

GIAP AND THE SEVENTH SON

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PREFACE

The following paper was written in May 1972 when the North Vietnamese offensive was in its second month. It was reviewed by a number of government agencies, revised and updated by the author, and released in September. The offensive continues, as the author suggested in May that it would. So does North Vietnam's intense campaign to mobilize every bit of the country's resources to sustain its war effort.

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Giap may now be pressing toward the light at the end of the tunnel so often seen by other generals, French and American. Ordered to achieve some sort of battlefield victory that would enable the North Vietnamese to dictate their terms for ending the war, Hanoi's famed general launched his current offensive in April. The offensive is now in its sixth month, and while there have been victories Giap can point to, the war-ending defeat of South Vietnam's forces has yet to come.

Giap now has three options. He can call off the offensive, gear it down and return to protracted warfare, or keep it going despite mounting costs. The very nature of armies and generals points in the direction of the third option as does a detailed analysis of articles in the North Vietnamese press and radio broadcasts.

To build up for the current offensive, Giap had to argue for, and got, a lion's share of North Vietnam's total resources. In doing so he mortgaged his own career, his army, and his country's future. This commitment could have greater long-range consequences than the outcome of the battles now being fought.

Until recently, North Vietnam was able to continue the war in the South and build the socialist North at the same time. It was not exactly guns and butter -- rather guns and steel mills. Now other priorities must be postponed. Economic development will have to await victory.

Fight now, work later, is the new message being delivered to North Vietnam's workers. The Party, the press, and the radio are telling factory managers to worry less about their production plans and more about the army's need for men. One deputy supervisor in the Hanoi Machine Works admitted that Party cadres at his factory had been

especially reluctant to strip their work force of its skilled workers, but had now changed that attitude. "We unanimously decided that even though economic construction is urgent, it is a long-term task; struggling to unify the Fatherland is a priority immediate task, an opportunity which comes once in 1,000 years. Not only must the factory ensure that it meets and exceeds recruiting quotas, but when we appoint persons to go fight the Americans, we must appoint persons who are advanced regarding ideology, health, and technical level."

At the same time, Hanoi newspapers report that hundreds of university students like Chu Tan Thanh, a student at the College of Medicine whose six brothers have already joined the army, and Pham Anh Dung, a fifth year chemistry student at Hanoi's elite Polytechnical College, are being told to postpone their studies and go into the army. "If graduation is not attained now, it will be done at a later time, while this is the only time to fight the Americans. The Fatherland is calling, the front lines are waiting."

The conscription of skilled workers and university students reflects the recent changes in North Vietnam's army. While South Vietnam was expanding and modernizing its armed forces as part of the Vietnamization program, a similar buildup was taking place in North Vietnam as the Soviet Union delivered increasing amounts of heavier and more sophisticated military equipment. The result of this Sovietization can be seen in the current offensive. It is a marked departure from North Vietnam's previous style of fighting. Ground assaults are preceded by artillery barrages and accompanied by tanks. An army that fights with modern weapons needs skilled technicians to operate the equipment, and manage the maintenance and logistics efforts necessary to keep it operating.

North Vietnam launched an unprecedented recruiting campaign prior to the offensive. Judging by numerous articles in the North Vietnamese press, it surpassed those of previous years. Special efforts were made to recruit more soldiers from sectors of the society whose members had often been permitted to avoid conscription, including sons of Party members, university students -- even those who had already been selected for advanced studies in Eastern Europe -- teachers, skilled workers, and sixth and seventh sons whose fathers and older brothers had already left for the front.

These aspects of the recruiting campaign suggest that the current offensive is a major gamble. North Vietnam's future trained manpower has been staked to provide the necessary human resources. The conscription of university students represents much more in North Vietnam than it does in the United States or even South Vietnam. Before students are selected for higher education in North Vietnam, they are carefully screened by the government for ideological reliability as well as mental aptitude. They represent an intellectual and ideological pick-of-the-crop. The Party and nation will depend on them for future leadership.

Giap was given the go ahead to launch his attack, but apparently only after some debate within the Politburo. Although Hanoi's leaders are united in their determination to continue the war until victory, there is some difference of opinion as to how this is to be done. Such debate emerges in articles and speeches by Politburo members. The dialogue takes place within narrow bounds as theologians would argue over vital issues of faith, each using the Scripture to support his interpretation, at all times careful not to slip into heresy. So it is with Hanoi's leaders, who say essentially the same things but in a different order, and cite different passages from Marx and Lenin to support their differing positions.

