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Dang Kim Oanh, Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa

THE 1968 MAU THAN EVENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM AND THE WHITE HOUSE POLITICAL CRISIS

Abstract: Tet Mau Than 1968 was the event that made a turning point in decision making in the 21-year war in Vietnam (1954—1975). Tet Mau Than 1968 was a real earthquake, directly impacting the internal situation of the White House, even putting an end to the career of a US President. For these reasons, the Tet Mau Than 1968 event in South Vietnam and its consequences always attracted the attention of researchers, historians, and military generals from many countries. “Tet Mau Than 1968” event, many issues have been posed, many comments and assessments about this historical event are still different, even opposing. The article focuses on clarifying the impacts of this event on the political atmosphere of the United States, leading to the crisis of powers in the White House, creating significant changes in Vietnam's war way decisions that Washington pursues.

Keywords: Mau Than 1968, South Vietnam, political crisis, White House.

Background

The Tet Mau Than 1968 event in South Vietnam has not only become a hotly debated topic for Vietnamese and American academics, but has also attracted the interest from many historians in the world and there are quite a number of different opinions and researches when evaluating the Mau Than 1968 event in South Vietnam.

American history professor Gabriel Kolko once considered the Tet Mau Than 1968 as the “most important and most complex” [Kolko 1991: 280] event of the war between the United States and Vietnam. Many American authors mentioning “Tet Mau Than” also proved confused in predicting the goals that Hanoi set for the offensive. G. C. Herring wrote: “It is very likely that the general offensive was set in a fairly optimistic mood. But there is no sign that Hanoi thinks the general offensive will be decisive” [Herring 1998: 240]. According to Davidson (former Director of Intelligence Department, US Military Aid Command from June 1967 to May 1969), “no reputable historian accepted that the United States had a military defeat on Tet” [Davidson 1992: 54]. General W. Westmoreland did not acknowledge Bac Viet’s military victory on the battlefield [Westmoreland 1976: 331], or as Marilyn B. Young, John J. Fitzgerald and A. Tom Grunfeld also said that, “technically, the Tet offensive was a military failure for the National Front for the Liberation” [Young, Fitzgerald and Grunfeld 2002: 86]. Similar to W. Westmoreland some other scholars like Don Oberdorfer [Oberdorfer 1988: 180], Phillip B. Davidson [Davidson 1988: 473] always said that the communists had lost on the battlefield and that Tet was a military victory of the United States.

It can be seen that the conclusions, assessments and explanations of the “Tet Mau Than” as above are relatively common in the US and many Western countries based on two main bases:

1 — after a stunned period, the US and Saigon army regained composure, counter-attacked fiercely, regained control of the cities, pushed the Liberation Army away from the fringes, plains and traffic hubs, military bases...; 2 — from the traditional military viewpoint of the US and Western army on victory and defeat.

The failure of the US military was not recognized in the “Tet” event, but the scientists realized the importance of this event to the outcome of the war, considering it as “one of the most decisive battles in American history” (accordingly, military victory and defeat is based on the movement of the battle line between the two sides and the statistics of enemy losses are a milestone of military victory); even ranking it in the ranking of the most decisive battles of the twentieth century [Davidson 1988: 473]; and also, recognized the tremendous psychological impact of this event [Frankland and Dowling 1976]. It should also be emphasized that the Western scholars mainly refer to the impact of the “Tet” event on psychology and politics in general, with little mention of its actual impact on the balance of power at the White House.

In Vietnam, in the seminars and books on the 21-year war (1954—1975), when discussing the Mau Than 1968 event, most researchers agreed that: the army and the people of the North Vietnam has achieved a great strategic victory. However, it is also suggested that, based on the comparison of the initial goal set for the “Tet Mau Than” offensive and the results achieved as well as on the basis of counting losses during and after “Tet Mau Than” ... has come to the conclusion: “In first round, we win, after we lose; that's a tie” [Westmoreland 1976: 331]. See also [Brodie 1976: 321; Maclear 1984: 274; Duiker 1983: 63—64; Young, Fitzgerald, Grunfeld 2002: 86]. Some authors also affirmed: “Tet Mau Than” in 1968 “did not create an upward development of the southern revolutionary war, did not change the outcome of the battlefield in our favor; for a worse situation in 1968” [Hoang Van Thai 1988]. There was a researcher who suggested that the “Tet Mau Than” victory should be rated as “a big ambush, a strategic raid that won a great victory” [Department of Military Science 1986: 2469].

