

North Vietnamese Viewed The Costly

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 23—Just when North Vietnam's offensive began at the end of March, an authoritative Communist official explained to Vietcong officials that "our general offensive is designed to defeat the enemy's Vietnamization plan, force the enemy to acknowledge his defeat and accept a political settlement on our terms."

The terms the Communists wanted, the official wrote in a little-noted article in the Vietcong magazine Tien Phong, were "a transitional government at the upper level while we seize control at the lower level and proceed toward the formation of a three-segment coalition government."

Reviewing this article and other captured Communist documents recently, American intelligence specialists have concluded that Hanoi's goal all along in 1972 was precisely to get a negotiated settlement.

"Sometime late in 1971 Hanoi must have calculated that the war was a stalemate neither side could win decisively," said an American analyst with many years' experience in Vietnam, "so they decided to make one last big push to get the best possible settlement and then take their chances on winning the peace."

An Expensive Policy

Exactly what peace terms Hanoi originally thought its offensive would produce is not clear, but the road to a settlement has been an expensive one:

Between 100,000 and 130,000 North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers have lost their lives or been disabled since the offensive began, American sources say.

Thirty-six thousand South Vietnamese soldiers have been killed, the sources report, and 90,000 wounded.

A million South Vietnamese civilians have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the Communist offensive or United States bombing in response to it. That is the largest forced migration in Vietnam since the Geneva accords ended the first Indochina war in 1954.

Dozens of cities, towns, and villages have been obliterated—to name a few of the more

prominent, Quang Tri and An Loc in South Vietnam, Nam Dinh and much of Haiphong in the North.

Whatever else the North Vietnamese offensive accomplished, it reversed the military trend that had favored the Government since the failure of the Communist's Lunar New Year offensive in 1968.

From then until 1971 American and South Vietnamese troops broke up almost all large Communist units, pushed them back across the border into Laos, Cambodia or North Vietnam, and opened up much of the countryside that had been under Vietcong control for years. Even in the populous and fertile Mekong Delta, long a guerrilla stronghold, the roads were suddenly safe and rice flowed to the Saigon market.

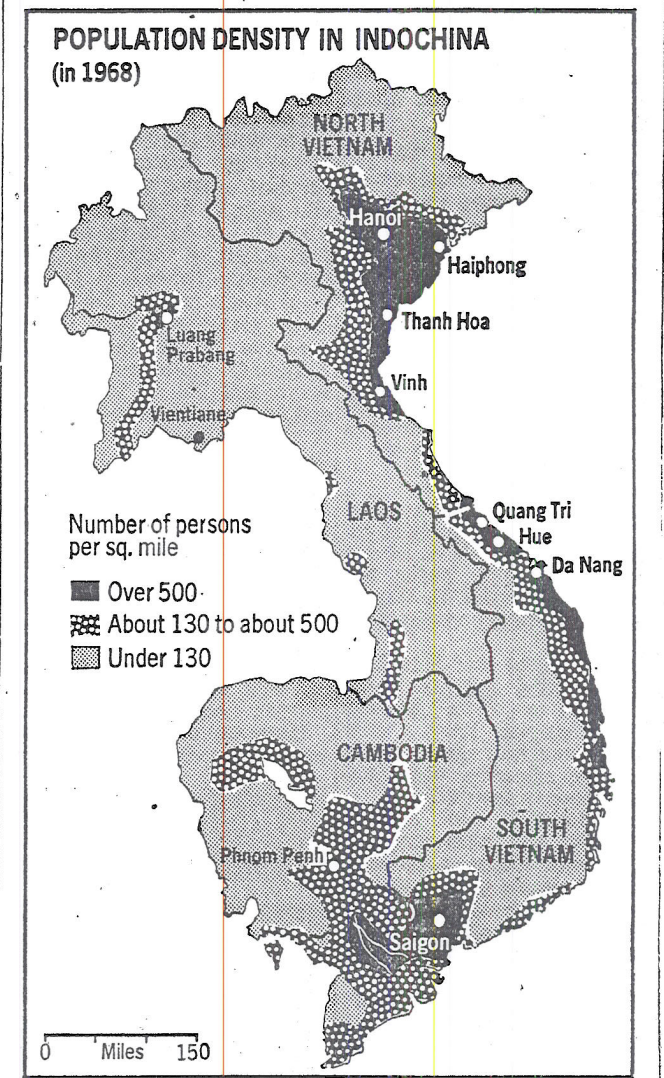
When the Communist attacks finally came last spring, they were the clearest possible indication that 500,000 American troops had really accomplished something, for each assault came from the sanctuaries outside South Vietnam's borders into which the Communists had been pushed.

