THE FAILURE OF INTE

LLIGENCE

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A Viet Cong (VC) suspect is picked up for questioning by troops of the 9th Infantry Division on the outskirts of Saigon, amid the devastation of the 1968 Communist Tet Offensive.

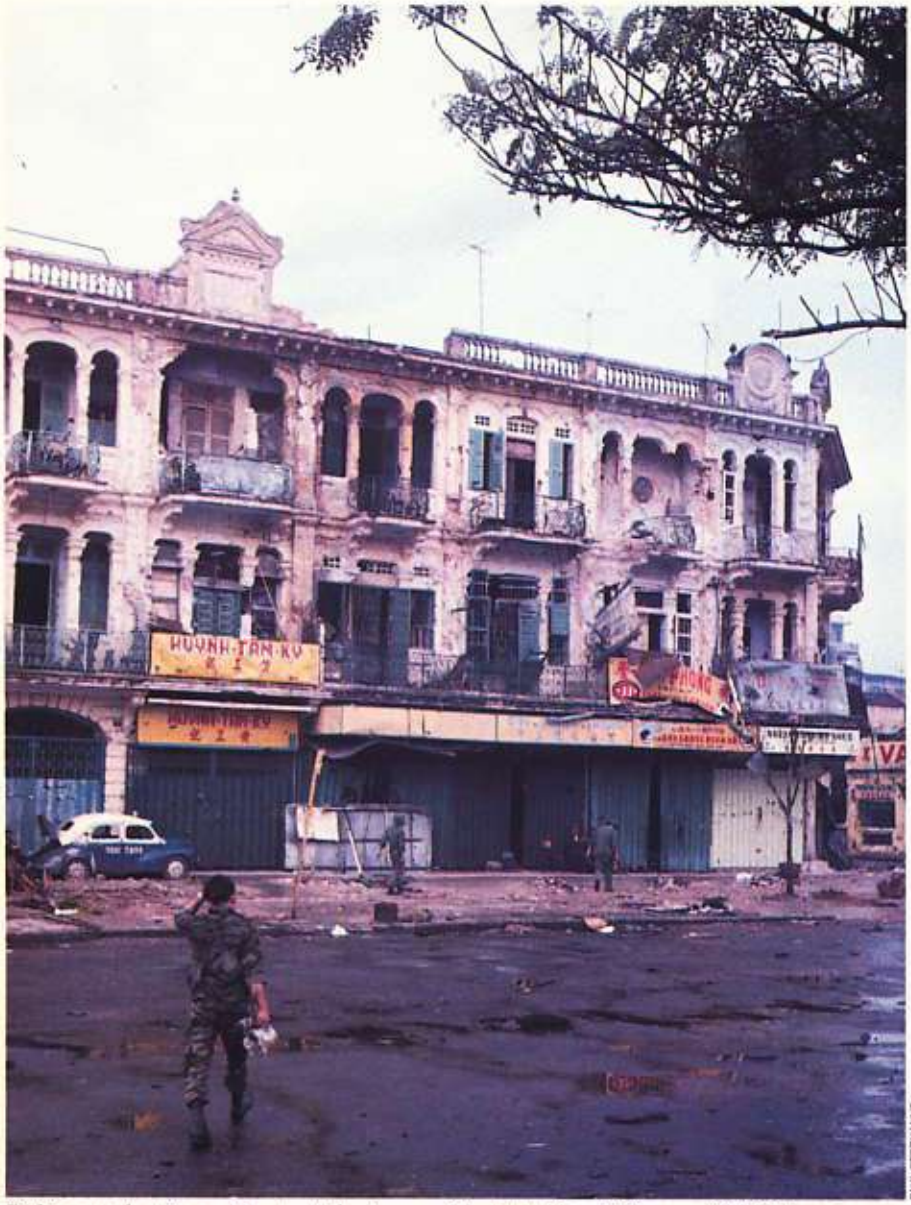
Were MACV intelligence staff members merely incompetent? Or were they too clever for their own good?

