REVIEW ESSAY

MacDonald, Peter. *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam.* New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.

In reading this book disappointment came quickly to this reviewer. The bibliography of this 368-page book was brief to the point of paucity; less than three pages long, consisting almost entirely of secondary sources. Some entries seemed purposeless, almost irrelevant to a biographical study of Vo Nguyen Giap, including such books as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Ward Just's *Military Men.* The name of Robert Pisor, author of *The End of the Line,* was misspelled as "Pissor." Only six of Giap's writings were listed, yet at least forty-five of his published works can be located with only a little effort. Surely a biographer would want to read as much as possible written by his subject. The bibliography had no category for letters, document collections, unpublished studies, articles, or declassified materials from intelligence agencies. Tacked at the end of the bibliography, almost as an afterthought, were two sentence fragments: "Plus fourteen taped interviews with Vietnamese veterans and officials. Also taped interviews with Generals Marcelle Bigeard and William C. Westmoreland." A poor bibliography can be forgiven if it is backed by extensive notes containing requisite material. In this case, there were none. An inadequate listing of sources in a book with no notes is like a rudderless ship with no anchor.

Moreover, MacDonald's *Giap* contained no preface, introduction or foreword. Even the illustrations were printed without credit-lines. At that point I was already convinced of one certainty: whatever else this book might be, one of its qualities would not be shared scholarship.

That said, MacDonald and his publisher must be pleased by the reception his new book has so far received. The estimable Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., in *The New York Times* book review section,[1] described it as a "balanced and most readable biography." Douglas Pike, writing in the latest issue of his *Indochina Chronology,*[2] claimed MacDonald's effort to be a "well done full scale biography." *The Economist* recently included a review of this work,[3] in which the writer concludes that "MacDonald gives a highly readable account of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, much of it from General Giap's vantage point." We are told that the author "bases much of his book on interviews with General Giap," and that the account "tries to be objective." Best of all, the book has been selected as an offering by the Military Book Club.

By the time I finished carefully reading *Giap,* I knew that I would have to differ with my peers. Some of the problems with this book are writ large; others are only minor. Taken together, however, the number of errors is astonishing and all diminish the importance of this book to the vanishing point. I call *Giap* a work without redeeming historical, literary or biographical merit, riddled with errors, lacking understanding, and misleading in its text.

To begin with, the publisher's blurb on the book's dust jacket claims that "Here, for the first time, is the full story of the general who humbled both the French and the Americans in Vietnam . . . as seen through the eyes of its brilliant, enigmatic, and ultimately triumphant commander." We also read there that "In 1990 [the author] went to Hanoi at the invitation of the Vietnamese government to interview General Vo Nguyen Giap . . .. Never before had a western writer been offered the opportunity to study the Indochina and Vietnam wars from the Vietnamese point of view . . .. Out of this research comes a balanced, fascinating portrait of one of the greatest military commanders of all time . . .." That is great hype. However, the book provides no new insights into Giap's life and psyche. Upon finishing the book readers may believe they have been informed about that important general. They will be wrong.

Psychiatrists and psychologists tell us that the character of adults is determined in large part by the events and circumstances of their youth. Modern biographers believe that, and consequently study and analyze the childhoods of their subjects with great care. MacDonald misses the mark, ignoring huge portions of Giap's life, including both his formative years during which his ideas were molded and the long decades since his removal from the center of power. He disposes of the early years of the young Giap (1911-1939) in eight and one-half pages. In even those few passages, MacDonald manages to mangle his facts thoroughly.

MacDonald correctly tells us (p. 16) that Vo Nguyen Giap was born in An Xa village in Quang Binh Province. The date, however, was 25 (not 28) August 1911. MacDonald does not know the name of Giap's father (Vo Quang Nghiem) or mother (Nguyen Thi Kien). He informs us (p. 18) that Giap's father, although a poor farmer, was also a *lettré*, a scholar of local distinction and a mandarin of the second class. This information is both in error and incomplete. Vo Quang Nghiem held the lowest (not the second) mandarin rank — ninth grade, civil corps — and he served as a secretary for the French *Résident* in Quang Binh Province. Nor was he as poor as most of his fellows for he owned two hectares of rice land (one hectare = 2.471 acres), nearly five acres in total, some of which he farmed for himself while renting the rest to others.[4] MacDonald then tells us (p. 19) that Giap's father was "arrested for subversive activities in 1919 and after a few weeks died in prison."