Russian scholars while carefully investigating the history of American war in Vietnam gave positive but cautious assessments of the success of the revolutionary forces [Lokshin 2018; Mazyrin 1978: 19—20].

Mau Than 1968 event in South Vietnam

The “Mau Than” plan was drafted quite early, right from the first months of 1967. During the two years 1967—1968, the Central Politburo of the Vietnam Labor Party, the Central Military Commission and the General Command of Vietnamese Army had many meetings to calculate, discuss, consider and gradually complete the 1967—1968 Winter — Spring Strategic Plan.

From October 20 to October 24, the Politburo met more specifically about guidelines and strategic plans in 1968. This was a very important conference to decide the Tet Mau Than offensive plan. The Politburo decided on a new method of offensive, a new method of battle with the high effect: Suddenly and simultaneously hit strongly urban areas across the Southern region. All of this strategic intent were kept strictly confidential: a) no discussions at the Central level; b) in the General Staff, only the person assigned to make the plan knows about this new policy.

On December 28, 1967, the Politburo held a special meeting, officially adopted a strategic plan in 1968. In January 1968, the Conference of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Labor Party in the 14th meeting, passed the Politburo’s resolution in December 1967, deciding to implement the General Offensive — General Revolution. Speaking at the Conference, First Secretary Le Duan noted that, although the US was passive, in a difficult position, “but it was strong ... so we must know how to wind it” [Tran Do 1988]. In order to do so, it was not possible to fight in the old

way, “but to go through a new phase, that is, the stage of general offensive-general revolution, it is capable of crushing its will to invade; make it really disintegrate, force it to come and sit with me, negotiate with us” [Voice recordings]. Not being able to fight in the old way means not being able to fight in a sequential manner, fighting seasonally, the period [voice recordings] but having to surprise and simultaneously hit cities in the South, aiming to “change the situation, change the outcome, strategic development on the battlefield” [Van Tien Dung 1998: 40]. The sentence “we cannot fight the old way” is that Le Duan wanted to emphasize the implementation of the General Offensive and general appraisal to focus the combined strength of the Southern Revolutionary War by fighting into the pharynx, striking the opponent's heart and the most sensitive moment in American political life, forcing American leaders to go down the ladder of war.

Thus, Tet Mau Than is aimed at realizing the strategic goals of the Vietnam strategic policy in the following aspects: 1- expose the whole process of American failure on the battlefield both in militarily and politics; 2- reveal the mistakes of strategy and the way of managing the war of the White House and US generals on the battlefield; 3 — “Tet” is also a celebration of Hanoi's will, strength and the art of managing the war [Defense Archive: 1162].

With all those goals, on the night of 29th day and at the daybreak of January 30, 1968 (the New Year's Eve according to the Western calendar), the army and people of the coastal plains of Central Region and Central Highlands simultaneously attacked the cities, towns, districts and a series of bases, warehouses, headquarters, airports, ports ... of the enemy, opening the general offensive and insurgency simultaneously across the Southern battlefield. After nearly 2 months of the General Offensive and the Mau Than 1968 Rebellion, the South Vietnam liberation forces and people destroyed and disintegrated a large part of US and Saigon troops, causing the US and their satellites in South Vietnam heavy casualties in people and means of war, resulting in a decline in morale, leading to internal political struggles within the US government.

Political crisis in the White House under the impact of Tet Mau Than 1968 event

True to the strategic goals that Hanoi calculated and set out, the Tet Mau Than 1968 Offensive caused the White House situation to be chaotic and contradictory, first of all revolving around urgent solutions in response to the Mau Than event itself.

Shortly after the “Tet Mau Than” broke out, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US Army and general Westmoreland urged Johnson to increase troops to South Vietnam. At the request of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, it was US Secretary of Defense R. McNamara who was the first to oppose this request as well as the intention to expand the scope of bombing and blockade of Hai Phong port. Directly involved in US policy during the Vietnam War, until the last months of 1966 and early 1967, R. McNamara began to show little confidence in a swift American victory in South Vietnam; therefore, on November 1, 1967, he wrote to Johnson, frankly telling the President, “what military measures we cannot achieve in Vietnam and therefore we must seek a smaller political goal through negotiation” [McNamara 1995: 306]. However, President Johnson was not ready to accept that and due to disagreements, the relationship between Johnson and R. McNamara was tense and then came to a break.