By Major Jonathan S. Lockwood, U.S. Army

In his classic 1976 work, *On the Theory of Military Incompetence*, British psychologist Norman Dixon, a former member of the Royal Engineers, listed 15 characteristics of the psychological profile of "incompetent" military leaders. At one time or another, both justly and unjustly, these characteristics have been applied in whole or in part to the senior Vietnam War civilian and military commanders and their staffs.

The 15 characteristics are as follows: 1) An underestimation, sometimes bordering on the arrogant, of the enemy; 2) An equating of war with sport; 3) An inability to profit from past experience; 4) A resistance to adopting and exploiting available technology and novel tactics; 5) An aversion to reconnaissance, coupled with a dislike of intelligence (in both senses of the word); 6) Great physical bravery but little moral courage; 7) An apparent imperviousness to loss of life and human suffering among their rank and file, or (its converse) an irrational and incapacitating state of compassion; 8) Passivity and indecisiveness in senior commanders; 9) A tendency to lay the blame on others; 10) A love of the frontal assault; 11) A love of "bull," smartness, precision and strict preservation of "the military pecking order"; 12) A high regard for tradition and other aspects of conservatism; 13) A lack of creativity, improvisation, inventiveness, and open-mindedness; 14) A tendency to eschew moderate risks for tasks so difficult that failure might seem excusable; 15) Procrastination.

Does this psychological profile constitute an adequate explanation for the failure of U.S. intelligence in Vietnam in general, and prior to the 1968 Communist Tet Offensive in particular? Dixon indicated that both the policy-makers and military men suffered from that kind of incompetence: "Any doubts as to whether the three factors of remote control, swollen staff and a wealth of resources make for incompetence are removed by contemplation of Vietnam. In this most ill-conceived and horrible of wars there was the Commander in Chief, Lyndon Johnson, aided by his advisers, dreaming up policies and even selecting targets at a nice safe distance of 12,000 miles. And there was the man on the spot, General [William] Westmoreland, a by no means unintelligent military commander but bemused by the sheer weight of destructive energy and aggressive notions



PAUL STEPHANUS

Picking up the pieces: Troops of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) make their way through Cholon as they fight to retake the district from the Viet Cong.

supplied by his President. Together, the Machiavellian mind of the one, coupled with the traditional military mind of the other, produced a pattern of martial lunacy so abject and appalling that it eventually did for both of them."

On the other hand, were the commanders and their staffs actually too clever for their own good? Did they fail to observe the rules of Occam's razor, a philosophical principle laid out by William of Occam in the 14th century—that the best explanation of an event is the one that is the simplest, using the fewest assumptions or hypotheses? Did military intelligence analysts and policy-makers ignore the simple facts in front of their eyes in favor of the most logically elegant estimates of the available evidence?

We will examine whether the intelligence failure at Tet in 1968 was the result of actual military incompetence by MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) and incompetence by intelligence analysts and policy-makers, or the result of not following Occam's razor principle. Dixon's psychological profile will be used to determine how closely U.S. military intelligence and civilian policy-makers matched up to the characteristics listed. Then the Occam's razor argument will be presented to see whether cleverness was the real culprit.

Of all of the characteristics of military incompetence listed by Dixon, "underestimation of the enemy" is easily the one that makes the strongest case for the incompetence theory. Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan argued in *Strategic Military Surprise* (Transaction Books, 1984) that "the scale and intensity of the Tet attacks were so shocking because they did not accord with the essential *impression* of flagging Communist capability." Don Oberdorfer made a more sweeping indictment of U.S. intelligence in *Tet!* (Doubleday, 1971): "The Tet Offensive was an intelligence failure not so much for lack of information as for lack of understanding and belief. Had the traditions and theories of the Vietnamese Communists been taken seriously—to say nothing of their psychology and strategy—the Tet Offensive would have been no surprise. The United States never understood its foe." (See Captain Ronnie Ford's "Window of Opportunity" elsewhere in this issue.)

