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The World

## Hanoi's High-Risk Drive for Victory

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SINGLY and in small groups at first, then in gun-waving mobs, the retreating South Vietnamese troops streamed out of shell-torn Quang Tri city. For four days their procession down sun-baked Highway 1 continued to swell. There were soldiers on foot wearing only mud-caked underwear and with rags wrapped around their feet in place of boots. Some rode on the fenders of cars commandeered at rifle point; others clung to army trucks that careered through South Viet Nam's northern countryside with lights ablaze at midday and horns blaring. The line stretched to the horizon, and so did its litter: helmets, full ammunition pouches, combat boots, web belts and packs. At the refugee-jammed city of Hué, 24 miles south of Quang Tri, the headlong retreat turned into a rampage. Soldiers who had not eaten in two days looted stores in broad daylight. By night, gangs of deserters started fires and fought drunken skirmishes in the streets.

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Urgent Questions. Last week the army of South Viet Nam suffered its worst debacle of the five-week-old Communist offensive, and North Viet Nam's Defense Minister and chief military tactician, General Vo Nguyen Giap, gained his easiest victory of the long war. The 8,000-man ARVN 3rd Division, assigned to the defense of the northernmost provincial capital, Quang Tri, was known to be poorly trained and questionably led. But no one had expected the 3rd to give up as quickly as it did. Pounded by five days of shelling by Giap's troops and abandoned by their officers, the soldiers simply broke and ran, leaving behind their tanks, armored cars and artillery. Quang Tri city, deserted by practically all of its 15,000 inhabitants as well as by its defenders, fell to the Communists within minutes after the last U.S. advisers had been helicoptered out. Immediately, the Communists set up a "revolutionary administration" in the city. South Viet Nam's President Nguyen Van Thieu angrily relieved both the commander of Military Region I, General Hoang Xuan Lam, and the 3rd Division's commander, General Vu Van Giai. No replacement was named for Giai; there was no 3rd Division left.

The fall of Quang Tri cast a pall of gloom over Saigon and Washington, and raised urgent questions about Vietnamization, the hopeful policy through which the U.S. had built up the army of South Viet Nam, at immense cost in lives and treasure, to fight the Communists on its own. Could ARVN survive, much less defeat the North Vietnamese offensive? Could President Thieu—and even the U.S. presence and influence in South Viet Nam—outlast another similar defeat?

To be sure, the 3rd had been the worst of South Viet Nam's 13 divisions, put together last June from stragglers and captured deserters, and there was no sign yet of the widespread unit defections that would signal the beginning of an overall collapse of ARVN. Still, the South Vietnamese badly needed to win the next battle if they were to stave off a national psychology of defeat that could intensify pressures to settle with the Communists at any price.

This time, the South Vietnamese had to win the battle on their own. The U.S. has only 65,000 ground troops remaining in South Viet Nam, and they are now assigned solely to defensive roles. As the biggest Communist blitz of the war continued last week, American advisers—and the U.S. commander, General Creighton Abrams—no longer had the decisive say in how or where the South Vietnamese fought; the decisions were being made by President Thieu and the South Vietnamese general staff. The U.S. could supply airpower (with more than 1,000 planes in the region) and dominate the Gulf of Tonkin with an armada that will soon number six carriers, five cruisers and 40 destroyers and 41,000 men. Washington could replace the abandoned South Vietnamese equipment, as it was doing last week. And President Nixon could punish Hanoi for the invasion by increased bombing, or even a blockade of Haiphong or a Dieppe-style raid\* by South Vietnamese forces on the northern coast. For all that, a hard fact remained: with the Paris negotiations suspended again, the next turns in the war could only be decided on the battlefield in a contest between Vietnamese.

What could be the climactic battle of the war seemed likely to come soon, perhaps even this week. Both sides had focused their forces on the city of Hué, sitting on the Perfume River five miles from the South China Sea. With its sizable population and its symbolic importance as the seat of the 19th century Vietnamese empire. Hué is coveted by the Communists as the putative site for an insurgent government with national pretensions. For President Thieu, the loss of the city would have grim consequences both in Paris and at home. Coming on top of ARVN's other recent reverses, a major setback at Hué could precipitate a rapid collapse of army and civilian morale, and might even lead to the fall of his regime.