Despite R. McNamara's objections, in the end, “Westmoreland's request to send 10,500 reinforcements was approved by the President on February 12, 1968”. [McNamara 1995: 306]. For one thing, in order to bind the White House more closely to its commitment to engage more deeply in the war in South Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised the President to call in reserve before sending any units to the battlefield. In this situation, on the one hand, R. McNamara agreed to send 10,500 troops to South Vietnam; on the other hand, recommended that Johnson not encourage re-

serve troops. He saw it as a gesture to protest the belligerent attitude of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Westmoreland.

In response to the offensive of the General Offensive and the Tet Mau Than Rebellion, which was at its peak, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Westmoreland requested additional reinforcement of 206,756 troops to the South — that would have meaning the United States must openly place the country at war, pushing the scale of the war to a new level, the consequences of which are extremely unpredictable. Because of this, request for troops has put White House officials in a daze and sparked fierce controversy among senior Washington officials. Many US congressmen have even completely lost confidence in the victory that the US is pursuing: “I don't believe we can win in South Vietnam...” Clark Clifford had to exclaim: “We (the US) seem to have a bottomless barrel. The more we pour in, the more the enemy will increase. The more fighting, I see, the more it will cause more casualties for the American side and that is what will continue to happen, one after another never stops” [Berman 2007: 49].

At the end of February 1968, a committee of senior American leaders headed by Clark Clifford was established to study/review the request for reinforcements. It is worth mentioning that instead of researching that requirement, the Clifford Commission turned to review all US war policy and military strategy in Vietnam. The reason for the change in the way we approach such subjects is because of the intense and overwhelming impact of the “Tet Mau Than”, Clifford realized that, “when we started talking about the effect of sending 206,000 troops to call in the necessary reserve army, to the precarious character of the dollar, we see that the consequences of that for the country will be really huge. The financial issue is already terrible” [Johnson 1971: 148].

Reviewing Vietnam's policies and the military strategy that the United States was implementing on the battlefield, the Clifford Committee realized that all of the goals that the United States had set were not achieved. The Committee discovered a gloomy truth that the Tet offensive proved that “The United States is further away than we (i.e. the United States) think how far away is that to be considered” [Schandler 1999: 249]. Clark Clifford posed the question: “Does anyone see the enemy having lost their will after 4 years we were there, after heavy losses, after our mass destruction bombings?” [Schandler 1999: 255]. The answer is: No! Indeed, “despite massively sending 500,000 US troops; 1.2 million tons of bombs each year, 400,000 non-combat aircraft annually ... and the United States killing 20,000 people ... but our control of the countryside and the defense in urban areas are now mostly just before August 1965. The more deeply involved, the United States has only come to a standstill” [Schandler 1999: 281].

That allowed Clifford to assert that, “the increase of American troops can only increase the devastation and Americanize the war and thus lead us to leave the goal of peace” [Schandler 1999: 281] and that is more than enough to Clifford came to the conclusion: “Our first goal is to end the involvement and gradually eliminate it”. That means the military line that the United States pursued in Vietnam during the local war years “not only without end but in vain” and “US policy in Vietnam must be considered in the light of US global political — military strategy” [The memory 1993: 19]. For comments for this Recommendation, Don Oberdorfer wrote: It proved that the Committee members have revealed that the US “can no longer control the war” that the US is pursuing in Vietnam. The US leaders at that time must admit that “Tet Mau Than” has put them “at a turning point”, “the solutions to choose came up in a cruel reality” [Oberdorfer 1988: 158].