Probably the most damning evidence that underestimation of the enemy was a factor at Tet was the Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) of November 13, 1967. In *The 25-Year War* (Simon & Schuster, 1985), General Bruce Palmer, Jr., stressed that point, even while denying that intelligence was being tailored to suit the preconceptions of the policy-makers: "We all knew, of course, that there was pressure from Washington to show progress and that 1968 was a presidential election year, but deliberate manipulation of intelligence is neither a fair nor a true judgment. Nevertheless, in hindsight I feel that the November 1967 agreed national estimate of enemy strength—generally lower than the CIA's estimate, which was later confirmed—probably helped reinforce the feeling in Vietnam prior to Tet 1968 that the enemy was not capable of conducting major, nearly simultaneous, countrywide attacks. In turn, this may have contributed to the tactical surprise achieved by Hanoi."

The SNIE of November 13, 1967, was essentially a compromise between the lower MACV/Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimate of enemy strength and capability and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimate, which was much higher and considerably more pessimistic in tone. The following SNIE extract concerning future Communist strategy illustrates that the conclusions that were drawn pictured an opponent that was all but defeated: "68. *Future Strategy.* The Communists apparently recognize that the chances of a complete military victory have disappeared, and they aim instead at a protracted war. Their objectives in this phase of the war are to immobilize and wear down the Allied military forces, to maintain base areas, expand their political agitation and control in contested and GVN [Government of Vietnam] areas, and defeat the RD [rural development cadre] program. In pursuit of these objectives, their tactics are to combine and coordinate closely their military operations and political activity."

Another of Dixon's characteristics of incompetence that appears to have been supported by the available evidence is "an inability to profit from past experience." This problem was virtually built into the U.S. military system. The one-year combat tour for U.S. Army personnel made it virtually impossible to

U.S. MARINE CORPS

General William Westmoreland (sixth from right) and Marine Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt (third from right) confer with U.S. and ARVN senior officers. By the end of 1967, Westmoreland was claiming that the Communists were incapable of mounting major offensive operations.