The pragmatists on the Politburo -- they can hardly be called doves -- are fervent in their commitment to the war effort, but they devote equal attention to developing industry and increasing agricultural production in North Vietnam. They carefully balance references to the armed struggle with references to the political struggle. The Politburo's two foremost military strategists, Truong Chinh and General Giap, talk more about the military struggle, but even they disagree over strategy. Truong Chinh, whose name means "Long March" befitting his adherence to the Chinese model of protracted warfare, favors a protracted struggle, waged by lightly equipped but highly motivated guerrillas. A guerrilla war in the South requires a smaller North Vietnamese investment than a conventional military contest enabling the North to devote more effort to its own industrial and agricultural development. Giap, despite his reputation in the United States as a master of guerrilla warfare, is a far more conventional professional soldier. He likes to consider himself

the Communist Napoleon of Asia and, like Napoleon, he favors decisive big-unit battles. He devotes more attention than Truong Chinh to the need for modern weapons, which the Russians more than the Chinese can supply.

Giap has gambled on big offensives before -- and lost. In 1951, pressured to produce some sort of victory after four years of hardship, and bolstered by Chinese military assistance which began to arrive in 1950, Giap launched three major offensives. The results were disastrous. Giap's army suffered 20,000 casualties and the retention of Giap as its commander was questioned, but his close relationship with Ho Chi Minh kept him in charge.

The high costs of the 1968 and 1969 offensives again brought Giap under fire. After Ho's death in September 1969, there was no one to protect him. Giap's political fortunes seemed to decline. In June of 1971 he was removed from his position as Vice Chairman of the National Defense Council, which is theoretically somewhat like our own National Security Council. He had held this position since 1960, answering only to the Council's chairman, Ho Chi Minh. More humiliating for Giap was the composition of the new Council in which he was placed fifth behind four civilians, including his arch-rival Truong Chinh. As North Vietnam's Minister of Defense, commander of its armed forces, and member of the ruling Politburo, where the most important military decisions are made, Giap remains a powerful man, but still he must have felt tremors in his political foundations. A smashing military victory would restore his reputation as a general and his political standing.

It may also bolster the political fortunes of another Politburo member, Le Duan. Le Duan is the man who, sixteen years ago, wrote the memorandum declaring that the takeover of the South by political means -- via the elections which had been scheduled as part of the Geneva agreements but refused by Diem -- had failed. Le urged that South Vietnam be taken over by an armed struggle instead. It was Le Duan who advocated the disastrous Tet offensive in 1968, a scheme to which, according to some reports, General Giap acquiesced reluctantly. More recently, Le Duan is reported to be disturbed by his rival Truong Chinh's growing power. Linked as he is with the struggle in the South, Le Duan may have opted for another war-ending offensive.

To lead the offensive, Giap chose one of his long-time lieutenants, General Van Tien Dung. General Dung owes his rise in the military to Giap and he is said to be intensely loyal to him. Dung commanded the 320th Division in the first Indochina War, represented the Viet Minh at the armistice discussions with the French, and accompanied Giap on his triumphant entry into Hanoi. Giap later advanced his appointment as army chief of staff.

It is ironic that the North Vietnamese are abandoning their terrible tenacity for tanks. It is also ironic that General Giap, who has engaged the United States Army -- the most powerful conventional army in the world -- should risk so much by sponsoring the very form of warfare that he did so much to discredit. A commitment to a military victory soon, as opposed to wearing South Vietnam down in a protracted struggle, poses grave risks for North Vietnam. To get the resources he needed for a conventional invasion of South Vietnam, Giap must surely have had to promise results commensurate with so large an investment. He had to convince others that conditions were favorable in the South for him to achieve a military victory.

Therein lies a trap: Instead of the course of action being determined by the assessment of the situation, the commitment to a course of action begins to determine the assessment of the situation. The planned operation starts to generate its own intelligence, which is almost always favorable to the planned operation. Many generals, including not a few of our own, have deluded themselves in this manner.

Small nations simply cannot field large armies in a conventional war indefinitely. It is too costly. The postponement of all other forms of national development while the war continues, the mortgaging of the country's skilled manpower, the promise -- indeed the requirement that they will return -- suggest for the first time a time limit. Ho Chi Minh always spoke of fighting fifteen or twenty years, or longer. But can North Vietnam support a conventional army in the South for fifteen years? Could its society and its economy withstand for fifteen or twenty years the recruiting drives that strip industry of its skilled workers and that send its university students into combat?