Thieu himself underscored the importance of the city, flying in last week to order personally that it be held "at all costs." "I'm very confident," he added. Mustered for the defense of Hué were South Viet Nam's best units. They included the 1st Division, a marine division and infantry units hastily brought up from the Mekong Delta and nearby Quang Ngai province. Thieu's biggest asset may be his new commander in the north, Lieut. General Ngo Quang Truong. Truong is regarded by Americans as ARVN's most effective field commander, and his first action was decisive enough. To stop the hemorrhage of ARVN troops through Hué, he ordered deserters shot on sight.

General Giap has thrown his strongest forces into the drive on Hué. Three divisions are closing on the city from the North and West, and a fourth is poised to the Southwest. The seasoned Communist troops, many of whom took part in the bloodying of ARVN in Laos last spring, are equipped as never before. They have tanks and heavy artillery, including Soviet 130-mm. guns with a range of 17 miles. Some of their equipment

is even more sophisticated: last week a portable heat-seeking Soviet missile downed two U.S. helicopters and a light plane near Quang Tri.

Daily Toll. Much of the fear and panic that engulfed Hué sprang from memories of the Tet offensive of 1968, when more than 3,000 residents were mercilessly massacred by the Communists and the once graceful city itself was permanently scarred in the bloody battles to rout them out. Now exhortations to HANG THE COMMUNIST TROUBLEMAKERS and HONOR THE ARVN SOLDIER were painted on the walls of the modern Kieu Mau school. Stores were closed, restaurants empty, and much of the population—200,000 in normal times, more than 300,000 early last week as refugees from the fighting around Quang Tri jammed into the city—had fled to Danang or other points south. Most went on foot, but some paid an extra \$50 to Air Viet Nam ticket agents to get aboard outbound planes.

The refugees who stayed on in Hué found spots on the grassy banks of the Perfume River if they were lucky, in fetid vacant buildings if they were not. "Highway 1 is the setting for this Asian Grapes of Wrath," reported TIME Correspondent David DeVoss. "Some families ride atop trucks, others are jammed as many as five to a Honda, but most of them walk. Exhaustion, hunger and heat are not the only enemies they face. Land mines, carefully planted each night by the North Vietnamese, take their daily toll in suffering."

In the Hué hospital, the wounded were packed two to a bed. DeVoss talked with Hoang Thien, a 57-year-old laborer whose wife and daughter were there for treatment of shrapnel wounds from mines planted by the Communists on the shoulders of the roads. "The V.C. didn't want anyone to leave, because once the people go the B-52s come," said Thien. "But a V.C. rocket destroyed my house, so I had no choice. They shot at us so we don't go, but we ran for two days until we hit the mines." For the first time in the current Communist offensive, sizable numbers of Americans, too, are in the path of the assault. A drive on Hué would brush perilously close to the U.S. airfield and communications center at Phu Bai, six miles south of the city. The base is guarded by two of the six U.S. combat battalions remaining in South Viet Nam.

When would the attack on Hué come? After the fall of Quang Tri, an ominous slack-off in Communist activity occurred last week on all three major battlefields, while the foe regrouped and marshaled his forces. In the Saigon area, Communist pressure eased on the long-besieged city of An Loc, 60 miles north of the capital. In the Central Highlands, the Communists made no move to follow up their rout of the ARVN 22nd Division with a direct assault on Kontum, which has been surrounded by Communist troops and is highly vulnerable to capture. Would the Communists strike Kontum first? Or were they getting their artillery and supplies in place in preparation for a move on Hué?

For the moment, the answers were all held by General Giap, North Viet Nam's legendary lord of the battlefield. More than likely, he was methodically measuring the odds in terms of his oft-repeated principle: "Strike to win, strike only if success is certain; if it is not, then don't strike."

