made the same mistakes, lost over 3,000 men and suffered his second set-piece battle with the French.²⁰

Despite two severe set backs and the loss of 12,000 men, Giap decided to make one more attempt at success and drive the French from the Delta before the monsoon arrived. This time Giap selected the Day River area on the southwestern side of the French line to make his main effort. On 29 May 1951, Giap ordered three divisions and two regiments to attack. The French were expecting Giap's forces to attack on the northern portion of the line, and Giap's thrust caught them by surprise. The Viet Minh enjoyed initial success, crossing the Day River and over-running several French positions. The French responded forcefully and quickly, dispatching a force equivalent to two divisions replete with armor and artillery. The French river craft units called *dinassauts*, short for *Division Navale d'Assaut*, joined the fray. The *dinassauts* and the French Air Force cut the Viet Minh supply lines, and delivered devastating fire into the Viet Minh formations in the open rice paddies. By 10 June, Giap had had enough and ordered his forces to withdraw. In 19 days of fighting, Giap had lost an additional 10,000 men.²¹ Again

²⁰ Davidson, 114-116.

²¹ Davidson, 117-120.

the French were victorious, employing a mobile defense, decisive reinforcement, and firepower to defeat the Viet Minh.

Giap's operational plan was flawed for several reasons. First, Giap allowed the French to operate unfettered on interior lines. French forces within the Delta region could quickly switch forces back and forth across the region to meet Giap's attacks. To prevent the French from fully maximizing the advantage of interior lines, Giap should have launched simultaneous attacks on several fronts. Also, he should have utilized his guerrilla forces in the region to harass the French maneuver efforts. Giap also underestimated the ability of the French to provide reinforcements, some of which were paratroops coming from as far away as South Vietnam.

Secondly, Giap underestimated the firepower of the French, most notably air and naval capabilities. The Viet Minh took exceedingly high casualties as they moved into the open terrain. Giap employed no countermeasures, either passive (concealment and cover) or active (antiaircraft fire, artillery and direct fire) against French aircraft, destroyers and *dinassauts*. Giap's negligence bordered on incompetence given the fact that his forces had been engaged against French firepower previous to the TTC.

Another shortcoming was Giap's rigid and inflexible command and control. At times he was unwilling to change the operational plan in order to exploit success. Other times, his forces repeatedly reinforced failure. Coordination between units was nearly non-existent, and the centralization and rigidity of command and control stifled initiative among subordinates.

Additionally, Giap was unable to logistically support his shock troops. Once his forces were engaged in prolonged combat, units were often forced to withdraw because they were out of munitions. His logistics troops suffered severe casualties and the resulting shortage of manpower

greatly hampered the archaic Viet Minh logistic system. Giap also miscalculated the support of the local populace, which figured prominently in his logistical planning.

Although Giap had a good estimate of his opponent's order of battle, his intelligence efforts failed to detect several essential elements. The support of the local populace was important to all facets of his operational plan. Instead of the support of the masses, Giap's forces received intermittent support. More troubling, the Viet Minh did not foresee the active support of the Catholic population to the French forces. The Catholics actively assisted the French and bore arms against the Viet Minh. The outcome of the Day River battle was directly influenced by the Catholic support. The Viet Minh intelligence effort also failed to recognize the French ability to rapidly introduce reinforcements, which greatly altered the correlation of forces.

Perhaps Giap's greatest shortfall during the TTC was his failure in protecting his force. Giap was able to skillfully position his forces for attack thereby achieving complete tactical surprise at the Day River but once his forces deployed into their attack formations, they were vulnerable to the French firepower effects. Further, he had yet to master the art of withdrawal, and his forces took murderous casualties as they attempted to break contact. Had the French been able to mount an effective pursuit, their control of Indochina might have been dramatically extended.

Finally, a glimpse of Giap's character is revealed. Giap blamed the Viet Minh troops for the disastrous results of the TTC, charging them with a lack of aggressiveness and cowardice. Clearly, he was attempting to preserve his own reputation and position at the expense of his troops. Only the intense indoctrination of the Viet Minh army held it together and prevented disintegration.²²

²² Davidson, 121-126.

Giap's General Counteroffensive cost him more than his staggering casualties. His prestige among the Viet Minh leadership plummeted. Shortly after the TTC debacle, Ho Chi Minh put forth a proposal to have Giap relieved of his position as commander in chief of the army. The motion was defeated, primarily because of Ho's strong opposition to his own proposal; it had been submitted in an effort to allow discussion and criticism and to clear the air of any developing movement to unseat Giap. Giap held his position, but was clearly weakened in the political circles of the Viet Minh.²³

With no option available, Giap withdrew to the hills once again and fought the French only in areas that maximized his manpower and mobility while neutralizing French firepower. He had learned from his mistakes. From now on, Giap would revert back to the first phase of military *dau tranh*, using raids and small attacks to avoid decisive combat. He would use time as his ally to improve the strength of his army and achieve rough parity with the French forces.

In early 1953, Giap shifted to the second phase of his *dau tranh* strategy, starting the "mobile war" phase, a blend of conventional war and guerrilla actions. Giap's army was then active throughout most of Vietnam, most notably in the Central Highlands, where his forces captured Kontum and threatened Pleiku, where some of the fiercest fighting to date took place. Giap also maneuvered a division into Laos, threatening French interests there. The French were forced to counter this new threat against Laos, moving forces into blocking positions near the small village of Dien Bien Phu.²⁴

With the approach of 1954, both sides confronted the common denominator of war, time. The French faced an enemy that was getting stronger by the day, particularly the well trained, regular combat divisions of the Viet Minh. With the Korean War terminated in a stalemate in

²³ Currey, 174-175.

²⁴ Currey, 177-182.

July 1953, Chinese instructors, advisors, and Chinese-provided Russian and American equipment began to arrive *en masse* to the Viet Minh. It therefore became imperative for the French to destroy at least a large part of the enemy's main battle force as rapidly as possible.²⁵

The Viet Minh were also under time constraints. In Berlin in February 1954, foreign ministers of several nations met and agreed that a conference would be held at Geneva in May to settle, among other things, "outstanding issues in the Far East," such as Indochina. This meant negotiation, and Ho Chi Minh was ready. "The basis for an armistice," he said to a Swedish journalist, "is that the French Government really respects Vietnam's independence."²⁶ If Giap were to deliver a significant military victory—a great bargaining chip for negotiations—it would have to be soon.

Dien Bien Phu.

The site of the climatic battle that effectively ended the war between France and the Viet Minh was Dien Bien Phu, a small village on the border between Laos and North Vietnam. About 180 miles from the nearest French post, it was fortified by nearly 16,000 French troops. The French believed their base at Dien Bien Phu would threaten the flank of the Viet Minh base in northwest Tonkin, block Viet Minh units from Laos, and interrupt the flow of the opium that was used to finance many of the Viet Minh's weapons purchases.²⁷ The French hoped to draw the Viet Minh into a set-piece battle in which supposed superior French firepower would destroy them.²⁸

²⁵ Fall, ix.

²⁶ Currey, 184.

²⁷ Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1976), 31.

²⁸ Summers, 141 and Fall, 43-46.