The first blow fell where least expected — on the string of fire bases just below the demilitarized zone in northern Quang Tri Province. On March 30 North Vietnamese gunners opened up a barrage of tens of thousands of rounds from 130-mm. field pieces carefully hidden in North Vietnam or the DMZ.

The South Vietnamese defenders, for reasons never explained by either the Saigon or United States commands were an untested unit, the Third Division, that had just been thrown together. As 25,000 North Vietnamese infantrymen advanced on them — backed by perhaps 300 heavy Soviet tanks and surface-to-air missiles—the division fled in panic.

3 Enemy Divisions Attacked

The second blow fell a week later as the North Vietnamese Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Divisions streamed out of the Cambodian jungle to attack in Binh Long Province 50 miles north of Saigon. They were backed by at least 100 tanks and scores of heavy antiaircraft



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Population centers in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are mostly in areas dominated by Government forces.

guns that had been smuggled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam.

How could the enemy have moved all that equipment without being spotted by the United States Air Force? Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, then the United States commander, was reported to be first surprised and then furious. "He was practically pounding his fists on the table in those first few days of briefing," said a junior officer who was at American headquarters. "Where the hell's the Air Force?" he'd say. "How come they didn't know about those

tanks? Don't they hit anything on the Ho Chi Minh Trail?"

The South Vietnamese force in Binh Long, the Fifth Division, quickly fell back and was surrounded at An Loc, the small provincial capital. Outnumbered and outgunned, it held on bravely but suffered casualties of nearly 100 per cent.

From Base Area in Laos

The Government's 21st Division, rushed up from the Mekong Delta to try to relieve An Loc, ignominiously failed to advance more than a few miles up Route 13 toward the town — and lost half its men anyway.

The third major assault—

Spring Drive as Crucial for a Settlement

in Kontum Province, in the mountainous, sparsely populated Central Highlands—was the one allied officers had most often predicted, but it did not come until April 24.

Attacking from a base area across the Laotian border, the North Vietnamese, again backed by tanks, overran the headquarters of the 22d Division at Tan Canh. The South Vietnamese broke and fled back to Kontum city, which the frightened residents evacuated.

In early April it looked as if a complete rout was under way. Vietnamization, President Nixon's heralded program for getting the United States out of the war and turning it over to the improved South Vietnamese Army, never looked more hollow.

What was wrong, American officers rapidly discovered, was the same thing that had always bedeviled Saigon's forces—poor leadership and lack of will. A system of promotion based on nepotism and personal loyalty just could not produce first-class officers.

When North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops launched a fourth but smaller attack on the central coast east of Kontum, in Binh Dinh Province. Government officials and army officers simply fled in their jeeps and armored cars, leaving the troops to fend for themselves.

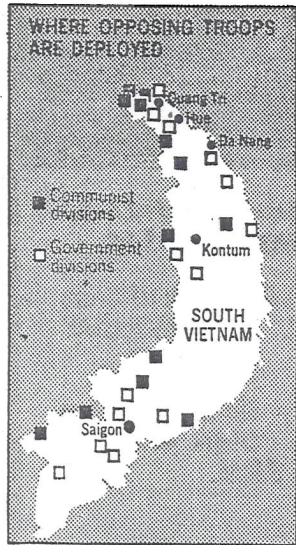
Some Distinguished Units

In Hoai An District, the district chief paused only long enough to load up his refrigerator. After that, his American adviser recalled, "we lost all our militia units—they just piled up their arms and faded away."