For Giap, now 60, the capture of Hué would be almost as great a victory as the fall of Dien Bien Phu 18 years ago last week. The man the French called the "snow-covered volcano" —because his calm exterior masks a fiery temperament—once again dominates the war in the South, something no South Vietnamese leader has ever been able to do. Maintaining the military initiative, Giap has called each turn of how and when a battle will be fought. The question that remains, and may be decided at Hué, is whether, as one U.S. general puts it, he is "merely Lawrence of Arabia, great in a special situation and with a peculiar set of national circumstances, or a Robert E. Lee, master of all military situations."

Many Enemies. So far, Giap has proved himself a master of Vietnamese situations, and has contributed a large chapter to any textbook on the black art of war. Going far beyond the Chinese concept of a "people's war" by guerrillas, he has developed the orchestrated use of guerrillas and conventional forces, and demonstrated—as at Tet in 1968—the importance of psychology to the outcome on the battlefield. In a 1969 article in the North Vietnamese army journal, *Quart Dot Nhan Dan*, he spelled out the strategy that he is pursuing in this offensive. "Being held in an unfavorable strategic position, the enemy can use only a small part of his troops. Though numerous, he is outnumbered; though strong, he is weak." To Giap, "the main goal of fighting must be the destruction of enemy manpower." He takes a cold view of war. "Every minute hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world," he has said. "Life or death, even of one's own compatriots, represents really very little."

In a way, Giap has been preparing for the battle of Hué ever since his youth. Born into impecunious gentry in An Xa, a small town just north of what is now the Demilitarized Zone, Giap grew up at a time when the fairly stable 30-year relationship between the French and Vietnamese was coming to an end. At 15, he was taking part in a "quit-school movement" in Hanoi. Before he was 30, he was helping Ho Chi Minh organize his revolution from a base in China. Though he once taught school in Hanoi, Giap was no bookstack scholar. Two years ago, Giap's foster father, a South Vietnamese Red Cross official in Danang, discussed Giap with British Orientalist P.J. Honey. "He was brilliant, extremely interested in warfare along the lines of Napoleonic strategy, but quarrelsome," said the old man. "He'll get near to the top but never to the very top because he makes so many enemies."

Giap's quarrelsomeness has shown up in the long course of the war. His rivals in Hanoi have tended to be optimistic believers in the kind of "general uprisings" that the Communists attempted to foment in the early 1960s and in 1968. Giap's doctrine involves a prolonged three-stage war, proceeding gradually from defensive organization to guerrilla war to something like large-scale conventional war.

Today Giap is at Stage 3, playing a role that he knows well. When he made his reputation in 1954, the Communists were negotiating in Geneva under the combined pressure of the U.S., Britain, Russia and China. Giap's task was to inflict a crippling defeat on the French while the talks were still in progress. The result was the 56-day siege that killed or wounded half of the 13,000-man French garrison at Dien Bien Phu.

The current offensive shows many of Giap's characteristics: methodical preparation, a heavy reliance on firepower, a willingness to take high casualties, combined with extraordinary caution—one trait that South Viet Nam generals share in spades.

Few armies, and certainly not South Viet Nam's, have ever matched the tenacity and determination of the troops that Giap has been able to field. It is clear that Ho Chi Minh's claim that the Communists would fight to achieve their goals for ten, 15, 20 years, or even longer if necessary, was no idle boast. Since 1964, when Hanoi began its direct military intervention in the war, the North Vietnamese have suffered roughly 400,000 casualties—about as many men as they have in their present army. Captured North Vietnamese troops tell familiar fatalistic stories of being drafted from towns to which no soldiers who have gone South have ever returned.