The Viet Minh combat soldiers numbered approximately 49,000 with an additional 54,000 logistical troops.²⁹ They were arrayed in a five-division formation, extensively augmented by artillery and antiaircraft units. Additionally, Giap had meticulously prepared his logistical plan. He developed an extensive and redundant supply network that provided flexibility and was resistant to interdiction. Giap was able to move vast amounts of munitions, supplies and food thanks to an army of coolies and Communist-provided trucks.³⁰

The French began their occupation of Dien Bien Phu on 20 November 1953 utilizing an airborne assault with two paratroop battalions. They met unexpected resistance but eventually secured the drop zone. In the following two days, four more battalions were inserted into Dien Bien Phu. Later, engineers, artillery, headquarters personnel, and a small contingent of armor were added. The French set to work constructing a short airfield and building defensive fortifications.³¹ Eventually the French would construct a series of mutually supporting battle positions, possessing supporting armor, artillery and supplies. Eight of these positions were interconnected and conceived to defend the airfield. Allegedly, these fortifications were named for the mistresses of the French commander at Dien Bien Phu, as they were all named after women.³²

The battle began with a massive Viet Minh artillery barrage on 13 March 1954 and was followed by an infantry assault. Although the assault met with limited success, Giap became concerned. The voracity of the fighting had badly rattled the morale of the Viet Minh. Giap, against the advice of his Chinese advisors, ordered his forces back into the mountainous terrain

²⁹ Fall, 223.

³⁰ Fall, 125-133.

³¹ Fall, 11-31.

³² Fall, 62.

surrounding Dien Bien Phu. Giap's decision was a difficult one that met resistance from the Viet Minh leadership and the Chinese Communist advisors. Yet Giap was resolute:

... We came to the conclusion that we could not secure success if we struck swiftly. In consequence, we resolutely chose the other tactics: To strike surely and advance surely. In taking this correct decision, we strictly followed this fundamental principle of the conduct of a revolutionary war: Strike to win, strike only when success is certain; if it is not, then don't strike. In the Dien Bien Phu campaign, the adoption of these tactics demanded of us firmness and a spirit of resolution...As a result not everybody was immediately convinced of the correctness of these tactics. We patiently educated our men, pointed out that there were real difficulties, but that our task was to overcome them to create good conditions for the great victory we sought.³³

Giap reformulated his plan, starting with a renewed and vigorous political indoctrination campaign focused on strengthening the fighting mettle of his troops. He set in motion an intense training program, where all levels of leadership rehearsed their actions for the approaching assaults. Giap also personally repositioned his artillery by placing hundreds of pieces in protected and camouflaged positions that allowed them to be employed in the direct-fire mode. He also refocused his logistical efforts to ensure that the assault forces would have ample ammunition. Finally, Giap positioned his antiaircraft weapons to deliver a blanket of fire over the French fortifications and particularly so that the force would be deprived of its airborne logistics. He had learned from his experience during the Red River Campaign.³⁴

Now believing that his forces were adequately prepared, Giap set in motion the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. Instead of the massive "human wave" attacks advocated by his Chinese Communist advisors, Giap decided to reduce the French positions piecemeal. He wisely chose to attack Beatrice first, as it was the most vulnerable. Giap clearly understood that his forces needed an immediate victory in order to maintain their combat morale and to develop

³³ Fall, 51.

³⁴ Fall, 125-133.

battle momentum in their favor. Once Beatrice fell, Gabrielle was next. Anne Marie was taken shortly thereafter, and following some ferocious fighting, Huguette fell. Dominique, Elaine, Claudine and Isabelle fell in a six-day span, and on 7 May 1954 the last French positions were overrun.³⁵ French losses were estimated at 13,050.³⁶ Viet Minh losses were nearly 7,900 killed and over 15,000 wounded.³⁷

At the height of the battle, the French requested military support from the United States. The chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up plans that envisioned the use of American air forces. Strategic bombers, tactical bombers and even atomic weapons were considered. Domestic, congressional, military and allied opposition caused President Eisenhower to deny the French request.³⁸

Giap's operational planning and execution for Dien Bien Phu was superb. In organizing attacks throughout Vietnam and Laos, Giap kept the French off balance and forced them to strengthen isolated garrisons that were less defensible. "By successively launching strong offensives on the points [the French] had left relatively unprotected, we obliged them to scatter their troops all over the place."³⁹

³⁵ Davidson, 234-262.

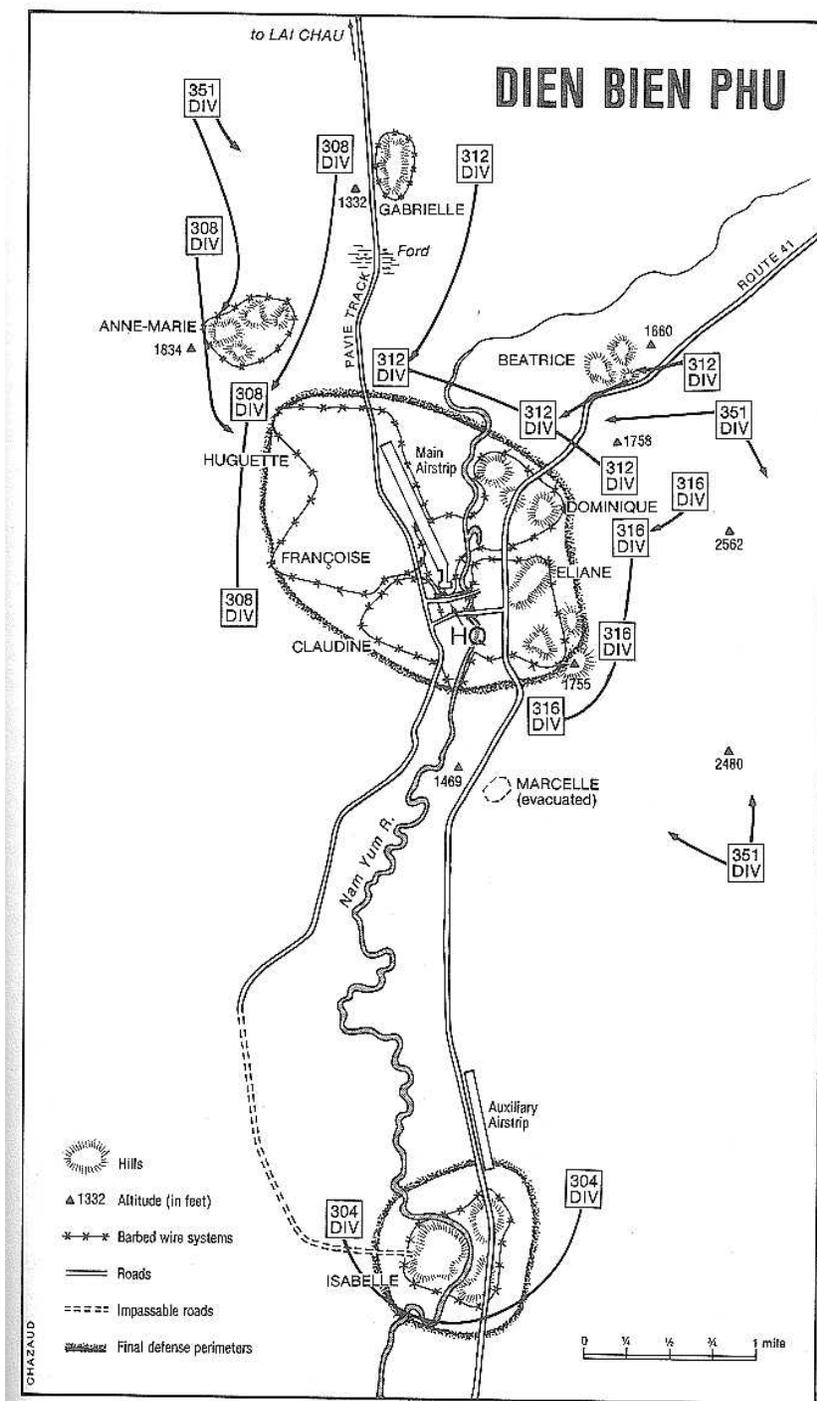
³⁶ Fall, 483-484.