That would certainly come as surprising news to Nghiem's grand-daughter — Giap's oldest child — Hong Anh. She recalls that Nghiem died in 1947 or 1948 "during the resistance time against the French."[5]

Files from the French intelligence services have tended to confirm the account given by Hong Anh. Giap's communist activities in the 1930s and 1940s alienated him from his father Nghiem. As Minister of the Interior in 1946, Giap went to An Xa to visit his father, who was Confucian and very attached to ancestral traditions. Nghiem refused to see him, saying that Giap had "betrayed the moral ideals of the nation by placing himself in the employ of a foreign ideology which had for [its] sole purpose the destruction of nationalism, the family, tradition, and the nation's religious philosophy."[6]

When French forces returned, they arrested Nghiem for his nationalism, and demanded that he publicly denounce his son. The old man refused and was placed in solitary confinement. Finally, he was taken to Hue and for several weeks forced to broadcast radio appeals asking Giap to lay down his arms. French files claim that in November 1947, finally worn out by torture and bad treatment, the old man died.[7] If anything was still needed to cement Giap's hatred toward the French, this latter incident did so sufficiently. All this information was also available to MacDonald had he but asked. One wonders why he did not do so.

We read on page 19 that Giap had two sisters and was the elder of two sons. Again, the text is incorrect. Kien, Giap's mother, bore *eight* children, three of whom died during childhood.[8]

MacDonald ignores Giap's early years of education at local schools in An Xa and Dai Phong. Then he writes on p. 19 that Giap left his home village for more schooling in Hue in 1924 when he was thirteen; in fact, it was 1923.[9] MacDonald calls the school (p. 19) the *Lycée National* (*sic*); it was better known as *Lycée Quoc Hoc*. It was Hai Trieu, one of his friends and fellow classmates, who lent Giap the book by Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh), rather than Nguyen Chi Dieu, whom MacDonald wrongly identifies (p. 21) as a local politician. Dieu was actually one of Giap's close friends and a fellow teen-aged student.

Contrary to MacDonald's claim (p. 31), Giap did not return to his home village of An Xa following his expulsion from *Lycée Quoc Hoc*. Nor did he ever persuade "the authorities to allow him to return to school in Hue." Instead, he remained for some time in Hue organizing an underground nationalist reading library. He also began at that time a career and life-long interest in newspaper reporting and writing.

MacDonald's litany of errors continues nearly without pause. He states (p. 21) that Giap fell afoul of the law and served three months imprisonment for his youthful political activities. Not so. In 1930 Giap participated in the general strike called to protest the execution of the Yen Bay nationalist insurgents following an abortive uprising. The French arrested Giap a few months later and sentenced him to two years hard labor. He served only thirteen months, at Lao Bao, a French prison near the Laotian border. Released early with the proviso that he return to his home village, Giap chose instead to go to Hue where, for a time, he resumed his newspaper work and then moved to Vinh.[10] There he began a shadowy and mysterious relationship with André Marty, the French police commissar in Vinh, who later became *Directeur des Affaires Politique du Gouvernement Général* (Director of the Political Bureau, Office of the Governor General) in Hanoi.

For some reason, Marty began a sponsorship of Giap which allowed the young man to study privately for, and pass, the French-required *baccalaureate* examination required of all who hoped to begin university studies. He allowed Giap to move freely from Hue to Vinh to Hanoi at a time when the young man was supposedly under house arrest in An Xa. This was unique; under French colonial authority, Vietnamese troublemakers never got a second chance. If they were

expelled from school, their education ended. There was no recourse from this rigidity.[11]

Yet Marty sponsored Giap's entry to the *Lycée Albert Sarraut* in the northern capital and later to the University of Hanoi. Why, when friends and acquaintances all around him were arrested, exiled, imprisoned or guillotined, did Giap escape unscathed? How did he merit such rewards? What was his relationship with Marty? This might have been sufficiently important for a conscientious biographer to explore, but MacDonald tells us nothing about it.

MacDonald consistently misspells French names, but he is hopelessly at sea with the Vietnamese language. For example, MacDonald states that Giap named his first military force, created in 1944, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (p. 61), which means the *People's Army Daily* (a newspaper). Giap's army was *Tuyen Truyen Giai Phong Quan* (Armed Propaganda and Liberation Brigade). MacDonald also completely muddles the names of Giap's two wives.