The Mandate. But still they come, and they fight fiercely. What is the difference between Hanoi's troops and Saigon's? The North Vietnamese have their problems with draft dodgers and deserters. The army journal *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* recently chided young conscripts who "dress outlandishly, behave in an uncivilized manner, and violate state laws, discipline and public sanitary regulations." But compared with, say, the 3rd Division troops that cracked at Quang Tri last week, the North Vietnamese have been model soldiers. Vietnamese peasants who have seen them recently have described them as fairly disciplined young men outfitted with olive uniforms, straw-covered soft hats and canteens; they appear to be highly motivated. North Vietnamese officers tend to be professionals who earn their promotions on merit. The ARVN leadership, by contrast, tends to be a class of its own, informed by old mandarin traditions and French colonial military training. Ranking officers, including province chiefs and field commanders, are very often political appointees with scant combat experience.

Beyond that, the difference between Giap's army and Thieu's is the difference between a government that has ruled with totalitarian power for 18 years and one that has had a history of revolving-door regimes and heavy dependence on foreign treasuries. The simple fact, as Rand Corp. Analyst Brian Jenkins notes, is that the North Vietnamese are "more cohesive and more accustomed than the South Vietnamese to rigid government control and the austerity needed for a protracted war."

The eleven-man North Vietnamese Politburo, of which General Giap is a prominent member, has always been at war. They are driven not only by the Communist doctrine of inevitable victory but also by the "mandate of Heaven," a kind of religious imperative to rule that, according to Viet Minh legend, was passed on to Ho Chi Minh in 1945 by the last Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai. The Hanoi leadership has more pragmatic reasons to fight on, of course. North Viet Nam's population continues to burgeon at a rate of 31% a year, exacerbating an already acute land shortage. Then there is the fact that for eight years now more than one-fourth of the North Vietnamese army has been posted out of the country under conditions of hardship and frequent terror unknown to those who have stayed behind. As Rand's Jenkins observes: "North Viet Nam's leaders may not be thrilled at the prospect of bringing this army home in defeat."

After five weeks of fighting, the North Vietnamese last week continued to hold the initiative and to expand their influence on three fronts:

**THE NORTH:** With four North Vietnamese divisions in place and a fifth poised just above the Demilitarized Zone, this is the strongest point of the Communist offensive. The North's troops now have the run of South Viet Nam's two northernmost provinces—Quang Tri and Thua Thien—outside of the shrinking government-held pocket around Hué.

**THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS:** Three North Vietnamese divisions own half of Binh Dinh province on the seacoast and most of the mountains to the west. If they overrun Kontum city, which is set on an open plateau and vulnerable to an attack, they will have sliced the country in half at its weakest point.

**THE SAIGON AREA:** Though the Communist pressure has eased somewhat, especially around the besieged city of An Loc, three North Vietnamese divisions have seized control of swatches of territory north and west of the capital, which gives them an enormous potential for more havoc. By one reckoning, enough rockets have been stashed around the city to permit a barrage of 1,000 rounds a day for two solid months.

So far, Giap's offensive has done remarkably little to foment popular unrest. The North Vietnamese have been welcomed in some areas, notably Viet Cong-infested Binh Dinh province east of Kontum. Generally, though, the "revolutionary administrations" that they have set up in towns and villages have been fearfully ruthless; the Communists have executed police and local officials, confiscated property and turned schoolchildren into armed "liberators." The indigenous Viet Cong, who have been vastly overshadowed by the Northerners during the present campaign, could be quietly preparing for the "spontaneous uprising" that the Communists—if captured documents are to be taken at face value—have scheduled for May 30, but so far they have been strangely inactive. As for civilian opponents of the war, not even the Buddhists, the students or the perennially restless veterans' groups have taken to the streets.

So far, enormous casualties have doubtless been inflicted on the twelve North Vietnamese divisions committed to the fighting (two others are waiting in the wings above the DMZ and across the Cambodian border in the Mekong Delta region; two more are far away in Laos). But South Viet Nam's 13 divisions have also suffered. As of last week, one infantry division and an armored brigade were "no longer effective," and many other units had been mauled.

With Giap's strategy of "annihilation" obviously having its effect, the U.S. last week pressed a new strategy on Saigon. The day after Quang Tri fell, Abrams and U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker visited Thieu. They reportedly brought a message of support from Nixon—and some advice. Thieu had been ordering just about everything to be held "at all costs." But with ARVN forces already spread thin on three fronts, that is too costly.

