

History of tet offensive



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The Tet offensive was an operation that took place in 1968 from January 30th to mid-August and was the largest military campaign of the Vietnam war. It involved nearly 80, 000 North Vietnamese attacking more than 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam simultaneously. The offensive was a complete surprise to the South Vietnamese and the Americans, as it was thought to be impossible for the NVA to carry out an operation this large and no fighting was expected to happen because of the Tet holiday (Willbanks, 2007). This operation became a turning point for the American-Vietnam war as the offensive caused the U. S. to lose control of some cities temporarily and it showed the American public that the U. S. was not winning the war as the government had previously claimed.

Prior to the Tet offensive, the U. S. faced declining support from the public in its' foreign policy methods in Vietnam. U. S. citizens faced rising taxes and increasing U. S. casualty numbers in Vietnam. Many people were starting to feel that it was a mistake to send soldiers to Vietnam and that it was a hopeless cause. Public opinion polls at the time showed that the percentage of Americans who believed that the U. S. had made a mistake by sending troops to Vietnam had risen from roughly 25 percent in 1965 to about 45 percent by December 1967 (Willbanks, 2007). The U. S. military and President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration attempted to alter the public's viewpoint on the war by feeding the media optimistic information about the war.

On the North Vietnamese side, there were concerns about the direction of the war and the affect it was having the capability of North Vietnam being able to sustain itself as country. Constant U. S. aerial bombings had decimated North Vietnam's economic capability and the government realized that at the current rate, North Vietnam would lack the ability to affect the war in South Vietnam. The operation went into its planning stages in the early months of 1967 and was decided to take place on the Tet holiday to surprise unsuspecting American and South Vietnamese forces. The North Vietnamese believed that the widespread offensive would cause the people of South Vietnam to revolt against the South Vietnamese government. While the offensive did cause the tide of the war to change, it did not cause mass uprisings (Bradley, 2009).

The first phase of the Tet offensive began in the early hours of January 30th when the NVA and Viet Cong initiated attacks on all major cities in central Vietnam including Nha Trang, Hoi An, Pleiku, and Da Nang. On January 31st, another major attack was initiated in various major cities and bases in Southern Vietnam. Much of the forces in the operation were focused on South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. North Vietnamese forces, while not able to take control of the city, managed to attack critical strategic points around the city. At the same time, the north Vietnamese forces and Viet Cong successfully attacked and captured the city of Hue in central Vietnam. It took the U. S. 25 days to fight back the North Vietnamese and retake the city (Willbanks, 2007).

The North Vietnamese initiated a second phase to the offensive on May 4th and attacked various targets across South Vietnam again. But this time the Americans and South Vietnamese were prepared and the offensive was considerably less successful. The 2nd phase ended in late May. The third and final phase of the Tet offensive began on August 17th and was easily repelled by the South Vietnamese and Americans. This last attack was considered a dismal failure as it had little effect on any South Vietnamese or American positions (Willbanks, 2007).

Although the Tet offensive did not achieve its goal of initiating uprisings throughout South Vietnam, it did inflict heavy damage on American and South Vietnamese forces. It allowed the Viet Cong to take control of the rural areas of Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta. The offensive put South Vietnam into turmoil as it was the first time that the war had reached any urban areas in South Vietnam.

It reduced confidence in the government in their ability to protect its' citizens from the Viet Cong. The battles that took place destroyed thousands of homes, displaced, injured and killed thousands of people. The human and material cost to South Vietnam was staggering. The number of civilian casualties was estimated by the government to be over 14, 000 with at least 20, 000 wounded. The North Vietnamese had suffered incredible amounts of casualties. Some estimates place the number of casualties to be over 180, 000 dead during 1968. The offensive was the largest number of casualties that the North Vietnamese had faced in the war. The situation was so dire, that many Viet Cong cadres had to be replaced partially by North

Vietnamese Army regulars. Although the North Vietnamese lost many soldiers in the South, they acknowledged the benefits of the Tet offensive. General Tran Do, one of the commanders in the battle of Hue, stated “ In all honesty, we didn’t achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this 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” (Karnow, 1988).

The aftermath of the Tet offensive also brought about more international influence into the Vietnam conflict. The Paris peace talks, which took place in May of 1968 initiated negotiations between the U. S. and North Vietnam while allowing third-party influence into the politics of the region. In short, the Tet offensive changed both the DRV and the U. S.’s goals of military and political victory against each other to negotiations and de-escalation (Bradley 2009).

The results of the Tet offensive also spread the conflict into the border regions of Cambodia and Laos. Before and during the Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh trail, which lead through southern Laos and Eastern Cambodia, to send supplies and reinforcements to Viet Cong cadres in South Vietnam. This supply route, was the main resource in preparing the Viet Cong for the Tet offensive After the offensive failed, the U. S. began bombing campaigns in Laos and Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh trail. These bombings eliminated Laos and Cambodia’s neutrality and dragged them into conflict within their own borders (Kranow, 1988).

In the U. S., the aftermath of the offensive created a crisis for the Johnson administration. Public opinion was now overwhelmingly against the war. The U. S. had suffered much casualties with over 16, 000 soldiers killed by the end of 1968. A new draft was also called in 1968 calling for 48, 000 men to be enlisted. These factors brewed heavy discontentment with the U. S. government and the Johnson administration. The Tet offensive certainly made an impact on the 1968 presidential election and Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to not run for re-election. The new administration of Richard Nixon oversaw the withdrawal of U. S. troops from Vietnam, allowing the North Vietnamese to capture Saigon and reunify Vietnam.

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