



Talk 38: The Vietnam War

Preview : Module 6: A Nation Adrift

Talk	Title	Time Period	Date of Talk
37	The Great Society	1964-1968	May 19th
38	Vietnam	1961-1975	June 2nd
39	US society and culture 1960's	1960-1970	June 16th
40	Return of the Republicans	1968-1976	September 1st
41	Cold War during the 1970's	1969-1980	September 15th
42	The "Humility Experiment"	1976-1980	September 29th
43	US society and culture 1980	1970-1980	October 6th

Talk 38: Vietnam

- 
- Prequel
 - Intervention 1964-1965
 - Americanisation 1965-1967
 - Tet Offensive 1968
 - Vietnamization 1969-1972
 - Abandonment 1973-1975
- 



Prequel

Vietnam...overview to 1941

- ▶ Periodically unified prior to 11th to 20th century
- ▶ Regional divide:
 - ▶ North Confucian Chinese: often “autonomous” region of China
 - ▶ South Buddhist/ Indian influence....warlord mini kingdoms
 - ▶ Christian missionaries 18th century...more prominent in south
 - ▶ Emperor fears threat of Christian...100,000 killed...pretext for French Invasion 1859
- ▶ Incorporated into French Indochina 1860's ...North French Capital
 - ▶ Fragmented into Administrative Regions run by French elite/ education.
 - ▶ Occupation brutal...predatory colonialism...rubber plantations
 - ▶ North...industrial/ administration centre small farms/ mining/extractive industries
 - ▶ South ..large scale rice and rubber plantations/ minimal industry...

Northern Highlands



gettyimages®
Credit: FRAME STUDIO



Ha long Bay



gettyimages®
Credit: Frank Bienewald

Landscape near Hanoi



gettyimages®
Credit: UCG

Rice paddies...lowlands



gettyimages®
Credit: Twenty47studio

Mekong Delta



gettyimages®

Credit: jean-claude soboul

Citadel Hue City (1832...Unified Vietnam)



Hanoi Cathedral (completed 1886)