Henceforth, the first ARVN priority will be to ARVN, not to small towns or unimportant stretches of territory. U.S. air and naval power, it was promised, would deal with the North Vietnamese —perhaps harshly enough to prevent another onslaught for years. ARVN would try to avoid bloody set battles. The idea is to give the North Vietnamese the same problem faced by U.S. troops back in an earlier era of the war, when American generals were forever complaining that "the enemy won't stand up and fight."

Within the U.S. Administration, where the private evaluations of Vietnamization have never quite matched the public expressions of confidence in it, there were new worries about ARVN'S staying power. No one really expects Saigon to be able even to attempt to reverse the battlefield situation very soon. The immediate hope is that with U.S. air and naval power, the South Vietnamese will be able to maintain a stalemate at least through the seven-day Moscow summit, still scheduled to begin on May 22. Meanwhile, pacification programs and other nonmilitary matters are being quietly set aside. "What good is it?" asks a top pacification official in Saigon. "If you lose the battle, the game is over anyway. All our concern now is with the war."

The arrival in Saigon early last week of a Pentagon team headed by Assistant Defense Secretary Barry Shillito increased speculation that President Nixon was casting about for a dramatic way to help regain the initiative and buck up South Vietnamese morale. That could be anything from bombing Hanoi and Haiphong again to an ARVN offensive (see THE NATION). U.S. military men pondered the possibility of an ARVN end-around play to strike at the Communist columns in Quang Tri province—a move perhaps combined with a raid on Dong Hoi in the North, thus presenting the Communists with trouble on two fronts. Schemes like that hinge on two commodities that are both in short supply: ARVN manpower and spirited leadership.

The North Vietnamese have decisions of their own to make, regardless of how Nixon reacts. By now, it is universally recognized that the Communists are able to keep fighting at a brisk pace for many months. But will they? CIA forecasters, who have been remarkably accurate on Viet Nam in the past, reckon that Hanoi will make a fundamental decision some time this month. The choice is between a "high-risk, quick-payoff" campaign and a "low-risk, slow-payoff" strategy. Under a low-risk plan, the Communists would keep up pressure (perhaps by rocketing cities) while husbanding their manpower for a second big push in the fall. If the North Vietnamese believe they are making progress, however, they would pursue a high-risk strategy, with frontal assaults on cities and troops, in the hope of destroying ARVN's will to fight by midsummer. The goals: to crumble ARVN and to topple the Thieu regime, perhaps in favor of a new nationalist figure who would be willing to settle the war along the lines of the seven-point plan that Hanoi has pushed in Paris.

The Model. There are indications that Hanoi will opt for the high-risk road. The Communists' tough stand in Paris could only mean, as one State Department hand puts it, that "they were smelling blood in South Viet Nam." John Vann, the veteran U.S. pacification adviser, agrees. Says Vann: "The willingness to sacrifice exhibited by the enemy exceeds anything in the past." Concedes a U.S. general in Saigon: "I'm sure they're convinced that they're going to win."

Short of the total collapse of the Saigon regime, the eventual goal of the Communists is to win control of South Viet Nam at the bargaining table in Paris. That scheme is under the direction of the Hanoi Politburo and its steely first secretary, Le Duan (see box, page 29). One of Le Duan's contributions to the war is the "fighting-negotiating" strategy now unfolding in Paris and in South Viet Nam. In a 20-page letter captured in South Viet Nam in 1967, Le Duan explained to the Viet Cong command that Hanoi had studied all major international negotiations conducted over the past 100 years and had decided that the Communists could find no better model than the long Korean negotiations. As at Panmunjom, the Communist negotiators' task would be to drag out the talks, while the military's job would be to take what it could get on the battlefield. The goal, Le Duan concluded, was to build such a strong position on the battlefield that the other side would have nothing to negotiate with at the bargaining table. It is up to Giap to make that strategy work on the battlefield. Whether he can do so will depend, in all likelihood, on the outcome of the battle of Hué.