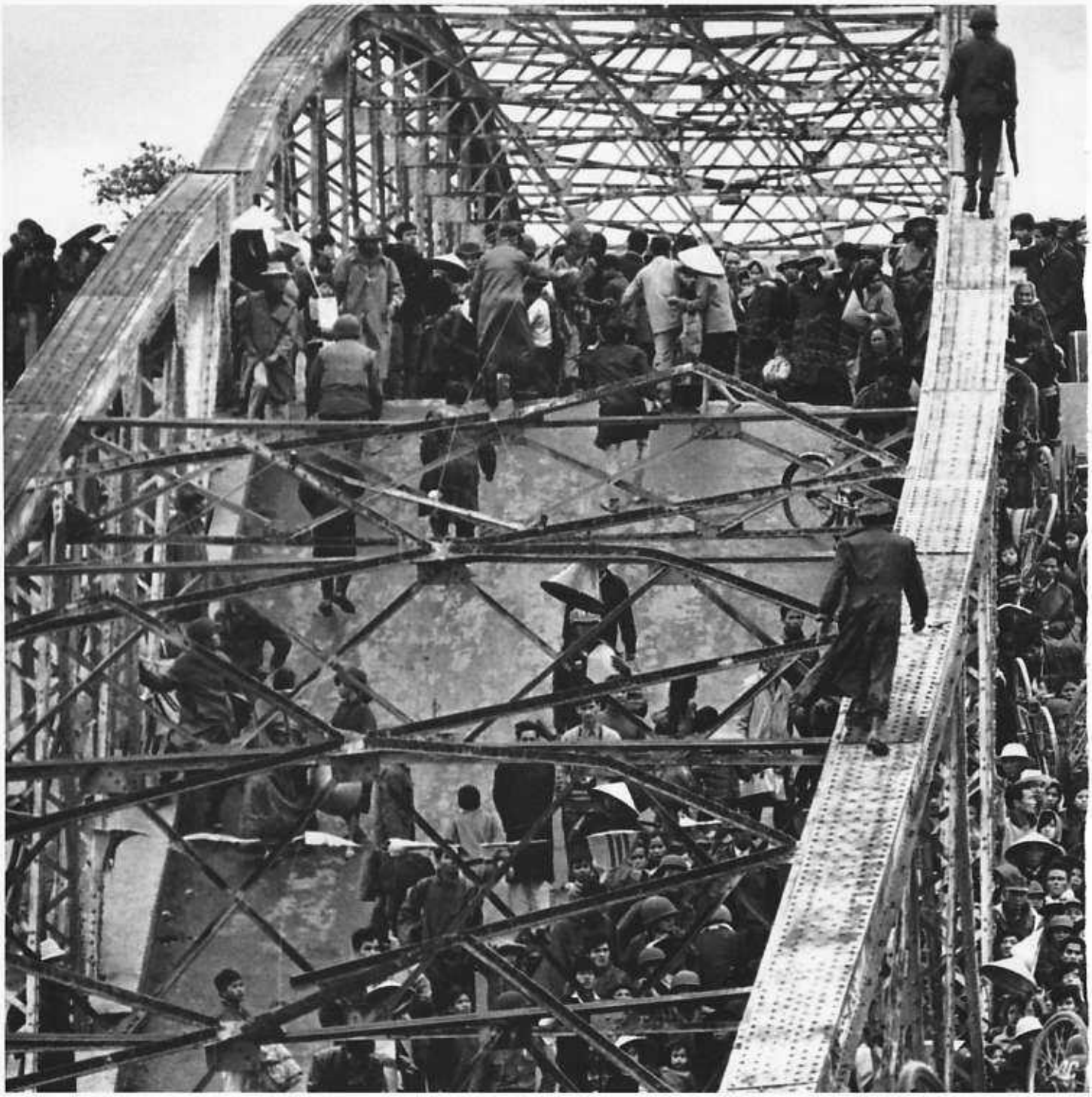
establish any sort of continuity or "institutional knowledge" on the U.S. side. To be sure, MACV J-2 (intelligence officer) Maj. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian's "combined approach" tried to work jointly with the South Vietnamese in order to take advantage of their inherent continuity and institutional knowledge. Yet the inability to learn from the past went beyond the military arena into the civilian policy-making realm. The French experience in Indochina with the Viet Minh was virtually ignored by U.S. policy-making, and the initial tendency in the 1950s to view the Vietnamese Communists as part of a monolithic Sino-Soviet bloc colored all subsequent decision-making in favor of using military force in order to display "resolve" to the Communists. At Tet, according to Oberdorfer, the inability to learn from past experience manifested itself as bureaucratic inertia: "The inertial force of habit and of bureaucracy overpowered the evidence at hand. Belief in a tremendous impending attack would have required tremendous countereffforts. Personal plans would have to be altered; holidays and furloughs canceled; daily habits of comfort and convenience in previously safe cities abandoned. If an official reported 'progress' last month and the months before that and had been praised for his tidings of success, how did he justify reporting an impending crisis now? Official assessments of Communist weakness would have to be discarded or explained away; public predictions would have to be eaten. It could not be done."

Based on Oberdorfer's observation, yet another characteristic of Dixon's incompetence model that applied to intelligence (at least partially) is "great physical bravery but little moral courage." Although intelligence analysts are rarely called upon to display the former, they are often in a position to have to display the latter, particularly when their superiors do not agree with their conclusions. If the analyst possesses sufficient moral courage not to fear losing his job, he will be more apt to hold fast in his convictions. Unfortunately, what happened before Tet was more an example of how bureaucratic intelligence organizations, both civilian and military, can stifle both initiative and moral courage, as Ephraim Kam observed in *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 1988).

Kam wrote: "When this is the case, the danger is not only that different hypotheses are not considered or that subordi-

U.S. ARMY

South Vietnamese troops of Company A, 30th Ranger Battalion, maintain radio contact as they move in against VC forces near Saigon on January 31, 1968.



nates suppress their opinions in order to keep their jobs; when a leader exercises such authority his colleagues, feeling that he must understand what is going to happen, will actually relax their alertness to the possibility of war. Before the Tet offensive of January 1968, for example, two DIA analysts wrote a paper accurately outlining the likely enemy course of action. The paper was never passed on, the implicit question being: 'How could you possibly know more than General Westmoreland?'"