³⁷ Fall, 487.

³⁸ Fall, 301-313.

³⁹ Currey, 184.

Figure 2



Source: Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 137.

Giap's mounting forays into Laos put the French on the horns of a dilemma. He forced the French to choose whether to defend or abandon Laos and settle for their coastal enclaves in Vietnam.⁴⁰ Thus, using operational maneuver, Giap baited the French to block his moves into Laos. His operational plan seized the initiative, placing the French in a reactive role while providing a concentration of effort. The plan was flexible, enabling his forces to take advantage of any mistakes the French made. It capitalized on the strength of the Viet Minh and exploited the weakness of the French.⁴¹ In contrast to the TTC, the French were forced to operate on exterior lines while the Viet Minh enjoyed the strength of interior lines.

Dien Bien Phu is often used to exemplify the critical role that logistics plays in warfare. The Viet Minh logistic system depended on two means; trucks and porters. The trucks brought in artillery, the bulk of ammunition and other heavy supplies. The porters carried the lighter items, mostly food and small arms ammunition. The Viet Minh were able to transport and distribute 4,620 tons of petrol products, 1,360 tons of ammunition, 46 tons of spare weapons, and 2,260 tons of consumable goods, including 1,700 tons of rice.⁴² The French were forced to rely solely on aerial resupply due to the remoteness of the combat base and the Viet Minh denial of land routes through ambush and demolition. The French failed to estimate adequately their logistical requirements, and failed to provide even half of the actual requirement.⁴³ The Viet Minh clearly won the "battle of logistics", and Giap rightly earned worldwide acclaim for the Viet Minh logistical efforts. Again, Giap had learned a lesson from his experience of running short of ammunition at Day River.

⁴⁰ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 55-57.

⁴¹ Davidson, 227.

⁴² Fall, 451-452.

⁴³ Davidson, 219.

Giap also held the advantage of firepower at Dien Bien Phu (see table below). In addition to the arms listed, the French also had four 155mm howitzers and ten light tanks.⁴⁴ Key to Giap's firepower advantage were terrain and logistics. The Viet Minh possessed the high ground surrounding the French garrison, allowing them to employ their artillery in the direct fire mode, providing dramatic accuracy. The Viet Minh never ran short of ammunition as they had done in earlier battles, permitting them to support infantry attacks with violent artillery preparation. French artillery observers estimated that the Viet Minh fired a total of 103,000 artillery projectiles of 75mm. caliber or larger.⁴⁵

Table 1

	105mm Howitzers	75mm Howitzers	120mm Mortars	82mm Mortars	37mm AA guns	Anti-Air MGs	Rocket Launchers
Viet Minh	24	15	20	40	20	50+	12-16
French	24	0	4	20	0	16	0

Source: Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1976), 479-486.

The French Air Forces flew over 10,400 air missions, yet this was no where near adequate. Two thirds or 6,700 of the missions were dedicated to supply or troop transport, leaving a paltry 3,700 combat missions. These close air support missions occurred early in the battle before Viet Minh anti-aircraft fire decimated the French air forces.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most significant failure of the French was their gross underestimation of the Viet Minh and Giap. Although the French knew within ten percent the enemy's infantry strength, they failed to accurately estimate the Viet Minh artillery, air defense and logistics

⁴⁴ Fall, 480-486.

⁴⁵ Fall, 451.

⁴⁶ Fall, 458.

capability.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the Viet Minh outperformed the French at the operational and tactical levels of war. Their superior performance can be attributed to the skill and determination of Vo Nguyen Giap as well as French incompetence at the highest levels.

The campaigns of 1951 through 1954 offer a glimpse into the transformation of Giap. A former history teacher turned amateur general, he soon blossomed into a master military professional. From the debacle of the TTC, Giap learned to capitalize on the strength of his army and the weaknesses of the French. His *dau tranh* strategy was effective and validated, using protracted warfare to defeat a militarily stronger enemy's will. The teacher had learned his lessons well, and he ingeniously applied those lessons to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu.

Giap learned the lessons of interior lines and concentrated firepower drawn from the Red River Campaign. He then used these principles to his advantage in baiting the French into Dien Bien Phu. Giap successfully made the French operate on exterior lines, and once the French occupied Dien Bien Phu, he massed his combat power quickly and efficiently. He skillfully employed siege tactics, and wisely destroyed the French fortifications piecemeal. His forces effectively utilized terrain, cover and concealment. He was resourceful, requiring his forces to dig trench line approaches to the French positions at Dien Bien Phu to protect them from fires. From the initial assault at Dien Bien Phu, Giap dictated the tempo of operations and held the initiative.

Giap's grasp of the importance of logistics was learned from the debacle of the TTC. His logistical shortcomings and French firepower stymied his limited achievements in 1951. He rectified his logistical shortcomings by creating a crude, yet highly effective logistical system that kept his troops supplied, leading to victory at Dien Bien Phu.

⁴⁷ Fall, 450.

Shortly after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords of 1954 were signed, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born. The Vietnamese had succeeded in driving the French from their country, and they had a new hero, Vo Nguyen Giap.

Following the creation of North Vietnam as an independent state, Giap became vice Prime Minister. He simultaneously held the posts of minister of national defense, commander in chief of the army, and served as a member of the Politburo. He commanded an army of 350,000 men reinforced by a people's militia of 200,000. In many ways, Giap was the equivalent of the American secretary of defense combined with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the added powers and authority held by a general in command of a field army. Giap had reached new heights of power and prestige.⁴⁸

From 1954 to 1959, the leading members of the North Vietnamese Politburo argued often and sometimes bitterly over the strategy of reunifying their country. The most influential members of the Politburo split into two camps. The number two man on the Politburo, just behind Ho Chi Minh, was Party Secretary Le Duan. Duan, along with General Nguyen Chi Thanh, promoted a militant and risky southern strategy. They advocated the use of northern troops in a largely conventional war against South Vietnam. The second camp was comprised of Truong Chinh, number three man in the Politburo, and Giap, who was number four in the Politburo hierarchy. They advocated solidifying the North as the bastion of communism and building the infrastructure of the economy. They favored military aid to their southern comrades and promoted Giap's first phase of revolutionary warfare in the south. This Giap/Chinh strategy held sway from 1954 to 1959.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Currey, 213.

⁴⁹ Currey, 228-233.