It would be unwise to suggest that North Vietnam cannot continue the war, or that it is about to cave in. Indochina is littered with

such predictions and the reputations of the men who made them. By now the tenacity of the North Vietnamese should be well recognized and properly respected. But fighting a limited war as North Vietnam has done in the past, and fighting the conventional war of the present are two different things. The North Vietnamese have sharply increased the cost to themselves.

One cannot help but wonder what made the Politburo go along with Giap. Did the North Vietnamese hear that South Vietnam was really growing stronger or did they believe that the South was on the verge of collapse and one good push would cause it to crumble? Did they fear that their Soviet and Chinese backers were about to abandon them? Did they believe that this was their last chance for another four years to influence political developments in the United States? Or were there some other pressures from within North Vietnam that caused its leaders to risk so much in one push?

But while the tremendous costs of pursuing conventional military strategy may limit North Vietnam's capability to pursue the war indefinitely and emerge at the end of it with anything more than the remnants of an army and a badly battered economy, General Giap and others in Hanoi may now be more reluctant than ever to abandon the effort. In Giap's probable view of things, he has three options.

The first would be to call off the offensive, that is, halt the current attacks, request or agree to a cease-fire, regroup the army, and depend for future gains on what the National Liberation Front can achieve through a political struggle in the South, or on what North Vietnam can achieve through negotiations. This would be more than a temporary stand-down to await the arrival of fresh troops from the North. Giap would have to abandon the strategy of achieving a military victory through conventional attacks. He would also have to permit the return of some of his more highly skilled soldiers to their vital civilian tasks.

Despite the costs of continuing the offensive, to abandon it now seems unlikely. A military effort of that scale is difficult to call off. It is organizationally disruptive and can be militarily dangerous.

Nor will Giap want to call it off. He does not have sole responsibility for military strategy, but he is the architect of the conventional, big war approach. He has laid his career on the line in arguing for the resources to fight a conventional war. He will be credited with its success -- or blamed for its failure.

More important than the reputation of generals, members of the Politburo collectively decided on the offensive. They have demanded from the people even greater sacrifices than before on the grounds that victory is near. They cannot so easily reverse themselves. To abandon the offensive prematurely would raise doubts about their judgment in the first place, which is something no political leadership likes to have happen. Long after the returns from the 1968 offensive ceased to justify the growing casualties, North Vietnam continued its attacks.

Abandonment also would raise doubts among the Viet Cong in South Vietnam about North Vietnam's reliability as an ally. That a nation must keep on fighting if only to demonstrate its steadfastness as an ally is old argument. It has been heard before in the United States. The upcoming presidential election in the United States provides another reason for not quitting now. North Vietnam will have to wait another four years before it again has so much leverage on U.S. politics.

Giap's second option would be to gear down and return to Phase II, a less conventional form of warfare with greater reliance on hit-and-run tactics, the avoidance of pitched battles, and a smaller manpower commitment from the North. To meet this kind of threat, South Vietnam would still have to maintain a large and debilitating defense establishment, which would become more and more difficult, given the likelihood of decreasing American assistance. Instead of attempting to conquer South Vietnam militarily, North Vietnam could wait for the South to collapse under the weight of its own army.

Heavy losses may eventually compel Giap to gear down, but certainly this is not his preferred style of fighting, and having once gone all out for conventional war, it is not easy to do. First of all, it would require the entire hierarchy of military managers and staffs that has

been set up for conventional warfare to dismantle itself, something all managers and staffs are loath to do. Second, the North Vietnamese army may no longer be good for that sort of thing. When armies are given trucks, they forget how to walk. When soldiers are trained to fight with tanks and artillery support, they find it hard to fight without.

Giap's third option is to press on with his conventional war. He may halt his attacks in one area to regroup his forces and attack in another area, thus keeping ARVN on the run from one battlefield to another. Or he may continue to hammer away at certain objectives, Hue for example, which as the country's former imperial capital and, incidentally, as the place where Giap's father was imprisoned by the French and died, remains an obsession of the North Vietnamese. Everywhere else, Giap would try to hold the territory he has gained.

The invasion has already achieved some success. It has brought new territory under the control of North Vietnam; it demonstrated that South Vietnam's army continues to rely heavily upon massive U.S. air support; it has compelled South Vietnam to commit its entire reserve force, thereby causing the remaining divisions to avoid actions that might tie them down. This in turn causes the South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces to bottle up or take off, allowing the Viet Cong cadres, who have lain low for years, to once again walk through hamlets at night. They need do no more than that in order to send the message through the countryside: "Avoid committing yourself to the Government's side; nothing is secure."