He repeats as fact (p. 74) the empty gossip, started by French journalists in the 1940s and 1950s, that Giap was a "swinger" in Hanoi in the immediate post-war years, and that Ho Chi Minh had to interfere to curtail his womanizing. The author does not know when Giap learned of the death of his beloved first wife Quang Thai (p. 31) nor does he tell how she died. Two high-ranking French officers, General Raoul Salan and General Jacques Massu have confirmed that she was tortured to the point of death whereupon she committed suicide.[12]

MacDonald does not know that Major Allison Kent Thomas led the American OSS Deer Team that parachuted into northern Viet Nam in 1944; he gives this honor to Archimedes Patti while writing (p. 35) that Thomas headed another group. He claims that Giap's soldiers finally abandoned Hanoi on 17 November 1946 in a fighting retreat in the face of advancing French troops. (p. 78) Wrong again. It was not until 19 December that Giap even issued a national call to arms, with generalized fighting breaking out the next day. The last of Giap's soldiers did not abandon Hanoi and retreat into the vastness of the northern Viet Nam until 17 February 1947.

Nor is his telling of the long years of competition between Giap and Truong Chinh sufficient. The only hint we have of the desperate jealousies in the politburo between Giap and Truong Chinh comes on page 177 when we are told that the latter "was sometimes to have differences of opinion with Giap, partly because for a time he supplanted Giap . . . as one of the favored deputies to Ho Chi Minh." How can MacDonald tell "the full story" of Giap's life and omit any discussion of his political struggles with Truong Chinh?

They worked together for years in the late 1930s and early 1940s and became close friends. Truong Chinh watched, in 1945, as Giap took advantage of his dual position as Minister of the Interior and Under Secretary of State for National Defense to enlist 1,500 fanatically "anti-white" Japanese military personnel who offered their services to him following Japan's surrender to the Allies. These soldiers were led by 230 noncommissioned officers and 47 gendarmes of the

Kempetai, all of whom were wanted by the Allies for war crimes. The entire group was commanded by Colonel Mukayama from the General Staff of the 38th Japanese Army. Giap arranged for them all to receive Vietnamese citizenship and false identification papers. Mukayama became one of Giap's firm supporters.

Towards the end of March 1946, however, when Ho Chi Minh promoted Giap to the rank of general and made him commander-in-chief of the People's Liberation Army, Truong Chinh sensed how rapidly Giap's power was outstripping his own. Claiming that Giap was insufficiently competent to command an army, Truong Chinh succeeded in placing General Nguyen Son as his chief of staff. Son was the only Vietnamese communist officer with professional military training, having attended the Moscow Military Academy. He also commanded a Chinese communist regiment during Mao's long march.

Truong Chinh also succeeded in having the army placed under the control of political commissars by creating the Political Bureau of the People's Liberation Army. This office, which exercised its authority at all levels, was under Truong Chinh's sole and direct control. Truong Chinh then placed one of his most reliable men, General Van Tien Dung at the head of the Bureau. And Giap found those around him dying sudden deaths.

Colonel Mukayama was killed in December 1947 at Cho Chu during a battle with French paratroopers. General Nguyen Son died from a bullet in the back after organizing the giant Viet Minh ambush of the Cao Bang/Langson garrison which ended in disaster for the French Army. So Giap turned to Truong Chinh's man, General Van Tien Dung, and made of him a protégé of his own. Due to their close contact under battlefield conditions, the two men gradually became friends and close allies. This hardly pleased Truong Chinh.

The disagreement between Truong Chinh and Giap reached a critical point in 1950 when Truong Chinh ordered the execution of Giap's Chief of Logistical Services, Tran Chi Chau. Then, intoxicated by success following his victory at Cao Bang/Langson, Giap made a series of mistakes. He launched his elite division three times into open combat and human wave attacks against the Mobile Groups of General de Lattre at Vinh Yen, the Day River, and Hoa Binh. Each time they were crushed.

Truong Chinh wasted little time in accusing Giap of being "responsible for useless massacres, which had no other purpose than to promote personal interests." He denounced Giap's "lack of judgment in his selection of responsible personnel." This pressure forced Giap to submit a written "self-critique," to eliminate his closest assistants (deemed to be incompetent), and to completely reorganize the command of the People's Liberation Army. Under the new system, Truong Chinh succeeded in giving political commissars complete priority over the military and placing Chinese military advisors at all echelons.