During these years, Ho Chi Minh gave his southern comrades very specific instructions. Ho decided to emphasize political *dau tranh*. In political discussions with villagers, they were to emphasize nationalism, not communism. Under no circumstances were they to take land from the peasants. They must avoid antagonizing local community leaders and instead work with them. They would strive to build solid support for their cause among peasants working the land. Violence was to be used only selectively. Most importantly, they were never to engage in conventional military operations, for that would lead to their defeat. They were simply not yet strong enough to face the soldiers of South Vietnam.⁵⁰

Then in 1960, Giap suffered a political setback. At the Third Party Congress, Giap and Truong Chinh were demoted within the Politburo. The government gave public notice of its support for the southern insurgency, and announced the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF was a communist ploy to disguise its leadership by hiding within more than a dozen other groups, non-Communist and nationalist organizations that opposed the southern government. Thus, the NLF could claim their independence and conceal North Vietnamese support. To further the deception, Ho Chi Minh relieved Giap of his total control over military operations in the South, and assigned them to Giap's rival, Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh. Although Giap had lost control of strategy and tactics, as minister of defense he still held the responsibility for the logistical and administrative support of the Communist forces in South Vietnam. From 1960 to 1964, military aid from the North began to stream to the NLF and caused the military situation for the South to deteriorate rapidly.⁵¹

The partitioning of Vietnam and the fear of “dominos falling” to Communism led successive American administrations to deepening involvement in Vietnam. Beginning with President

⁵⁰ Currey, 233-234.

⁵¹ Davidson, 288-312.

Eisenhower, U.S. assistance to South Vietnam expanded modestly, as the American government tried to keep the Republic of South Vietnam from falling into the communist camp. President Kennedy inherited a deteriorating situation in Vietnam, and responded with a significant increase in military and economic aid. While U.S. military advisors were increased from about 300 to 16,000, the commitment of American combat forces was a step that Kennedy was unwilling to take.⁵² As 1963 ended, President Johnson was faced with the near collapse of South Vietnam. Johnson shared Kennedy's reluctance to introduce combat troops, but that would change as events unfolded in 1964.

In 1964, the communist attacks grew in intensity and frequency, and in February the American advisory compound at Kontum City was attacked. Tay Ninh province and the Mekong Delta were struck next. In May, the communists sunk the *U.S.S. Card*, while the ship was at berth in Saigon. The Special Forces camp at Nam Dong was overrun in July. Yet, throughout the year, Johnson made no overt reprisals despite growing American casualties.⁵³ Then in August, two U.S. destroyers were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This attack became known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and would prove to be the catalyst for the American combat involvement in Vietnam.⁵⁴

⁵² Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3.

⁵³ Davidson, 311-329.

⁵⁴ The Gulf of Tonkin incident remains controversial. The debate regarding the incident is not germane to this paper. For further reading see H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1997), 107. Also, Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House Inc., 1988), 379.

Chapter 3

War Against the Americans

*The enemy will pass slowly from the offensive to the defensive. The blitzkrieg will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus, the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: He has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long, drawn out war...*⁵⁵

-Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap

In 1964 the North Vietnamese Politburo made the decision to commit regular army units to the war in the south. Giap did not agree with this decision, as he favored a protracted “peoples war” in the south, while the north concentrated on economic and military development. Despite presenting fervent arguments in the Politburo against this policy, Giap lost his debate, and three reinforced regiments were sent south. After a buildup in supposedly neutral Cambodia, the North Vietnamese intended to attack across the Central Highlands and drive to the sea, splitting South Vietnam in two and ultimately seizing the entire country.⁵⁶ They executed this plan on 19 October 1965 with an attack on the U.S. Special Forces camp at Plei Me. General William Westmoreland, commander of America’s armed forces in Vietnam, made the decision to commit the U.S. Army First Air Cavalry Division, just arrived from the United States, to the relief of Plei

⁵⁵ Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway; *We Were Soldiers Once. . . and Young: Ia Drang-The Battle That Changes the War in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1992) 338.

⁵⁶ Moore and Galloway, 12.

Me. The division's helicopters enabled it to fly over enemy roadblocks, and its firepower was instrumental in breaking the Plei Me siege. On 26 October, South Vietnamese relief forces were able to break through to the camp. With this success, General Westmoreland ordered the First Air Cavalry Division to switch from defensive to offensive operations, and its reconnaissance units began to seek out the fleeing enemy.⁵⁷

Unknown to the Americans, the North Vietnamese Army's 66th Regiment, joined by the survivors of the 33rd Regiment that had laid siege to Plei Me, was regrouping in the Ia Drang Valley to the southwest. The North Vietnamese combat forces totaled nearly 3,000 men. On 14 November, the 430 men of the U.S. First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry made a helicopter assault into what appeared to be an unoccupied landing zone in the Ia Drang valley. As soon as they landed, they came into contact with elements of the North Vietnamese Army 66th Regiment. Fighting was intense and one U.S. platoon was cut off from the main body. Reinforced by air by elements of the U.S. Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry and supported by intense artillery and air support, including strikes by B-52 bombers, the First Battalion was able to hold on in the face of heavy odds. On 15 November it was further reinforced by the Second Battalion, Fifth Cavalry, which had moved by air to a landing zone some two and a half miles to the southeast and had marched overland to the sound of battle. Thus reinforced, the Americans were finally able to retrieve the survivors of the cut off platoon. The North Vietnamese broke contact, with some troops fleeing back across the border into Cambodia and others fleeing eastward into the jungles of the Ia Drang Valley.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Summers, 202.

⁵⁸ Summers, 203.

Two days later the Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry walked into an ambush and was overrun. In the savage fighting, often hand to hand, 151 American soldiers died, another 124 were wounded, and four were missing in action.⁵⁹ The survivors managed to hold on to their positions with the aid of heavy artillery and air strikes. Giap's Central Highlands Campaign ended at the end of November, when the remaining North Vietnamese withdrew into Cambodia. Three hundred and five Americans were killed, and the North Vietnamese lost 1,519 by body count with an additional 2,000 estimated killed.⁶⁰

As after action reports from his Central Highlands Campaign began to filter their way back to Giap, he read with astonishment of the combat miracles performed by the Americans. The Americans held an incredible advantage in mobility and firepower. The 1st Cavalry Division was able to airlift its artillery along with its infantry, and keep their forces supplied. Giap learned that the American division had fired over 33,000 artillery rounds, and helicopters had provided over 13,000 tons of supplies during the course of the battle. Air mobility of this scale caused Giap great concern and he realized that his massed forces were vulnerable to sudden attack that would be supported by devastating firepower. Although Giap had previously defeated the French, who held the advantage in mobility and firepower, he had never dealt with a disadvantage of this magnitude. Shortly after the Central Highlands Campaign, Giap became firmly convinced that the only way to defeat the Americans was through a protracted "people's war." It was clearly not the time to conduct the third phase of a people's war. Giap persuaded his subordinates that, despite many defeats and extraordinary losses, they would never stop

⁵⁹ Moore and Galloway, 311.

winning the war. Time, Giap reminded them, was on their side. They did not have to defeat the Americans militarily; they had only to avoid losing. A tactical victory meant nothing to change the balance of forces, and would bring America no closer to victory.⁶¹

Both sides drew lessons from the Central Highlands Campaign. General Westmoreland looked at the statistics; 3,561 North Vietnamese estimated killed versus 305 American dead, and saw a kill ratio of twelve North Vietnamese to one American. He concluded that American mobility and firepower would bleed the enemy to death over the long haul and win a war of attrition.⁶²

The Communists drew their own conclusions. Their army had withstood the high-tech firestorm delivered by a superpower, and had fought the Americans to a draw. By their yardstick, a draw against such a powerful opponent was the equivalent of a victory.⁶³ They would continue to fight against stiff odds in the belief that America would tire of the endless fighting and leave, just as the French had done a decade earlier. For now, the Communists would avoid set-piece battles. When forced to fight they would “grab the enemy by the belt”, to get so close to him that artillery and air power would be ineffectual.⁶⁴

During 1966, the North Vietnamese and the Americans increased their forces in South Vietnam. Giap sent fifteen new regiments (five divisions totaling 58,000 men) to the South. By the end of 1966 Giap’s combat force in the South had increased to a total

⁶⁰ J. D. Coleman, *Pleiku; The Dawn of Helicopter Warfare in Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 262.