Giap, therefore, is likely to call for a continuation of the maximum effort, despite mounting casualties and diminishing returns. To continue the offensive requires no major decision as would calling it off. It risks none of the potential disruption that accompanies a radical change in tactics. Armies can sustain casualties easier than they can sustain change. And Giap has already demonstrated his willingness to take enormous casualties to achieve his objectives.

Successful combat generals exude confidence. It is hard to imagine being led into battle by a pessimist. Having staked everything on success

now, Giap, of course, wants to believe he is winning. He is going to say he is winning. Unless his army is different from all other armies in history, the briefings he receives will tell him that he is right.

Despite the Communist tradition of self-criticism, it is difficult for any army to admit failure. Armies have a "can do" philosophy. They reflect the attitude of their commanders. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news, least of all where the Old Man has committed himself to victory. If he says they are winning, his field commanders will try to confirm that they are. This ensures that the reports of success get back to Giap a lot faster than reports of failures.

Giap himself no doubt is aware of this phenomenon. It occurs in all large organizations, and he can make mental adjustments to get a truer picture of the battlefield. But generals are optimists and believe in their own luck. Probably no one but Giap knows just how much things were really fouled up at Dien Bien Phu, how much he owes his victory there to French mistakes and his own sheer luck. If he can keep the offensive going now, Fortune may hand him another enemy mistake.

Whatever his personal doubts, Giap is not about to admit them to other members of the Politburo. The battle reports come to him first. He can select what he wants them to see, and what they will be predisposed to see. The Politburo, however, has other channels of information. Party cadres positioned at every level of the army's chain of command report directly to the Party leadership, not to the military. There is also the information and espionage net controlled by the Minister of Public Security. Through these sources the Politburo is liable to receive reports that contradict military claims of success in the South. When that happens, the debate among Hanoi's leaders, whose political fortunes are involved, may intensify.

There is, after all, a heavy price to be paid for carrying on a conventional war in South Vietnam. Even with foreign assistance, North Vietnam will be weakened by the heavy drain on its resources that a conventional war imposes. North Vietnam, which barely manages to feed itself in a good year, will remain dependent on foreign assistance not

only for the weapons of conventional warfare, but will become increasingly dependent on foreign allies for nonmilitary assistance as well to keep its economy going while its workers fight at the front. Hanoi will thus become more vulnerable to pressure by its allies, something it has always avoided.

What about internal pressure? We seldom hear of debate among the people of North Vietnam. Even allowing for the fact that the North Vietnamese press is an outlet for government views and not an expression of public opinion, the North Vietnamese rank among the most disciplined people in the world. There is never any mention of dissent, only occasional evidence of war-weariness. But since 1971 a new element has been added to the population. Disabled veterans of the war are a growing cause of public concern. The government is worried that their presence might diminish the people's enthusiasm for the war. A Hanoi newspaper, for example, recently reported word had spread in Catholic areas that soldiers returning wounded had been punished by an angry God for joining the army. The government, which has always looked upon the Catholics as potential subversives, quickly suppressed the rumor before it could undermine recruiting.

Another new element is that university students and sons of Party members are being sent to the front. Previously they had managed to get the scholarships and jobs that exempted them from the draft. Today, the fate of North Vietnam's individual soldier is no longer the sole concern of easily disciplined peasants. The war has hit the upper sectors of society.

There is possibly a fourth option which combines elements of a cease-fire, a stage-managed urban uprising, and a final military push. A cease-fire arranged in the near future would allow the North Vietnamese to maintain at least some of their forward positions. Meanwhile, Viet Cong agents and sappers could continue to infiltrate into Saigon and, at some future date, perhaps shortly before the elections in the United States, they would launch an urban uprising. It would not necessarily be one, but a few riots and enough explosions could make it look like one. The North Vietnamese army, having used the respite to strengthen

itself, would then rush forward to support the apparent revolution. The South Vietnamese army would be caught between Saigon and other fronts at a time when the U.S. president might be reluctant to intervene.

But for reasons of his own, Giap is likely to oppose a cease-fire. He can always remind others that the Viet Cong promised such uprisings in 1968, but when his army was committed, they never materialized. Giap is not Lenin; he is a general. He would certainly prefer an orderly military victory to a chaotic revolution in Saigon. It would, after all, be more befitting the conventional army he has so carefully constructed. It would make Giap the most powerful postwar figure in Vietnam -- all Vietnam. Toward that objective, the seventh son now marches.

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