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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

8 February 1968

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 8-68 (ONE Distribution Only)  
SUBJECT: Vietnam: The Communist Balance Sheet

NOTE

This is only an effort to provide some basis for continuing the debate on Vietnam; obviously it is still early in the game to be very confident about what has happened or what happens next. No effort made in this memo to survey the US GVN side.

W. Hyland

*I think this is very interesting  
and on the face of it worth making  
a Memo to the DCI - if it holds  
up after discussion.*

*Am*

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1. As in every major military-political effort by the Communists in Vietnam, the present offensive serves several objectives. Some are fairly obvious, such as the psychological shock of a sudden and massive assault on areas hitherto believed secure. In this they succeeded. Beyond this more or less minimum achievement, however, Hanoi and the Viet Cong apparently had and may still have much more far-reaching military and political goals, general uprising and the establishment of a new "coalition regime".

2. In general, what we have been witnessing since last September is a shift from the protracted war theory to what the Communist now call an "all-out attack". This does not mean that the fighting has to be over soon; the Communists have by

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no means exhausted their military capabilities for continuing the conflict. But they have gambled a good deal on the present offensive, an effort which bears considerable resemblance to General Giap's final campaign against the French in the winter and spring of 1953-54.

Background

3. The concept of the present military and political effort was apparently worked out by the summer of last year, and embodied in a high level decision in Hanoi. The essence of this decision was subsequently conveyed to the troops in quite general terms, under the rubric of a "General Offensive and General Uprising." Heavy indoctrination courses were held throughout South Vietnam in October, November and December. The general tenor of the new political line is reflected in the following notes of a briefing on the party decision:

The Central (Executive Committee) of the Lao Dong Party came to the conclusion that the time is ripe to directly stage the revolution. The opportunity for the General Offensive and the General Uprising has presented itself. The Central...and Uncle (Ho) order the SVN Party Headquarters and the entire army and the entire people of SVN to carry out the General Offensive and General Uprising in order to gain a decisive victory for the revolution during the 1968 Winter-Spring-Summer phase...Strong violent attacks must be launched with the people rising up like a

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surging wave that carries away everything in its wake. Then, we will establish our administrative control...Our troops will get ready for movement to the lowlands in order to march forward towards liberating the cities. We must use each regiment and division to take over the liberated areas on a continuous basis. Propaganda must be conducted far and wide.

4. Other documents indicated the broad scope of the new offensive and the shift in tactics. One cadre, for example was told that the three phase concept of the first Indochina war was now to give way to the doctrine of "all out attacks". Another document noted the "urgent requirement" to mobilize manpower and resources so as to obtain an "extraordinary victory" in a relatively short period of time. Finally, some documents indicated the formation in the provinces of "suicide units".

5. Another aspect of this new line was the increased emphasis on a "coalition" government. While the blueprints for such a new regime were intentionally blurred, it was nevertheless held out as a near term objective which would be achieved within the context of the General Offensive.

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6. By mid-December the Communists began to make careful plans for the attacks which were to take advantage of the beginning of Tet. They announced a proposed seven day Tet truce (and one can imagine what might have happened if this had been accepted by the GVN and US). Actually, at that very time, special training had begun for the attacks. Some more NVA replacements were scattered throughout some VC units; village guerrillas and raw recruits were impressed into Main and Local force units, and clandestine cadres and units began briefings and planning for the wave of attacks against cities and towns, and the formation of the new "Peace Fronts". A document just captured, but dated 16 January, mentioned "Emergency Directive No 1". Just prior to the attacks an order of the day by the SVN Liberation Army was apparently read to all the troops and cadres. It asserted that:

"This will be the greatest battle ever fought throughout the history of our country...it will decide the fate and survival of our fatherland."

7. The VC rank and file were further motivated by three general promises. They were told that major reinforcements would arrive within the first day of the attacks, so that the troops were to hold for as long as possible until help arrived (in

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some cases this was true but definitely not so in other areas). Secondly, the troops were led to believe that the populace would rally to the Viet Cong. And, finally, many cadres and soldiers were told, or chose to believe that a new government would be quickly established and peace negotiations would soon follow.

8. The Attack. The offensive against the province capitals and district towns was apparently to be launched all over the country in the early morning of 30 January. As a country wide operation the attacks were fairly well coordinated. But in their execution, there seems to have been a breakdown in many areas. The total picture as it now emerges is a rather bizarre kaleidoscope. Many obvious targets were not struck the first day, particularly in the delta. Some cities escaped altogether or for several days, when all element of surprise had been lost (Tay Ninh). Other attacks were little more than probes or harassments, while others developed into major engagements.

9. The general plan called for two stages and perhaps a third. First, the local city units, sappers and political cadres were to seize key objectives such as radio stations, police headquarters, province chiefs, US compounds and so forth.

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This was to be exploited psychologically by broadcasts and proselytizing teams announcing that the VC had actually assumed power throughout the province and country. This initial effort was supposed to be followed up by actual infantry assaults. In some areas this second attack never materialized, or quickly bogged down. For example, several prisoners from a VC company attacking Saigon have said that their units were stalled on the outskirts before reaching their objectives. In some areas, such as Nha Trang no reinforcements were ever intended. A high level political cadre there nevertheless believed that though their local efforts might fail the country - wide attack would succeed.