⁶¹ Currey, 256-258.

⁶² Moore and Galloway, 339.

⁶³ Moore and Galloway, 339.

⁶⁴ Currey, 257.

of 282,000. By 31 December 1966, 385,000 American servicemen had been committed to the war.⁶⁵

General Westmoreland ordered his forces to conduct offensive operations in 1966. Known as search and destroy missions, they were intended to find the enemy and destroy him. As these operations continued, Giap found it increasingly difficult to prepare for or mount major operations without inviting damaging U.S. spoiling attacks. Operations Irving and Attleboro took a heavy toll on Giap's men and material, and denied his use of vital base camps. His forces were being pushed further from the population centers and into the Cambodia border region. Giap conceded that he had lost battles, but not the war. He continued to advocate his *dau tranh* strategy, against an increasing chorus of voices in the Politburo calling for a more aggressive conventional war.⁶⁶

In early 1967, General Westmoreland ordered the two largest operations of the war; Cedar Falls and Junction City. Nearly thirty thousand troops went into the Iron Triangle, an area only twenty miles from Saigon and, according to intelligence estimates, home to over two Communist regiments. These operations cost Giap 2,728 men and tons of vital supplies.⁶⁷ The cost in men and material may not have been significant to Giap, but the mounting losses bolstered the arguments of Giap's critics in the Politburo. Giap's critics argued that the Communist movement was losing momentum. In the South, no appreciable gains had been made. In fact, Communist forces were being driven further from the populace, and the loss of men and material was becoming much more difficult to replace. In the North, the effects of the American bombing campaign were causing economic deterioration and dislocation. Shortages of food, clothing, and medicine were

⁶⁵ Davidson, 395.

⁶⁶ Currey, 262-263.

approaching the extreme, and malnutrition appeared in ever increasing numbers. Giap's critics called for a revision of the war strategy, and Ho Chi Minh convened the 13th Plenum of the North Vietnamese Central Committee in March 1967. He tasked those assembled to study the entire war effort and recommend a course of action. After lengthy deliberation, the 13th Plenum called for a "...spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time." The 13th Plenum had rejected Giap's call for continued protracted war and had embraced an all-out drive for victory at one stroke. This was the new strategy, the first step on the way to the Tet offensive.⁶⁸

Giap was not happy about the new strategy, as he remained a proponent of protracted warfare. The decision was made more unpalatable, because it was, in effect, a victory for his opponent Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh. Nevertheless, as minister of defense, he swallowed his objections and ordered his staff to begin planning. In mid 1967, the North Vietnamese Politburo approved the plan known as "General Offensive, General Uprising," shortened by the Communists to "TCN-TKN." Giap's plan envisioned an operation beginning in the fall of 1967 with attacks along the borders of South Vietnam to tie down large numbers of U.S. troops. Then would follow a coordinated general offensive against the South in all its major cities. Southern cadres were to launch a general uprising of the population that would culminate in a complete overthrow of the southern government, or at the very least, installation of a Communist dominated coalition.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Macdonald, 229-231.

⁶⁸ Davidson, 428-441.

⁶⁹ Currey, 264-265.

The Tet Offensive

The watershed event for the American Vietnam War was the Tet offensive of late January 1968, an event long anticipated by the Politburo and for a short period expected by the Americans. By the beginning of 1968, both sides had completed their preparations for what each knew would be a large, and probably decisive, battle. The North Vietnamese and the NLF were positioning men and supplies to launch their Great Offensive. In mid-January, specially trained commando units called sappers, began to infiltrate into the cities and towns with their weapons concealed under loads of farm products. At the same time, Main and Local Force units began to move toward their objectives, the towns and cities of South Vietnam.⁷⁰ Throughout South Vietnam, sixty-seven thousand communist troops were committed.⁷¹

Between midnight and 0300 hours, 30 January, NLF forces attacked six cities or towns in the middle section of South Vietnam. The initial success of the attacks varied, but by daylight all Communist forces had been driven from their objectives. No other towns or cities in South Vietnam were attacked on that night, as these six attacks were premature. According to prisoners of war, the nationwide attacks had originally been set for the night of 29-30 January, but just before D-day, Giap ordered a twenty-four-hour delay until the night of 30-31 January. Some of the VC attacking units apparently did not receive the change of date, or if they did, could not notify their assault units, already moving into their attack positions. The premature attacks of 29-30 January cost Giap

⁷⁰ Davidson, 474.

⁷¹ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1971), 116.

dearly, for he lost much of the key element on which the success of the Great Offensive depended--surprise.⁷²

During the night (30-31 January), Giap launched his countrywide offensive against the cities and towns of South Vietnam. The assaults on most of the cities were soon beaten off, although heavy fighting continued in Saigon for about two weeks and in Hue for almost a month. For Giap and the Communists, the Great Offensive failed with enormous casualties. The Communists lost close to 58,000 men, and the allies lost over 9,000.⁷³ While these figures must be viewed with the skepticism always reserved for enemy strength and casualty figures, there is no doubt that Communist losses (almost entirely NLF) were disastrous. Not only were NLF losses heavy, but they were concentrated in their political leadership cadres who had surfaced during the attacks. In reality, the Tet offensive for all practical purposes destroyed the NLF.⁷⁴

Not only did the Great Offensive come to grief, but the Great Uprising never “arose.” The ARVN troops did not surrender or defect, and the South Vietnamese people refused to join the NLF even in those towns where they held temporary sway. On the contrary, the Southerners rallied to the support of the South Vietnamese government. Thus, the NLF claim to moral and political authority in South Vietnam suffered a serious blow.⁷⁵

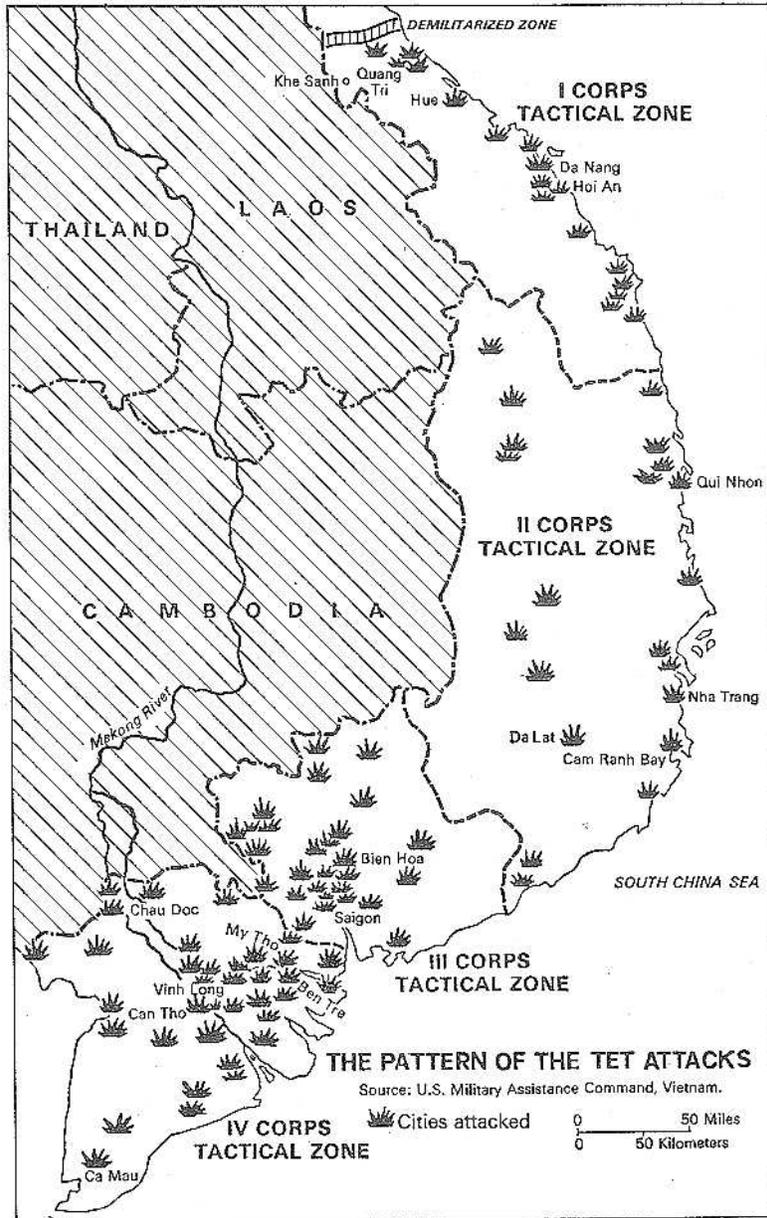
⁷² Davidson, 474.

