



'Year of Decision' For North Vietnam

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WHILE the result remains uncertain, the most interesting aspect of Hanoi's current offensive is the parallel with the Tet offensive in 1968. Both differences and similarities are remarkably revealing.

To begin with, Hanoi's official propagandists have used precisely the same phrase, "the year of decision," in both these cases of huge, convulsive effort. Before Tet, the Viet Cong saturated the towns and countryside of South Vietnam with claims that a "general uprising" would bring "final victory" in "the year of decision."

This year, the North Vietnamese press and radio have been telling the towns and countryside of North Vietnam that the new "year of decision" would bring an early end to the war.

The totality of effort is again identical. For the Tet offensive, the Viet Cong leaders threw into battle every military unit of the VC. In every town attacked, the native VC units were the point battalions — and thus the battalions that suffered far the most.

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FOR THE present offensive the Hanoi war planners have similarly engaged every North Vietnamese division and regiment that they could muster, including their entire reserve.

Schematically, therefore, the two patterns are identical. But there is also this enormous difference. In 1968, the Viet Cong in South Vietnam were the ones who were called upon for the total effort, with the North Vietnamese army units in a supporting role. Whereas this time, the

North Vietnamese army itself is being called upon for total effort.

But what will happen if the North Vietnamese army suffers this year as the Viet Cong suffered in 1968?

One school, including ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, holds that Hanoi will simply try again later on, even if the present offensive proves a sanguinary failure — which is far from sure, as yet. This school's argument depends on official U.S. calculations that credit North Vietnam with all but limitless manpower reserves.

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THE MAKERS of the calculations were also responsible for the old estimate of the number of VC guerrillas, which was excessive by a factor of six. But to challenge the official calculations, there is almost nothing but random testimony from prisoners of war.

For example, one of the North Vietnamese POW's, a recently taken 17-year-old draftee, has just told of his village and his district literally stripped of all men capable of bearing arms.

In fact, if the truth is being obtained from this youngster, and from a good many others like him, the above-mentioned official U.S. calculations of Hanoi's manpower reserves are nearly as wrong as the old guerrilla estimate.

On that assumption, the present "year of decision" could prove climactic. But no one can tell which assumption is correct. And more important still, no one can tell, as yet, what result will be finally produced by the "year of decision's" total North Vietnamese effort.