Compelled now to share his power and authority, Giap returned to the use of "people's warfare." Open combat once again became a thing of the past. Now Giap relied, as he had in earlier years, on the ambush, and maneuvers in difficult terrain.

"The countryside was to encircle the towns, the mountains were to dominate the rice lands of the plain." The influence of Chinese advisers increased accordingly as the pro-Chinese clan within the politburo became all powerful. It took victory at Dien Bien Phu to restore to Giap all his lost ground and prestige — but even then the Chinese managed to create doubts about his abilities by emphasizing the phantom role played there by the Chinese General Lo Kwei-Po.

Giap was now at the apex of his power, but it did not last long. Starting in 1955, Truong Chinh and his supporters again weakened Giap's authority by reorganizing the Defense Ministry into three separate branches: the General Staff, the Political Department, and the Logistical Department. While Giap remained as nominal head, his authority was in fact limited to the General Staff. One of Truong Chinh's men controlled the Political Department, and the Logistical Department became autonomous.

Another blow to Giap occurred in September 1959 when the politburo promoted one of Giap's rivals, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, to Senior General, the same rank as that held by Giap. Now without even fear of retribution, Truong Chinh and his supporters circulated a rumor throughout the North that Thanh was a more competent general than Giap. Giap's star did not begin to rise again until Thanh's death in 1967.[13]

This brief summary is only an outline of Giap's troubles with Truong Chinh. It barely mentions Giap's rivalry with Nguyen Chi Thanh and omits entirely quarrels with other enemies such as Le Duan. Is none of this worth telling in a biography that purports to tell "for the first time, . . . the full story" of Vo Nguyen Giap "as seen through the eyes" of that important general? MacDonald seems to think not, for he mentions none of this.

On other fronts, MacDonald is not at ease with the numbering system Giap used to designate certain military units. Logistical Group 599 did not open the Ho Chi Minh trail in July 1959, as the author would have it on page 182. It was Group 559 and it did so in the fifth month of that year, or May 1959; hence its number. He finally gets the number right on page 248, but then calls the unit a regiment — of 24,000 men — surely the biggest "regiment" in the history of warfare! Without attribution, MacDonald claims (p. 93) that Giap sent soldiers into China between October 1951 and the end of 1952 for parachute training, a most unlikely occurrence, since Giap had no airplanes.

MacDonald does not correctly describe (pp. 79, 107) the training Giap instituted in the Viet Bac for his noncommissioned and commissioned officers. Nor does he ever sense the importance to Giap of combining the life of a politician and soldier; he says very few words about the subject on p. 105.[14] Neither does he appreciate the role political discipline played in the fighting morale of Giap's soldiers.

The author mistakenly describes Giap (p. 341) as one of the world's great guerrilla leaders; an implicit confession that he does not understand either Giap or the nature of people's wars of national liberation. He ends many of his chapters with

long, tedious quotations that sometimes continue for three and four pages, the point of which is unclear. Likewise, he does not provide readers with any help in understanding the location of unfamiliar place names. The book contains only two maps. One, on page 11 is of French Indochina and the other, on page 137, depicts the scene where the battle of Dien Bien Phu occurred. The latter map misspells the name of the river shown.

In MacDonald's discussion of Tet 1968 (p. 262), he depicts Giap as an enthusiastic architect of the offensive.[15] We must reach page 342 in the summary chapter of the book before discovering that he was a longstanding *opponent* of that attack.[16] Nor does he tell us about the decades-long rivalry between Giap and Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh over the proper strategy to use in the South. He then treats the battle of Khe Sanh after, rather than before, Tet 1968. Tet is discussed in eleven pages from 260-71; Khe Sanh occupies nineteen pages from 272-91. The author has confused not only the horse and cart but their relative sizes!

The author supposedly based a portion of this book on extensive interviews with Giap and other high level military and civilian officials. Yet, it is not at all clear who spoke with him. MacDonald identifies a few retired Vietnamese officers, whose comments are quoted at unnecessary length. This reviewer was unable, however, to find textual references identifying all of the fourteen unnamed individuals he claimed in the bibliography to have interviewed. Perhaps some with whom MacDonald spoke did not provide information worth including in his story? Those who are listed would have been junior officers or senior enlisted persons twenty-five to forty years ago, or perhaps low-level bureaucrats, and thus hardly more than observers of great events; certainly not molders of them.