Because of a lack of moral courage on the part of policymakers, analysts were compelled to change their estimates to support existing national policy, even *after* the fact of a surprise attack such as Tet. Thus, as Kam noted, "in January 1968 the Joint Chiefs of Staff insisted that the Tet offensive in Vietnam had been a total military defeat for the enemy." Although the DIA did not agree with this interpretation, it watered down every paper it wrote on this subject so that its position was impossible to determine. Similarly, one could find other isolated examples to support nearly all of Dixon's characteristics of military incompetence for the U.S. military in general.

The final aspect of military incompetence that could be said to have bedeviled U.S. intelligence at both MACV and the national level was "a lack of creativity, improvisation, inventiveness, and open-mindedness." On the face of it, this would seem to be an astounding accusation to make. After all, by the time of the Tet Offensive, the U.S. Army was making use of computers, SIGINT (signal intelligence), "people sniffers" and other remote sensing devices, as part of an unprecedented array of firepower and technology.

Yet that was the very heart of the problem. The U.S. Army was geared up to fight a conventional war, if not on the model of World War II, then at least based on the Korean War experience. In World War II, the war had been a "total war" ap-

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Refugees flee across the Perfume River as the ancient capital of Hue, hitherto uninvolved in the war, falls to North Vietnamese troops. The bridge was blown up by Viet Cong sappers swimming underwater, using scuba equipment bought at a Marine PX.

proaching the theoretical extreme exertion of violence described by military strategist Karl von Clausewitz; one in which, since the political objective was the "unconditional surrender" of Nazi Germany, Italy and Japan, the military and political aims coincided. Thus relieved of any burden of considering limitations on the use of military force by political considerations, the U.S. Army could focus exclusively on the conduct of military operations.

Even though the Korean War demonstrated that such an experience could not be applied to all subsequent wars, the U.S. military leadership failed to learn from past experience, as discussed previously. This was manifested, ironically enough, in General McChristian's "combined approach" to intelligence gathering in Vietnam. Although his system of operating jointly with the South Vietnamese did make up for many of the operational weaknesses each possessed, it was in the final analysis a wholly uncreative and inflexible approach. It focused on combat intelligence to the virtual exclusion of political analysis.

As Robert W. Komer noted in *Bureaucracy at War* (Westview, 1986), since intelligence was oriented on enemy combat units, MACV in 1967 decided to exclude from its order of battle estimates "such elements of a highly unconventional enemy establishment as local self-defense groups or the Viet Cong infrastructure." This was what led to the order of battle controversy in which MACV consistently understated the actual number of enemy forces in the field.

Komer then precisely identified the psychological shortcomings of U.S. intelligence, particularly the lack of flexibility and creativity: "As a result, we tended to underestimate real enemy strength—a tendency reinforced by lack of much firm intelligence on VC recruiting in the countryside. Many military intelligence officers (with some notable exceptions) seemed to have closed minds to such other facets of the war. It was not their job, after all. All too little attention was paid to the operational code or tactical style of the enemy, to the fact that his tactics as well as his goals were as much political as military. *We saw the enemy in our own image, one reason why we repeatedly thought we were doing so much better than we actually were* [emphasis added]. Nor was there ever an adequate effort to combine and rationalize the plethora of U.S. and GVN intelligence agencies, which overlapped and often got in each other's way. Institutional autonomy was more important than optimum results. This also contributed to the inadequacy of our intelligence despite all of the enormous resources involved."

There is a considerable case to be made for sheer incompetence due to institutionally ingrained psychological shortcomings that were endemic, not only to the military intelligence analysts within MACV but also to the national level policymakers and analysts. But is this a wholly fair assessment? Even assuming that all the psychological quirks and foibles described above could have been eliminated from both MACV and the national policy-making level (questionable at best), would the likely result have been all that different? Or was there another factor at work?

As earlier discussed, the danger in not seeking the simplest solution is that it is possible to arrive at the most logically elegant conclusion based on the available evidence, and yet still be wrong. As noted by General Philip B. Davidson, MACV J-2, to General Westmoreland at the time of the Tet Offensive: "Even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody. Why would the enemy give away his major advantage, which was his ability to be elusive and avoid casualties?"

The answer to General Davidson's question, of course—one that he did not realize at the time—was "to achieve surprise." And yet there is considerable merit in General Davidson's assertion. The Tet Offensive, from a strictly *military* point of view, was an uncommonly rash and foolhardy undertaking of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The two top U.S. military commanders admitted, "It did not occur to us that the enemy would undertake suicidal attacks in the face of our power. But he did just that."