⁷³ Oberdorfer, iv.

⁷⁴ Davidson, 475.

⁷⁵ Davidson, 475.

Figure 3



Source: Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1971), 123.

In fairness to Giap, it must be again noted that he was adamantly opposed to the Tet Offensive. He had opposed the project from the start, but the arguments of Nguyen Chi Thanh and Le Duan had convinced Ho Chi Minh that the attack should be carried

out. Charged by the Politburo to plan the attack, Giap reluctantly followed orders. The result was not surprising to Giap, when American military might proved far more adaptable and responsive than Thanh and Duan had predicted.⁷⁶

As noted above, Giap's ability to command and control his forces during Tet cost him dearly. Because of faulty communications and poor planning, many of his troops were not notified that they were going into combat until a few hours before the attack. His attacks were not coordinated, and because of the premature attacks on the thirtieth, he lost all hope of achieving surprise. Giap's plans called for a quick blow that would cause the southern government to fall. For this task, Giap's subordinates cautiously fragmented their units into small, platoon-sized groups. Thus they failed to take full advantage of the principles of mass and surprise.⁷⁷

Another failure of Giap's was the brutality with which his forces operated. At Hue, the Communist forces slaughtered over 2800 civilians with ties to the southern government.⁷⁸ Atrocities like Hue occurred throughout the southern countryside, although none would reach the magnitude of Hue City. Undoubtedly, this brutality had a significant impact on the South Vietnamese populace, squelching any hope, no matter how slight, of a "General Uprising."

Tet was a tactical and operational disaster. None of the objectives set forth by the Politburo had been achieved. Never again was the NLF able to fight in even battalion-sized units. From now on the brunt of combat in South Vietnam would be borne primarily by northerners and not by the NLF.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Currey, 269.

⁷⁷ Currey, 267

⁷⁸ Oberdorfer, 232.

⁷⁹ Currey, 269.

Strategically, Giap and the Communists won an unexpected windfall. For two years the American public had been told that America was winning the war in Vietnam. The common refrain from the Johnson Administration and General Westmoreland was “there is light at the end of the tunnel.” Now the media provided thousands of reports of fighting in the cities and villages, and hundreds of American casualties. The shock and dismay of the American public was probably best exemplified by its most trusted correspondent, Walter Cronkite. After hearing of the Tet fighting he exclaimed, “What the hell is going on. I thought we were winning the war.”⁸⁰ Newsweek magazine echoed the thoughts of many U.S. government officials claiming that the “... audacious Lunar New Year offensive had, in a single stroke, dramatically altered the complexion of the war.”⁸¹ Tet turned American public opinion against the war and caused President Johnson to not seek re-election. Within a year Westmoreland would be reassigned. Through no grand strategic design, the Communist had suffered a tremendous tactical defeat, yet made possible a decisive strategic victory.

The reaction to the Tet Offensive by the American press and public exposed a weakness that the Communists knew they could exploit. They realized that the *dich van* element of the *dau tranh* strategy (political action among the enemy population) directed against the American public could become a decisive factor in driving the U.S. from Vietnam. From this point forward, North Vietnam’s military actions would be weighed for its political impact in America.

To replace his losses, between 1 January and 5 May 1968, Giap ordered nearly 90,000 replacements into the South. He and his staff worked feverishly on plans for a

⁸⁰ Oberdorfer, 158.

⁸¹ Currey, 270.

new offensive ordered by the Politburo. On 7 May 1968, Giap's soldiers launched Tet II, 119 attacks on southern provincial and district targets. Northern soldiers and the NLF fared no better than they had during the original Tet Offensive. They were slaughtered by the thousands in fierce combat with South Vietnamese troops and American units.⁸²

As the battles of Tet II raged, Giap and Truong Chinh were busy mounting political attacks against their rival, Le Duan and his supporters, who had for several years dictated the North's military policies. Giap and Chinh claimed that Tet had tipped the balance of power in favor of the enemy, and that the policy should be shifted from phase three to phase two of *dau tranh*, the "mobile war" phase, a blend of small conventional war actions emphasizing guerrilla actions. After heated debate, the Politburo approved the plan, and Giap hurriedly issued a directive that stated: "Never again, and under no circumstances are we going to risk our entire military force for just an offensive. On the contrary, we should endeavor to preserve our military potential for further campaigns"⁸³ At last, Giap's policies once again completely dominated the military policy of the North.

The year of 1969 was marked by change on both sides of the war. President Nixon entered office, and General Abrams replaced Westmoreland as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Under Nixon's orders, Abrams initiated the policy of "Vietnamization". The war would gradually be turned over to the South Vietnamese, and the U.S. would begin to withdraw. In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh died on 2 September 1969. Following his funeral, the three most powerful men emerged from the Politburo to lead the country. Le Duan would control domestic affairs, Pham Van Dong would preside over foreign policy, and Vo Nguyen Giap would control military and defense matters.

⁸² Currey, 269.

⁸³ Davidson, 595.

Since none of these men held the authority wielded by Ho Chi Minh, most issues of state demanded approval by all three. Giap continued his *dau tranh* phase two policy throughout the rest of 1969. His forces conducted small unit attacks and random shelling of U.S. and South Vietnamese positions and installations. His goals were to pursue a prolonged war, to inflict setbacks to Vietnamization and pacification, and to inflict greater casualties on U.S. forces.⁸⁴

In 1970, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces decided to strike at Giap's sanctuaries in Cambodia. The Nixon administration had begun a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia the year before, but now ground forces would clear Giap's bases. The allies hoped to force Giap's army to stand and fight in order to protect their vital bases. In fact, Giap's forces did try to defend these bases, but after two days of heavy fighting, he ordered them to withdraw deeper into the Cambodian jungle. This operation cost Giap dearly, as he lost nearly 11,000 dead and 2,500 captured. Additionally he lost vast amounts of arms and supplies:⁸⁵

- 23,000 individual weapons, and 2,500 crew-served weapons
- 16,700,000 rounds of small arms ammunition
- 14 million pounds of rice
- 143,000 rounds of mortar, rocket and recoilless rifle ammunition
- 200,000 rounds of anti-aircraft ammunition

Pleased with the performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the results of the Cambodian raids, the Allies decided to cut the vaunted Ho Chi Minh trail. As a result of legislation passed by Congress, U.S. ground forces were not allowed to operate outside of the borders of South Vietnam. Thus, Operation Lam Son would be

⁸⁴ Currey, 273-274.