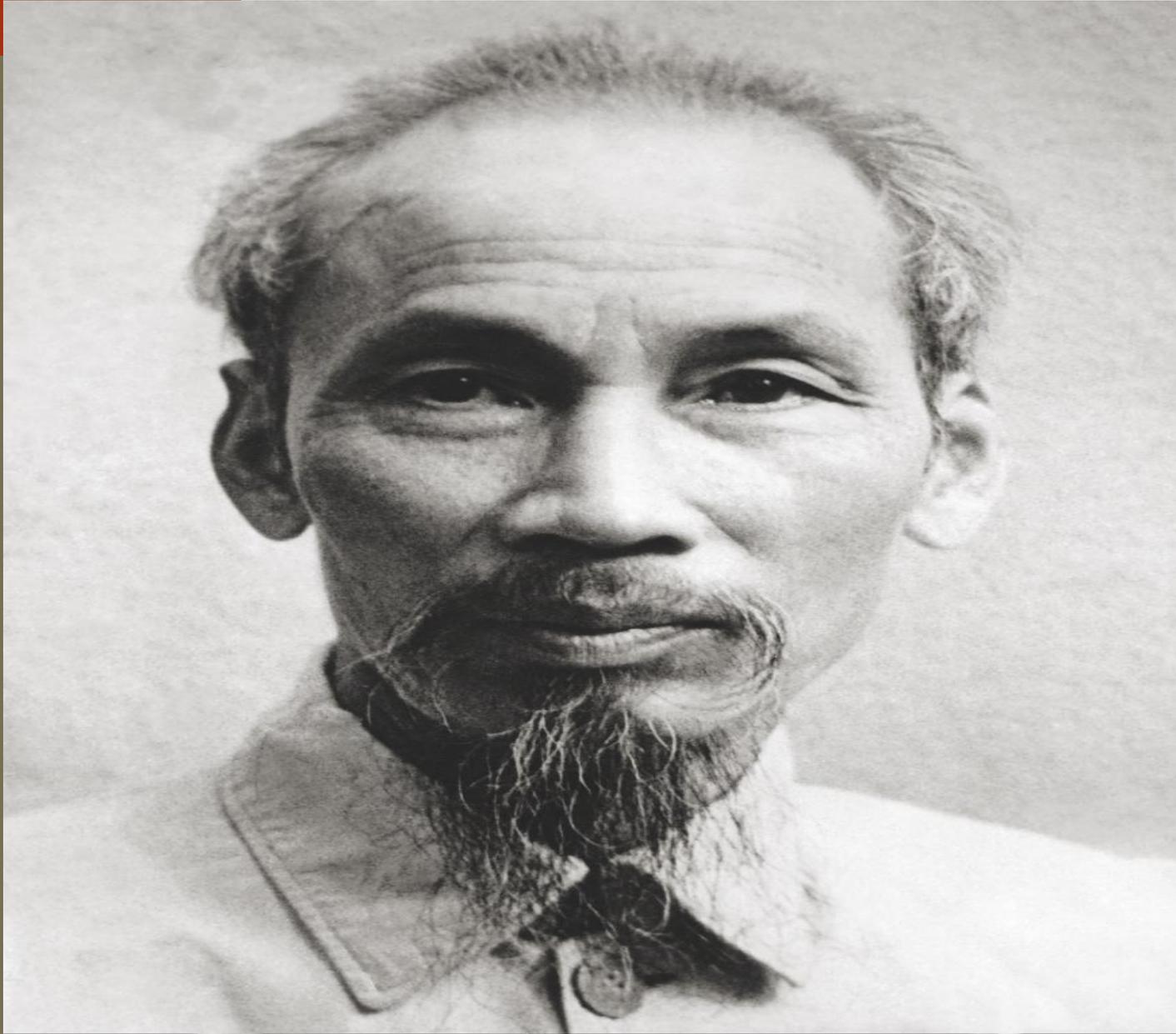
gettyimages®
Credit: NHAC NGUYEN

Vietnam 1945-1954

Japanese invade 1941

- ▶ French (Vichy) army “restricted to barracks”, puppet emperor Bin Dao installed
- ▶ Ho Chi Minh leads Communist revolt from China 1945, request US recognition
- ▶ French return to regain “Indochina” 1946
 - ▶ Supported by US as part of “Containment” strategy
 - ▶ French run out of money, US finance, French fight
 - ▶ French defeated 1954 by Communists (VietMinh) led by Ho Chi Minh
- ▶ Treaty of Geneva 1954: Vietnam divided....subject to Referendum 1956
 - ▶ North: Democratic Republic of Vietnam.....revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh
 - ▶ South: Republic of Vietnam...”emperor” selects Ngo Diem Catholic Francophile

Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969)



Father Confucian priest
...French school Vietnam
... Attend college Paris/ pastry chef
...no money, works on ships

Settles France...1917..studies
Communism...joins Vietnamese
Independence movement.

....asks USA for support...rejected
...moves to USSR/then China

Leads Indochina Communists. Writer
...famous...becomes leader...

....to Vietnam 1941...leads Viet Minh
To replace Japanese...asks Truman
for support ...rejected...Communist

Revered...undisputed leader of North

North Vietnam: “Democratic” Republic of Vietnam

- Population 16 million, 90% peasants, 10% urban,
 - Government promoted atheism, most of public Buddhist, Catholics 4%
 - GDP per capita \$500 (2024) ...educated elite
 - Financial aid from USSR and China
- Communist Dictatorship
 - Centralised economy, extensive security
 - Dissent crushed/ executed/ limited religious freedom
 - Land Reform delivered: Landlords “re-educated” or executed
- Regime stabilises power 1954-1959

Begin campaign of reunification with South 1959

Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-1963)



Born to Catholic family
Father civil servant for French puppet
Emperor Bin Dao..ambassador to Malaya
...burned alive by Buddhist mob

Considers priesthood (as brother)
...joins Civil Service/ ...Governor
...anti communist/ nationalist
...exiled by Bin Dao..moves to Japan, US, Europe

Returns to Vietnam 1954
...appointed by Bin Dao and US as Prime Minister
(vs French advice), English speaker Anti Communist

Refuses Referendum, rigs 1955 election (98.5% vote!)

