

North Vietnamese will be defeated in the end, unless they are winners

SAIGON — There 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. And as these words are written, the North Vietnamese drive to take Kontum City has not begun in earnest.

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 really 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, the brave and able Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, can only organize a solid defense of Hue.

Or rather the rest will hardly matter, unless the present outlook in the provinces around Saigon proves to be deceptive. Heavy government losses in the center will not bring the victory that Hanoi seeks. In the north or hereabouts, the war will be won or lost.

All hangs upon a knife edge, in sum. But it is still 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, such as the French troops had never seen. The French high command did not believe the big guns could be deployed and used. But the French high command was dead wrong. So the two fresh divisions, plus the new big guns, won the

battle at Dienbienphu.

All successful generals tend to repeat themselves. The worst feature of Gen. 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 turn 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. Even the North Vietnamese training depots are being cannibalized to get raw cannon fodder. And as at Dienbienphu, the unprecedented North Vietnamese employment of both armor and heavy artillery has introduced a quite new element into the fighting.

Yet the analogy, although ominous, also has its other side as well. In interviews with Communist journalists after Dienbienphu, Gen. 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, or even if the French had had the will to continue the war for another year after the battle.

This is where the present offensive recalls Tet in 1968. That year, Gen. 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. In the upshot, after a very bad time, the armed forces of the Viet Cong were just about completely destroyed. 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. The price already paid has been so high that one hates to think of it. There is hard intelligence, for instance, that the North Vietnamese divisions have already sent 22,000 wounded back up the trail toward Hanoi.

This year, moreover, the North Vietnamese invaders will be defeated in the end—unless they are the winners. There can be no indecisive stalemate, in other words.