In the official report to President Johnson of the Clifford Committee, many issues related to US war policy in Vietnam are still open because “they may be too depressed, do not want to come to the final conclusion” [Secret documents 1971: 247] — that shows the fierce contradictions and divisions among the American leadership. Johnson also had to bitterly admit: “Our policy is questioned severely and heavily criticized in Congress” [Oberdorfer 1988: 157]. In the US House of Representatives, on March 18, 1968, 139 congressmen (including 89 Republicans and 41 Democrats

from Johnson) issued a resolution asking the US Congress to review all US policies and strategies in South Vietnam; Congressmen “became increasingly disgusted with the US war strategy in Vietnam” [Memories 1972: 334]. Even Dean Acheson — former US Secretary of State of Truman, who had consistently and strongly supported Johnson's war policy until 15-03-1968, after thoroughly investigating the situation of the Vietnam War, was also forced to tell Johnson: “The President is under the am conspiracy chief coalition deceived. What Westmoreland is trying to do in Vietnam cannot be done without using that economic and military resources completely unrestricted” [Oberdoffer 1988: 63]. Dean Acheson desperately concluded: “The country does not also supports the war” [Puler 1986: 255]. This attitude of Dean Acheson is also the attitude of the “Wise men” — representing American tycoons.

Shortly after Johnson's meeting with Dean Acheson, on March 19, 1968, Clark Clifford, who replaced R. McNamara as US Defense Secretary, asked Johnson to convene meetings of a “Wise Men” senior advisory group to address the issues that the Clifford Committee remained open. Clark Clifford's proposal was actually meant for the senior advisory group — which is behind the American oligarch — to speak out of what the “Clifford Committee” had stated earlier but had not dared to conclude. All of the above forced the President of the United States to report a change of personnel in the government (mainly for some senior generals closely related to the Vietnam War). Therefore, on March 23, 1968, in the Oval Office, in front of the press and television, President Johnson declared: Admiral G. Sap, who advocated increasing troops into the South, pushing strongly bombed the North, relinquished the position of Pacific Commander. General Westmoreland resigned as Commander of the US Military Aid Command in Saigon (M.A.C.V). General Creighton W. Abrams — Westmoreland's deputy in the MACV was called back to Washington to “argue” about the US military plan in South Vietnam ... On March 23, 1968, Johnson sent General Earle Wheeler secretly flew to the US military base in the Philippines to meet Westmoreland. There, he informed Westmoreland that the 206,000 troops he and Westmoreland had requested for reinforcement had been completely rejected, and the “find and kill” strategy was being criticized in the United States. He asked Westmoreland, while still in South Vietnam, to find an alternative name for “find and kill”.

For two days, March 25 and 26, 1968, the senior advisers group “Wise Men” met in Washington to formally express their views on the Vietnam War. In order to have a basis for decision making, the “Wise Men” group had previously met with important government officials and listened to reports of several other government officials. On March 26, 1968, at the White House, Johnson officially met the “Wise Men” group members. Also attending the meeting were General Abrams, who would replace Westmoreland as Commander of the US Military Command in Saigon and General Wheeler. At this meeting, Henry Cabot Lodge — a former US ambassador to South Vietnam who specialized in monitoring the situation of Vietnam for Kenni and Johnson, asked Johnson to urgently consider moving from “consumption war” strategy and “find and kill” strategy measure to a new strategy. The “turning point” attitude of most of the “Wise Men” group members about the Vietnam War caused Johnson to deeply fluctuate (like Philip C. Habib, General William E. Depuy, etc.). He sadly realized that, if the “wise men” had been affected “by reports of the Tet offensive so badly, how could the ordinary people in this country think about it?” (The new strategy emphasized the role of the US military force as a “shield”, on which the army and government of the Republic of Vietnam must be reorganized to assume the responsibility of war). And so, the “death sentence” for the local US war in Vietnam was proclaimed by the high-ranking advisor's back to end the work the Americans had started for the previous year.

In 1965, when the successful and notorious American troops were launched into the battlefields of South Vietnam, escalating to ravage the North of Vietnam, the White House always believed in an easy, lightning-fast and effective military victory decision. However, the general offensive and the uprising of the Lunar New Year contributed a part to the decision to ignite American ambi-

tion. “Tet” has made the United States realize that “the price to pay for manpower (to accomplish US goals in Vietnam) has now reached a level that can no longer be met without making a call, enlisted a large number of reserve armies and made serious economic adjustments” [Secret documents 1971: 257]. “Tet” has really had a strong, huge impact on the United States and “led to a new era in this seemingly endless war” [Memories 1972: 418].