⁸⁵ Davidson, 627.

conducted by ARVN on the ground, supported by the Americans in the air. The operation started on 30 January 1971, and after limited success, turned into a debacle. Giap reacted quickly and forcefully, moving four divisions, a tank regiment and several artillery battalions to reinforce the three regiments already fighting the ARVN. By 25 March, the ARVN had been repulsed and Giap's vital logistics network remained intact. Giap had dealt the policy of Vietnamization a serious blow.⁸⁶

The Politburo was heartened by ARVN's debacle at Lam Son. In early summer, not long after Giap's victory in Laos, ranking members of the northern government authorized him to launch a major assault against the south sometime the following year, while the United States was still drawing down forces, rather than waiting until after the departure of American units. ARVN would be no threat, and an attack would humble not only the South but the United States as well.

Giap listened to all this with mounting dismay. He had believed that such desires were a thing of the past. Hoping to find a way to short-circuit such plans, he enlisted the aid of Truong Chinh, and both men vigorously opposed mounting a southern campaign. As at Tet in 1968, Giap believed it was the wrong time to undertake such a major offensive against the South. Once again, Giap's position did not convince the others in the Politburo, and he was ordered to prepare a strike against the South and to achieve a battlefield victory that would enable Ha Noi to dictate the terms ending the war.

Although he opposed the concept, Giap believed it was still his duty to prepare for battle with all of his skill. He would rely on the coordinated power of fully equipped and modern infantry, armor, and artillery. Their only weakness would be in the air, for Giap

⁸⁶ Davidson, 637-654.

could not battle the Americans for control of the air over South Vietnam. Giap set the date for the attack at noon, 30 March 1972. On the Christian calendar, this day was Good Friday.⁸⁷

The Easter Offensive.

The Easter offensive began on 30 March 1972. It was an attempt to overrun South Vietnam by a massive cross-border attack using North Vietnamese troops supported by tanks and artillery. With the majority of U.S. ground combat forces withdrawn from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese believed the South Vietnamese Armed Forces would fold.⁸⁸

Committing nearly their entire army to the offensive, the North Vietnamese launched a massive three-pronged attack. Four divisions attacked directly south across the Demilitarized Zone to seize the provincial capital of Quang Tri in I Corps. Another two divisions attacked east toward Quang Tri from bases in Laos. The second prong was a two-division attack in II Corps to seize Kontom in the Central Highlands while a third division attacked in the lowlands near the coast. The final prong was a three-division attack to seize the provincial capital of An Loc in III Corps.⁸⁹

After initial successes, the North Vietnamese attack was stopped cold by a combination of South Vietnamese tenacity, U.S. air and naval firepower, the U.S. advisors, and North Vietnamese inadequacies and mistakes. According to President Nixon, who compiled his statistics from official reports, the Easter offensive cost the

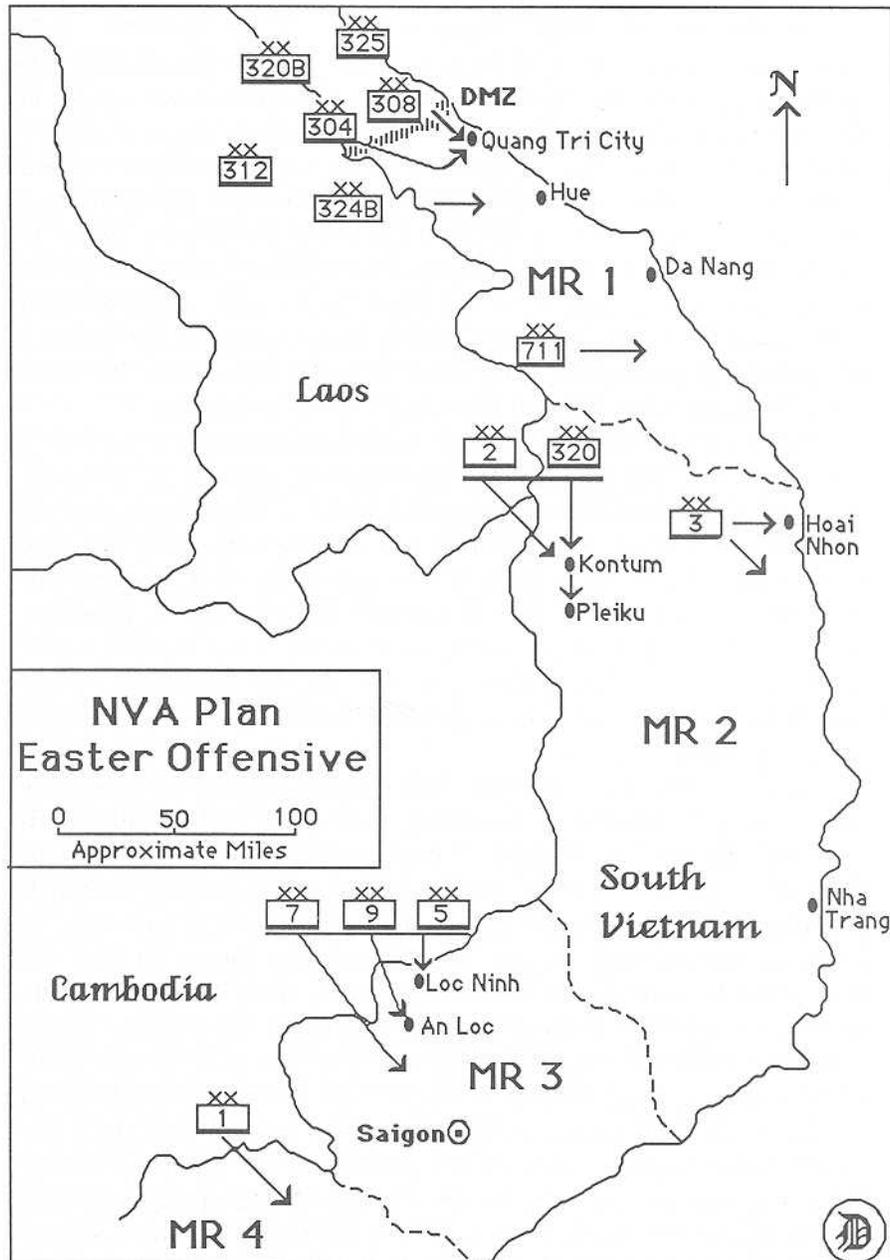
⁸⁷ Currey, 283-285.

⁸⁸ Summers, 149.

⁸⁹ Summers, 149.

North Vietnamese over 100,000 dead, 450 tanks, and untold numbers of artillery pieces and trucks.⁹⁰

Figure 4



Source: Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War; The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 676.

⁹⁰ Davidson, 705.

As was the case with the Tet offensive, Giap had been opposed to the Easter offensive. Giap was not only impressed with the devastating American air power but was also concerned that the offensive might bring about his biggest nightmare, an invasion of North Vietnam.