Since MacDonald interviewed Giap, that ought to cover a multitude of textual sins. But, a reader must plow doggedly through 177 pages before reading the first (and only?) reference to information MacDonald derived directly from Giap. He writes (p. 178) that "Giap told the author that the people and the collective leadership had won the wars, and not him . . .." Giap tells all visitors that; it is part of the set speech he uses. So, where is the new information? For the most part, MacDonald seems to quote from Giap's writings and from his talk(s) with the man without differentiation, leaving a reader confused. How many talks with Giap did MacDonald have? One or several?[17] How long were they? Where did they take place? What were their dates? Such bibliographic detail is regularly given by authors, but not in this volume.

When they met did Giap simply lecture to him? This is usually the situation in such cases. Or was there a free and easy exchange of information? That is a doubtful possibility given the necessity of government observers at such meetings who silently and carefully watch what occurs. The Vietnamese government has placed Giap under "house watch" for the last two or three years, fearful that he might use his military support to instigate a *coup d'état*. One must also remember that any conversation(s) MacDonald held with Giap were conducted through interpreters and Giap is normally reluctant to respond to spontaneous questions. He prefers to

have a list of them ahead of time and when he arrives for a meeting he delivers a prepared lecture which may or may not respond to queries previously submitted to him. It would have been useful for the reader to learn the conditions under which MacDonald's interviews were carried out. That would say a great deal about their value as a source. This reviewer could find only the one direct quote from Giap in the entire book and MacDonald certainly does not use normal scholarly apparatus to enlighten his readers. In that quote he gained nothing that was new or informative. Where then are the insights MacDonald gained from his trip to Viet Nam?

Yet, the publisher notes, MacDonald went to Hanoi "at the invitation of the Vietnamese government . . .." Those unfamiliar with the workings of the current administration there may not be aware that *all* who travel to Viet Nam, other than on group tours, must be "invited" by the government. MacDonald's visit was then no different from similar journeys undertaken by dozens, probably hundreds, of researchers in the years since 1975. The dust jacket copy claims that "never before had a western writer been offered the opportunity to study the Indochina and Vietnam wars from the Vietnamese point of view . . .." This is arrant and arrogant nonsense. This reviewer is certainly "a western writer" and I have gone *three times* "at the invitation of the Vietnamese government" to study their conflicts "from the Vietnamese point of view." Two of those trips were taken *before* MacDonald made his trek. One can think of many others who have made similar journeys.

Nor has this biography been written "from the Vietnamese point of view." Even that modest claim is incorrect. Too often MacDonald tells of battles that were important to Americans, rather than those of crucial consequence to Giap. This biography is written from a western, rather than an eastern, perspective.

What conclusions should be drawn? Giap never comes to life in this book. We never learn what motivated or inspired him, save in the most wooden way. The general seems to be a puppet, marching across a stage on which there are few other actors. We are left wondering what friends he had, what enemies, what loyalties that moved the real-life man to decades of the utmost dedication to the cause of freeing Viet Nam from the bootprint of foreigners in the face of staggering difficulties. Other than to say (p. 340) that Giap was a great general (which everyone already knew), one wonders what MacDonald's purpose was in writing this account. Worst of all, he fills his pages with a staggering amount of incorrect information, which is a real disservice to the reading public by both the author and his publisher. One wonders why MacDonald's manuscript was not submitted to scholars for their review prior to the copy-editing phase of publication.

We need more studies of Viet Nam. Even after all these years we still know relatively little about its northern leadership from 1940-75, and certainly we have learned no more about Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap from this new book. Before MacDonald's publication, only four biographical studies of Giap existed — some outdated, some of poor quality, and none now generally available: Robert J. O'Neill, *General Giap: Politician and Strategist* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Gerard Le Quang, *Giap: ou, la guerre du peuple* (Paris: Denoel, 1973); Georges

Boudarel, *Giap* (Paris: Editions Atlas, 1977); and lastly, Huy Phong and Yen Anh, *Nhan dien huyen thoai Vo Nguyen Giap: hoa quang vay muon cho cuoc chien tuong tan* (San Jose, CA: Mekong-Ti Nan, 1989). No source in English adequately covered the life of this important general. That is still the case.

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Endnotes

1. *New York Times Book Review*, 10 January 1993, p. 10.

2. *Indochina Chronology*, XI, no. 4 (October-December 1992), p. 14.

3. *The Economist*, 20 March 1993, p. 98.

