



Crisis in Vietnam Recalls Dienbienphu

— Joseph Alsop

Saigon

THESE will be more bad news before there is good news, unless Hanoi's war planners are astonishingly unlucky. In the central highlands of this country, hardly more than one government division is opposing three North Vietnamese divisions.

Hereabouts, in the provinces surrounding Saigon, the signs suggest that Hanoi has already had bad luck. The order to take An Loc "at all costs" has in fact cost a good part of another three North Vietnamese divisions. The South Vietnamese have also suffered heavy losses; but unless Saigon is appallingly unfortunate, the other side is due for eventual defeat in this area.

Meanwhile, however, all depends on the battle in the north. The rest will hardly matter if the new corps commander in the north, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, can only organize a solid defense of Hue.

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IT IS worth noting that as matters stand today, Hanoi can lose this war, as well as win it. This is the first time Hanoi has risked so much since the second struggle for Vietnam began.

The analogy, ominously, is with the battle at Dienbienphu in 1954. By that time, the Communists were perilously close to exhaustion in their war with the French. But they had two uncommitted assets, which they used for a decisive gamble.

The assets were a couple of fresh divisions in training in China, across the border, plus a large number of big guns,

which won the battle at Dienbienphu.

All successful generals tend to repeat themselves. The worst feature of General Vo Nguyen Giap's plan for the Tet Offensive in 1968, was an attempt to make the siege of Khe Sanh into a mini-Dienbienphu. Giap wasted two divisions at Khe Sanh that might just have been enough to run Tet into an irreversible disaster.

This time, the repetition in the planning is again clear. As at Dienbienphu, all of Hanoi's remaining reserves have been committed to the great offensive. Yet the analogy, although ominous, also has its other side as well. In interviews with Communist journalists after Dienbienphu, General Giap himself admitted that literally everything had been risked upon this one last throw of the military dice. Defeat would have followed, he admitted, if that single battle had not been won.

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THIS IS where the present offensive recalls Tet in 1968. That year, General Giap was fairly prudent in his use of North Vietnam's Army. But he ruthlessly committed the entire armed forces of the Viet Cong of South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong never recovered thereafter.

This year, as already noted, the entire armed forces of North Vietnam have been committed, with equal ruthlessness.

This year, moreover, the North Vietnamese invaders will be defeated in the end — unless they are the winners. There can be no indecisive stalemate. If the Saigon government's troops are not smashed, then the North Vietnamese will be irrecoverably smashed.