There are three primary reasons why the Easter Offensive failed: Overwhelming U.S. air power, the South Vietnamese fighting ability, and the mistakes of Giap and his subordinates. Perhaps Giap's biggest failure in his operational plan was the fact that he could not logistically sustain his attacks. This forced his troops to halt repeatedly in their attacks, waiting for resupply. Giap could stockpile but not transport his war material, and this weakness permitted the Americans to shift the weight of air power from one threatened area to another. When one considers the tremendous logistical requirements of a modern army in combat, requirements measured in thousands of tons per day, Giap's problem becomes obvious—a problem not only of voracious consumption, but one complicated by devastating American air strikes along his whole logistical chain.⁹¹

Beyond Giap's logistical inadequacies lay another deficiency. Neither he nor his commanders had any feel for, any experience in, or any understanding of truly mobile operations. His use of tanks is an example. Giap chose to employ hundreds of T-34 and T-54 tanks as moving gun platforms, ineffectively coordinated with infantry units. He should have utilized his tanks as a mobile arm to strike deep into the enemy's rear areas, a tactic utilized with great success by the Germans in the opening stages of World War

⁹¹ Davidson, 709

Two. Yet Giap had no experience with armored warfare and failed to capitalize on his armor capabilities.⁹²

Finally, Giap failed to fully appreciate one of the few truths in modern war. Mobile warfare cannot be conducted in the face of enemy air superiority. Tanks and the immense logistical support they need are simply too vulnerable. This truism is ten times stronger when one faces not only enemy air superiority but also enemy air supremacy. The result of the Persian Gulf War validates this premise.

The devastating results of the Easter offensive shocked the Politburo. Combat deaths were so high and expenditures of material so great that even the most avid Politburo supporters of conventional war against the South were forced to face facts. The offensive had unleashed Nixon's fury, and the North was now reeling from air attacks of a magnitude never seen before. With their country in ruins and their army repulsed, their only option now lay in Paris. The North Vietnamese ordered their negotiators to get serious and work out a settlement.⁹³

Giap had warned against the offensive and had cautioned the Politburo members that it might not succeed. He was right, and that was enough for the Politburo to condemn him. Although he retained his position as minister of defense, the Politburo stripped Giap of his command of the army. They gave the command to Giap's longtime protégé,

⁹² Currey, 289.

⁹³ Currey, 288.

General Van Tien Dung.⁹⁴ Three years later, it would be Dung, not Giap, who would lead victorious North Vietnamese forces into Saigon.

⁹⁴ Currey, 288.

Chapter 4

Another Look at Genius

*The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes.*⁹⁵

-Carl von Clausewitz

As a tactician, Giap had mixed results. His actions in 1951, 1968 and 1972 gained his army little and cost them dearly. In the wars against the French and the Americans, Giap was obliged to accept high casualties to compensate for his lack of equivalent firepower: it was a matter of men balanced against material, but if losses were not balanced by results, Giap called off the action.⁹⁶ When he realized his ledger was not balanced during the campaigns of 1951, 1968, and 1972, Giap stopped his attacks. When the results justified the sacrifice, as at Dien Bien Phu, Giap pressed for a victory. Viewed through a strategic lens, Giap's tactical losses actually amounted to very little. Perhaps the best illustration of this is a conversation between Colonel Harry Summers and Colonel Tu of the North Vietnamese Army that took place on 25 April 1975. "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said Colonel Summers. The North Vietnamese

⁹⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 645.

⁹⁶ Macdonald, 291.

colonel pondered this remark for a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant.”⁹⁷

Critics of Giap’s “butcher bill” tend to discount the very nature of warfare. Slaughter in wholesale fashion has been the reality of most wars. During the Civil War when Grant faced Lee at Cold Harbor, 7,000 Union soldiers died in less than half an hour. One Southern observer called it “inexplicable and incredible butchery.”⁹⁸ In the battle of the Somme, 1 July to 19 November 1916, approximately 1,250,000 German, French, and British soldiers fell. The British suffered 60,000 killed or wounded on the first day.⁹⁹ The Communist casualties resulting from the Tet and Easter offensives can not be laid at Giap’s feet, as he opposed both of the operations and strenuously argued against them.

As a strategist, Giap was a master. He understood early in his career Clausewitz’s oft-quoted maxim that war is a continuation of politics by other means. From Clausewitz, Giap learned the interrelation of politics and combat. Giap governed all of his campaigns by Clausewitz’s basic thesis that the political object, as the original motive of the war, should be the standard for determining the military objectives and the application of the force to be used.¹⁰⁰ His stunning victory at Dien Bien Phu serves as an illustration.

Giap’s genius resides in his firm grasp of strategy, specifically revolutionary war or “people’s war”, as Giap prefers to call it. Giap’s strategy of revolutionary war totally integrated two principal forms of force—armed force and political force, military *dau*

⁹⁷ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, rev. ed. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 21.

⁹⁸ Currey, 332.

⁹⁹ Macdonald, 291.

tranh and political *dau tranh*.¹⁰¹ Their combined use created a kind of war unseen before: a single war waged simultaneously on several fronts—not geographical fronts, but programmatic fronts—all conducted by one and the same authority, all carefully meshed. It was a war in which military campaigns were waged for political and diplomatic reasons; economic measures such as land reform were adopted to further political ends; political or diplomatic losses were accepted to forward military campaigns; and psychological campaigns were launched to lower enemy military effectiveness. All actions; political, military, economic, and diplomatic, were weighed for their impact on the other elements of *dau tranh* and on the advance towards the final goal—the seizure of state power.¹⁰²

Giap's strategy of revolutionary war was, in essence, total war. It encompassed all elements of national power, and it involved all segments of the North Vietnamese society. Indeed, the entire nation was mobilized for war. As noted earlier, Giap's strategy was one of protracted war. Clausewitz realized the effectiveness of a protracted war when he wrote:

It is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy's forces. I refer to operations that have direct political repercussions, that are designed in the first place to disrupt the opposing alliance...or favorably affect the political scene...wearing down the enemy in a conflict means using the duration of the war to bring about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance.¹⁰³

As Giap and Clausewitz knew, protracted conflict has several advantages. It allows time to be used as a trade off for the enemy's superior strength. It creates in the enemy

¹⁰⁰ Davidson, 19.

¹⁰¹ For an in-depth analysis of the *dau tranh* strategy see Douglas Pike, *PAVN: Peoples Army of Vietnam*, (New York: Presidio Press, 1986), 209-247.

¹⁰² Davidson, 25-26.

¹⁰³ Von Clausewitz, 92-93.

camp a sense of endlessness, of conflict continuing for years without resolution or apparent hope for victory. Protracted conflict clouds the understanding of what is really happening and makes for easy manipulation of external perception. Aggression is not seen as aggression but as liberation.¹⁰⁴ For all of these reasons, protracted warfare is especially effective against democratic countries. Many observers note that the *dich van* element of the *dau tranh* strategy (political action among the enemy population) was an important factor in driving the U.S. out of Vietnam.

Returning to the definitions of genius listed earlier, it is clear that Giap is a military genius. He was able to take what was already known and synthesize it, using relationships and connections no one else noticed, and create a new strategy that was victorious. Indeed, his strategy of revolutionary warfare and *dau tranh* still stands the test of time. As Douglas Pike, the distinguished expert on the North Vietnamese Army has stated, "...it is a strategy for which there is no known counterstrategy."¹⁰⁵ Giap's grasp and application of grand strategy clearly characterizes him as a genius and one of the premier strategists of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁴ Pike, 219.

¹⁰⁵ Pike, 213.

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