4. "Biographical sketch of Vo Nguyen Giap." DD Form 1396 (1 September 1962), report number 6 832 0761 69, Defense Intelligence Agency. In this essay the report will be cited as "DIA."

5. Much that has been written about Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap in the West — particularly the years between his birth and 1954 — has simply been in error. Some time ago, wanting to know more about the details of his life, I sent two single-spaced typescript pages of questions to a Vietnamese *emigré* living in Paris, Mme. Tran Kim Dung. A friend of the Giap family, she planned to visit them on an upcoming trip to Viet Nam. She carried my questions with her to Hanoi and presented them to the general one evening at his home in the presence of his wife, Dang Bich Ha, and his daughter, Hong Anh. He and Hong Anh prepared responses to my questions and some days later, Hong Anh met again with Tran Kim Dung at her hotel, bringing not only Giap's replies but also certain reactions of Dang Bich Ha and of Hong Anh herself. Upon Mme Dung's return to Paris, she faxed me that material, consisting of twenty-three typed, single-spaced, legal-sized sheets of paper, accompanied by a three-paged, single-spaced, typed message by Mme Dung giving her own impressions of the meeting with Giap and his family. Those documents contained a wealth of information and are here cited as Giap Questionnaire.

6. DIA. Internal evidence, such as the use of "M." (French abbreviation of Monsieur) before the names of many individuals in this report suggests that it was based, in large part, on material provided by French intelligence. When compared with reports on Giap produced by other American intelligence agencies (which regularly contained masses of misinformation), one finds here too many details on Giap's early years with precise information on family members (including even direct quotes of their statements), names of family friends, tutors, school teachers, and Giap's early associations for this to have been an American product.

7. Ibid.

8. Giap Questionnaire.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Two knowledgeable Vietnamese *emigrées*, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, ARVN (Ret.) and Dr. Phan Quang Dan, M.D., concur with this conclusion based upon my own research and their recollections of their youthful days in French-occupied Viet Nam.

12. Letters, Will Brownell, Director, Vietnam Bibliographical Project, Columbia University to Cecil B. Currey, 1 February 1991, 13 February 1991, and 1 July 1991. Brownell interviewed both Salan (13 July 1982) and Massu (no date given).

13. DIA.

14. Text, p. 105, reads: "As always, he took his orders from the Party (of which, of course, he was a senior member, and in which he had a strong voice) . . .."

15. Text, p. 262, reads: "But Giap too had plans: he would take the battle into the South in unprecedented force. To this end in October 1967 the Politburo in Hanoi had agreed in principle to his winter/spring campaign, part of which involved a widespread attack in the South at the time of the Tet festivities that on 30 January 1968 would inaugurate the Year of the Monkey."

16. Text, p. 342, reads: "In fact, Giap had consistently doubted the success of a general uprising in 1968. He was overruled." Which was it? Was it his plan as MacDonald would have us believe on p. 262 *supra*, or was he forced to follow orders, as the author tells us on p. 342?

17. MacDonald presumably met with Giap at least twice for on p. 345 he refers to "occasions" on which he saw the general. If they met more than once he has even less excuse for the errors, sloppy research and lack of understanding present in this book.

James J. Wirtz. *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Two hours after the people of South Vietnam began to revel in the delights of Tet (a major religious holiday in Vietnam), gunfire was exchanged in Nha Trang. A key aspect of Hanoi's 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising—the so-called Tet Offensive—had begun. As the night wore on, half a dozen cities in the northern and central parts of South Vietnam came under heavy enemy artillery fire and ground assaults followed. One day later, just after midnight on the morning of Wednesday, 31 January, the Battle of Tet began in Saigon, the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam. It is the latter date that marks the official start of one of the most interesting battles — actually a phase in a campaign that lasted over a year — in the second half of the twentieth century.

Call it what you will — Tet 1968, the Battle of Tet, the Tet Offensive, Hanoi's Winter-Spring Offensive of 1967-68, or even the 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising — Hanoi's surprise military action in South Vietnam in early 1968 marked a turning point in modern American military history and ushered in an era of confused thinking about the use of American military force that lasted into the early 1990s. All the events of that time — both military and political — merit much more detailed study.

Much of the secret intelligence that was available to the Americans in the days before Tet is available to historians today.[1] Military and political people that were involved in the war on the other side of the conflict are beginning to talk about the pre-Tet period. Today scholars can make better judgments about Hanoi's