This was not to say that intelligence collection did not succeed in getting adequate indicators of the impending offensive. On January 5, 1968, MACV issued a press release on a captured document concerning a projected general offensive and uprising. But then, according to Knorr and Morgan, "The release itself depreciated the plausibility of the revelation, suggesting that

Aftermath of an overambitious Communist offensive: During the fight to retake Hue, Marines take a wounded North Vietnamese soldier prisoner on February 12, 1968.

it may have been designed as morale-boosting VC propaganda." The seeming outlandishness of the document actually decreased the likelihood of its being taken seriously, and thus actually assisted the North Vietnamese deception effort.

In fact, due to the massive scale of the "diversionary" effort being mounted by the North Vietnamese near the DMZ at Khe Sanh, this logically reinforced the American belief that the enemy would not simultaneously attempt a countrywide offensive at the very time he was heavily engaged at Khe Sanh. At worst, American analysts anticipated an enemy offensive immediately before or after the Tet holiday, as had been the pattern in the past.

Then, too, the hardest thing of all to assess as an intelligence analyst is when your opponent is about to do something stupid, at least stupid from your own perspective. And the North Vietnamese had indeed overestimated their own political strength among the South Vietnamese as well as the likelihood that they would participate in a general uprising. The calls for a general uprising in the document released by MACV on January 5 made the entire document seem suspect to American analysts, who had correctly predicted that the South Vietnamese would not support such an uprising. In an order presented to the Third International Intelligence and Military Operations Conference in 1988, analyst James Wirtz summed up the essence of the U.S. intelligence problem at Tet.

Wirtz stated: "The unintended deception created by the failure to judge correctly the sympathies of the South Vietnamese population also facilitated the communist attempt to launch a surprise attack during the Tet holiday. The North Vietnamese and VC obtained the element of surprise by reaching for what proved to be an overambitious objective. By inadvertently violating the principle of concentration of forces (the communists were far weaker numerically and politically than they imagined), the Tet attacks surprised the allies, but at the cost of dooming the entire offensive to *military* failure. Moreover, this unintended deception created by communist miscalculation presented allied officers and intelligence analysts with a very difficult problem. Because they possessed accurate information about the status of the South Vietnamese population and VC strength, American predictions of a major urban offensive and General Uprising made little sense.... In other words, the allied failure to realize the full implication of their opponent's miscalculation helped the communists launch a surprise attack during the Tet holiday."

If nothing else, the U.S. intelligence failure prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive should teach us about the destructive effects that initial errors in strategic intelligence methodology and organization can have on the course and long-term outcome of a war. Because of the failure to challenge the pre-existing mindset, which saw all Communist movements as part of an unshakable monolith; because of the chronic inability to profit from the past experience of the French; because of the subsequent one-year tour policy that ensured that we could not profit from even our own past experience; because of our well-documented propensity for underestimating the opponent and seeing him as a mirror image of ourselves; and because of the lack of creativity and open-mindedness of our intelligence officers in failing to consider the political nature of the war rather than just the military side—these psychological shortcomings, systemic as well as those that could be attributed to particular individuals, simply made Tet the logical result of a series of deficiencies that had existed for a long time.

Under the existing conditions, no intelligence system, no matter how well trained or organized, could have avoided Tet. Even the fact that our intelligence analysts *did* draw the most logically elegant plausible conclusions from the available evidence worked not in our favor but in the enemy's.

On the other hand, had we managed to rid ourselves of all of these pre-existing deficiencies, Tet would never have become an issue, because properly assertive, farsighted and well-educated strategic intelligence analysis would have altered the entire course of the Vietnam War, and perhaps would have prevented it altogether.

By 1968, U.S. military intelligence was asking to be surprised; at Tet, it unwillingly got its wish. □

Jonathan Lockwood is a serving military intelligence officer who has written extensively on intelligence matters. For further reading see Ephraim Kam's Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective *(Harvard University Press, 1988) or any of the other sources cited in this article.*