On March 31, 1968, in the US Embassy's dispatch to Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Laos, the Philippines and South Korea, the US State Department “emphasized primarily the importance of strengthening the combat effectiveness of the Government of South Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam Army with the equipment and other necessary American supplies, considers it a top priority in American actions” [Schandle 1977: 504]. In essence, this decision was a saving face for the US by withdrawing gradually and pushing the position of the Republic of Vietnam Army to the first rank. A few hours after the telegram was delivered, on the night of March 31, 1968, President Johnson appeared on statewide television, delivering the most important and most tragic speech in his political life, formally proclaiming America's “honorable” steps back; and also, declared not to run for US President for the next term. The speech immediately caused “intense impact in the United States and around the world”. It proved to be clear: “The United States has passed an important turning point in the war as well as in policy and there is no turning back” [Pribbenow 2008: 25]. Moreover, the Tet Mau Than 1968 “flipped the flag during the Vietnam War, detrimental to the United States and pushed this superpower into a historic disaster” [Secret documents 1971: 568]. US Marine Major-General Brigadier Robert E. Cushman sadly exclaimed: “The God of War helps the Communists!” [Secret documents of The Pentagon: 569]. The Tet Mau Than 1968 Offensive, with repeated attacks, “pushed the country believed to be fighting for Vietnam in a state of dying” [Kloth: 31.01.2008]. In the end, even if he didn't want to lose the war or negotiate, Johnson had to “make the most important decisions during his presidency” [Vietnam/Krieg: 26.02.1968].

After three years of gradual escalation (1965—1968), the US strategy in Vietnam fell into a dead end. The “dilemma” of the US is described by Theodore Sorensen (former Kennedy adviser): “Our worldwide military dominance is not enough to win. Our worldwide political dominance does not allow withdrawal”. [Vietnam/Krieg: 26.02.1968].

Conclusion

“Tet Mau Than 1968” was like the drop of water to overflow the glass — revealing the strong divide in American politics. The “Tet Mau Than” offensive made 1968 the most painful and chaotic year in the United States. Tet has smashed the mask of the official illusion that hides the US from seeing the real situation of the US in Vietnam” [Vietnam Eskalation: 18.03.1968], causing the conflict among the US ruling authorities which is already fierce. “Tet” put President Johnson in a tragic situation when he had to deal with the military at the same time in Vietnam and with the political situation in America in the election year of the President, “leading to a major change in US war strategy” [Oberdorfer 1988: 116].

“Tet” has left America — the nation with the most powerful military power — on the brink of a military-political tragedy.

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Authors:

Đặng Kim Oanh, Ph.D. (History), Editor-in-Chief of the History of the Party magazine, Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy. ORCID: 0000-0001-9915-0938.

E-mail: oanhtcls@gmail.com

Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, Ph.D. (History), Associate Professor, Faculty of History, Hanoi State University. ORCID: 0000-0002-3427-8073.

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Нгуен Тхи Май Хоа, Данг Ким Оань

**НОВОГОДНЕЕ НАСТУПЛЕНИЕ 1968 г.
В ЮЖНОМ ВЬЕТНАМЕ
И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ КРИЗИС В БЕЛОМ ДОМЕ**

Аннотация. Наступление в Тет Мау Тхан (лунный Новый год) 1968 г. стало поворотным пунктом в принятии решений в 21-летней войне во Вьетнаме (1954—1975). Это наступление имело эффект землетрясения, оказав непосредственное влияние на внутреннюю ситуацию в Белом доме и даже положив конец карьере президента США. Поэтому данное событие в Южном Вьетнаме и его последствия всегда привлекали внимание исследователей, историков и военных многих стран. Ими поднято много вопросов относительно этого исторического события, дано огромное количество комментариев и оценок, порою полярных по своей сути. В данном исследовании вьетнамские историки дают своё видение последствий этого события для политической атмосферы Соединённых Штатов, главным из которых стал коренной пересмотр политики Вашингтона во Вьетнаме.

Ключевые слова: Новогоднее наступление в Тет Мау Тхан 1968 г., Южный Вьетнам, политический кризис, Белый дом.

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Авторы:

Данг Ким Оань, к.и.н., гл. редактор журнала «История партии», Государственная политическая академия Хо Ши Мина. ORCID: 0000-0001-9915-0938. E-mail: oanhtcls@gmail.com

Нгуен Тхи Май Хоа, к.и.н., доцент, исторический ф-т Ханойского государственного университета. ORCID: 0000-0002-3427-8073.

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