10. There may have been plans for a third phase, which has not begun and may never begin. In this phase the larger NVA units still in reserve would be committed, especially in areas where there was a promising situation. In Hue the initial attack was by the VC city unit and a VC Battalion; they were to fight for seven days, and of reinforced for 15 days. Some of the units for a second attack are still in place and could attack, in some areas, particularly in I Corps. Their failure to do so yet could mean that this was only a contingency plan. However, in some cities there have been two general attacks (Hoi An,

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Can Tho), though the second wave seems to have been a weak one. The decision facing General Giap in whether to commit good troops to retrieve an unpromising situation. He may have no choice.

11. The "Uprising". As a purely military effort to seize and hold, the Communist have failed thus far. In part at least, their failure was because of the total lack of popular support. While it is difficult to know just how much support they expected, they must have counted on some in many areas. Initial propaganda exploitation heavily emphasized the idea of a "general uprising". The premature announcement of new "Peace Fronts" also fits in a pattern of fomenting a popular seizure of power. Finally, the rather meager military effort in some cities suggest that the only hope in those areas was for the people to rally to the VC banner.

12. This failure is probably the single most impressive fact of the last few days. Given the excellent political cadre system developed over decades, one would think that political agitation and exploitation would be one of the Communists' strongest instruments. In practice it proved the weakest.

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And in the process the Communist have sacrificed their clandestine apparatus throughout most of the country. This cannot be quickly replaced, nor can the sapper and special action units that bore the brunt of the initial attacks. This aspect may prove more costly than the thousands of foot soldiers who have been killed in the last week.

The Countryside

13. The effect outside the cities is less clear. Strangely enough the pacification program apparently was not a major target of military attacks, perhaps because the only units not engaged were the guerillas. Nevertheless, in the process of assaulting the cities the Communists may have achieved significant damage to the revolutionary development program. Many cadre teams were forced to pull out of their areas once the protecting forces were withdrawn to the cities. In other areas, previously secured hamlets were invaded by propaganda and foraging teams. And of course there were outright attacks and assassinations. Thus, there may be more significant damage in the countryside than in the cities. If so, it will be a major blow to the US and the GVN.

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14. Khe Sahn. The picture is also a mixed one if considered against another probable Communist objective. If Khe Sahn is parallel to Dien Bien Phu in Hanoi's thinking, then the Tet Offensive is analogous to the attacks which the Viet Minh launched in the winter-spring of 1953-54 against many of the same targets which were struck in the past week. At that time Giap's objective, in his words was, as follows:

"By successively launching strong offensives on the points they (the French) has left relatively unprotected, we obliged them to scatter their troops all over the place in order to ward off our blows, and thus create favorable conditions for the attack at Dien Bien Phu..."

Thus one of the military aims of the Tet Offensive was to draw ARVN, American and Korean units into the defense of urban areas. Obviously, this has succeeded to some extent. But at the same time, the attacks have not yet succeeded to the point where the outcome of Khe Sahn has been affected. Indeed one of the mysteries is the failure to launch the Khe Sahn battle simultaneously with the other attacks.

15. If this is Giap's current strategy, however, then repeated attacks throughout SVN will have to be made despite the heavy costs. Not until the issue is decided at Khe Sahn will Hanoi be in a position to judge the total impact and effectiveness of its bold but costly moves.

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16. The Outlook. The main question remains: is this the final effort of the Communists. Will they be forced into a peace settlement as their failure becomes clear, or, alternatively do they have every intention of suing for peace at a time when their political psychological "image" seems strong.

17. To begin with it must be remembered that the Communists conceive of the present effort as a campaign, openly announced to run through the spring, at least. It is not a single burst, even though the recent attacks were concentrated within a few days. There is still the battle of Khe Sahn, and the entire DMZ to be fought; and in many areas there is still a second cycle of attacks that could be initiated.

18. Equally important, all the dimensions of the political strategy are not fully apparent. The Communists are not going to quietly drop the new "Peace Fronts". There may still be some sensational developments in the political realm. For example, one rather doubtful report claims that General "Big" Minh will emerge as the head of a new "coalition" formed between the NFL and the new insurrectum committees and fronts. Thus it may still be a matter of months before the Communist play all their cards.

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19. Nevertheless, they are now fully committed to the proposition that the very last phase of the revolution has begun. They will try to claim an enormous success; and they may even believe that much has been achieved both politically, militarily internationally. They will certainly expect the debate and controversy in the US to be aggravated and the tensions within the GVN to be heightened. However, they must also know that there will be no uprising, no massive takeover, and no collapse in Saigon. In sum, they are almost back to square No. 1, and their forces are decidedly weakened. The question uppermost in their minds must be whether US and South Vietnamese confidence has been so shaken that within a few months the US will sue for peace.

20. It is in this context of uncertainty over their own prospects and the position of the US that the Communist may follow their military moves with further political initiatives. They will almost certainly want to test the US position in the wake of the Tet offensive and while the Khe Sahn battle is in doubt. The peace offensive if it comes could be as massive as the military one. From the Communist standpoint, after a major show of force

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and demonstration of military capabilities, there is not likely to be a better political and psychological time to try for a political settlement.

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