Although some South Vietnamese units fought with genuine distinction—the marines, the Airborne Division, the First Division in the hills west of Hue—President Nguyen Van Thieu replaced 11 of his 13 division commanders before the offensive was over.

With South Vietnam perhaps near collapse, Vietnamization was put aside, and an armada of United States planes and ships was assembled to stop the North Vietnamese.

Eight hundred Air Force, Navy and Marine fighter-



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bombers began flying 300 missions a day against targets in North Vietnam and an equal number in the South. Over 200 B-52 heavy bombers, which carry up to 30 tons of bombs apiece, began making a record number of daily strikes against North Vietnam, ranging as far as Haiphong, and the United States Navy put together a fleet of 6 aircraft carriers and 35 cruisers and destroyers—the largest task force since World War II.

Technically, President Nixon continued Vietnamization as United States troop strength in South Vietnam itself fell from 120,000 men in March, before the offensive, to 23,700 today. While Mr. Nixon told the country that the war would have to go on until the United States got its prisoners back, 126 more pilots were shot down and listed as missing in North Vietnam.

Little Turmoil in Saigon

Under the pressure of the bombardment, plus the mining of North Vietnam's harbors, in May, the Communist offensive was gradually checked in late May and June. Hue, the former imperial capital bordering on Quang Tri, did not fall and its residents, who had fled, slowly returned.

Throughout the offensive the Saigon Government remained surprisingly free of turmoil, with the usually vocal opposi-

tion scared by the intensity of the Communist attacks. Thanks to a troop-replacement system that was improved last year after the disastrous invasion of Laos, South Vietnamese Army losses were quickly made up with freshly trained recruits.

Even Quang Tri city was retaken by the South Vietnamese marines after a tortuous three-month campaign, personally ordered by President Thieu, that left not a house or a tree.

In October the North Vietnamese and Vietcong shifted to a less costly tactic, using small units to infiltrate hamlets and cut the highways around Saigon. According to United States intelligence sources, the Communists had received orders to seize as much territory as possible before the cease-fire, but they achieved little of permanence.

The North Vietnamese, it appeared, had made some damaging miscalculations of their own. The nine men in the Politburo who formulate policy clearly had not anticipated that President Nixon could so easily override antiwar sentiment at home and resume the bombing of the North.

The Mining and the B-52's

Nor had the leaders in Hanoi apparently expected that he would mine the harbors, risking intervention by the Soviet Union and China. Perhaps most critical, the North Vietnamese had not appreciated the awesome power of B-52's when employed tactically against infantry around Quang Tri, Kontum and An Loc.

At the end of the summer, then, with the offensive stalled and troops and supplies exhausted, the North Vietnamese leaders decided to make their bid for a negotiated settlement, the United States intelligence officers here theorize. Hanoi had planned all along to get some sort of peace by the end of the year, the sources believe, but now it had to make more concessions than it had originally intended.

In any case, as Hanoi viewed it, peace would only mean shifting from a military struggle to a political one.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!

Vietnam War Casualties

MILITARY

(1961 through Jan. 13, 1973)
United States—45,933 killed and 303,616 wounded (with 153,300 of these requiring hospitalization).

South Vietnam—183,528 killed and 499,026 wounded (all requiring hospitalization).

North Vietnam and Vietcong—924,048 (an estimate by South Vietnamese command; figures on wounded not available).

CIVILIAN

415,000 South Vietnamese civilians killed and 935,000 wounded as result of combat, 1965 through 1972 (estimates provided by United States Senate Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees).

31,463 South Vietnamese killed and 49,000 abducted as result of Vietcong actions against civilians, 1966 through 1972 (figures from United States Defense Department).

20,587 killed and 28,978 jailed as result of Saigon Government actions against civilian Vietcong, 1968 through May, 1971 (figures from Agency for International Development).