Considered "puppet" of Americans....but nationalist
...Aggressive, ruthless, effective
... Government as "family business"
...chief advisors younger brother & wife Madam Nho

South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam)

Population 16 million, 80% rural villagers,

- Religious freedom ... Government Catholic, population 90% Buddhist, 10% Catholic
- Average income \$1,000 per year (2024) ..double North(vs US \$82,000, UK \$50,000)
- Financial aid from USA

- Authoritarian centralised “family” government
 - Rigged elections (99.5% “approval)
 - Minimal allowed opposition/ relatively free media, private institutions & business

- Initial Land Reform plans fail (1954-1959)
 - 10% of land redistributed.....Landowners retain control
 - “Aggroville” programme...forcible relocation of peasants within armed camps
.....fails due to violent resistance by loose coalition nationalists/ communists

Solution: Transform Society via “Strategic Hamlet Programme

Strategic Hamlet Programme (1959-1963)



The idea: transform society by turning villages into modern settlements (as in US)

Process

Clear area of resistance

Hold by building fortress/ surrounding farms

Build...infrastructure, schools, shops.

...US to provide building materials, advisors

Problems

Peasant resistance...land attachment

Corruption...bias to preferred landlords

Rushed...8,000 hamlets planned

...indefensible/ incomplete

Viet Cong (South Vietnamese communist

...campaign of sabotage & assassination

Viet Cong

Origins

- ▶ Communist revolutionaries fighting French .
- ▶ Triggered by Diem rejection of Referendum/ failed “Land Reforms”

▶ Organisation

- ▶ Alliance with liberal Nationalist groups: National Liberation Front formed 1960
- ▶ North Vietnamese assume leadership 1959...pose as indigenous to south.
- ▶ Highly organised into cells...numbers rise from 100,000 to 300,000 by 1963
- ▶ Standing army plus local militia living among population

▶ Tactics

- ▶ Blend in with peasants/ austere/ non corrupt
- ▶ Operate by night...propaganda meetings...US “imperialists....French returned
- ▶ Kill vs landlords, civic leaders, collaborationists....and their families

Increases strength...control 20% S Vietnam by 1963...and growing

Diem visit to Washington 1961

...meeting with VP Johnson to seek aid

.....“he may be a son of a bitch, but he was our son of a bitch”

JFK authorises increasing advisors (from 700, 1960 to 16,000 1963)



Long Haired Army

Nuyen Thi Dinh (1920-1992) ...Mekong Delta 1963



Women's movement
...spontaneous reaction
In relocated villagers
...Mekong Delta revolt 1960

Incorporated into "National Front"
...70% membership
...Logistics/ support roles

Fighting battalions
...Created 1963
...Nuyen Thi Dinh leader
...active part of VC army

Viet Cong preparing to attack



gettyimages®
Credit: -

Coup of 1963

Resistance to Diem regime grows 1961-1963

- ▶ Buddhist peace demonstrations repressed
- ▶ Diem “Catholic campaign”...monks classed as “communists”
- ▶ Self immolation of monk July 1963.... Riots across Vietnam

▶ Coup

- ▶ Vietnamese Army asks for permission to remove Diem August 1963
- ▶ JFK says US “will not oppose” revolt by army officers..sends \$500K cash for Diem
- ▶ Diem murdered Nov 1st 1963/ JFK assassinated November 22nd

North sees opportunity

....send 100,000 volunteers South to join Viet Cong



Talk 38 Vietnam War Part two

B52 Bombers...leave in am...return for lunch



gettyimages®
Credit: -

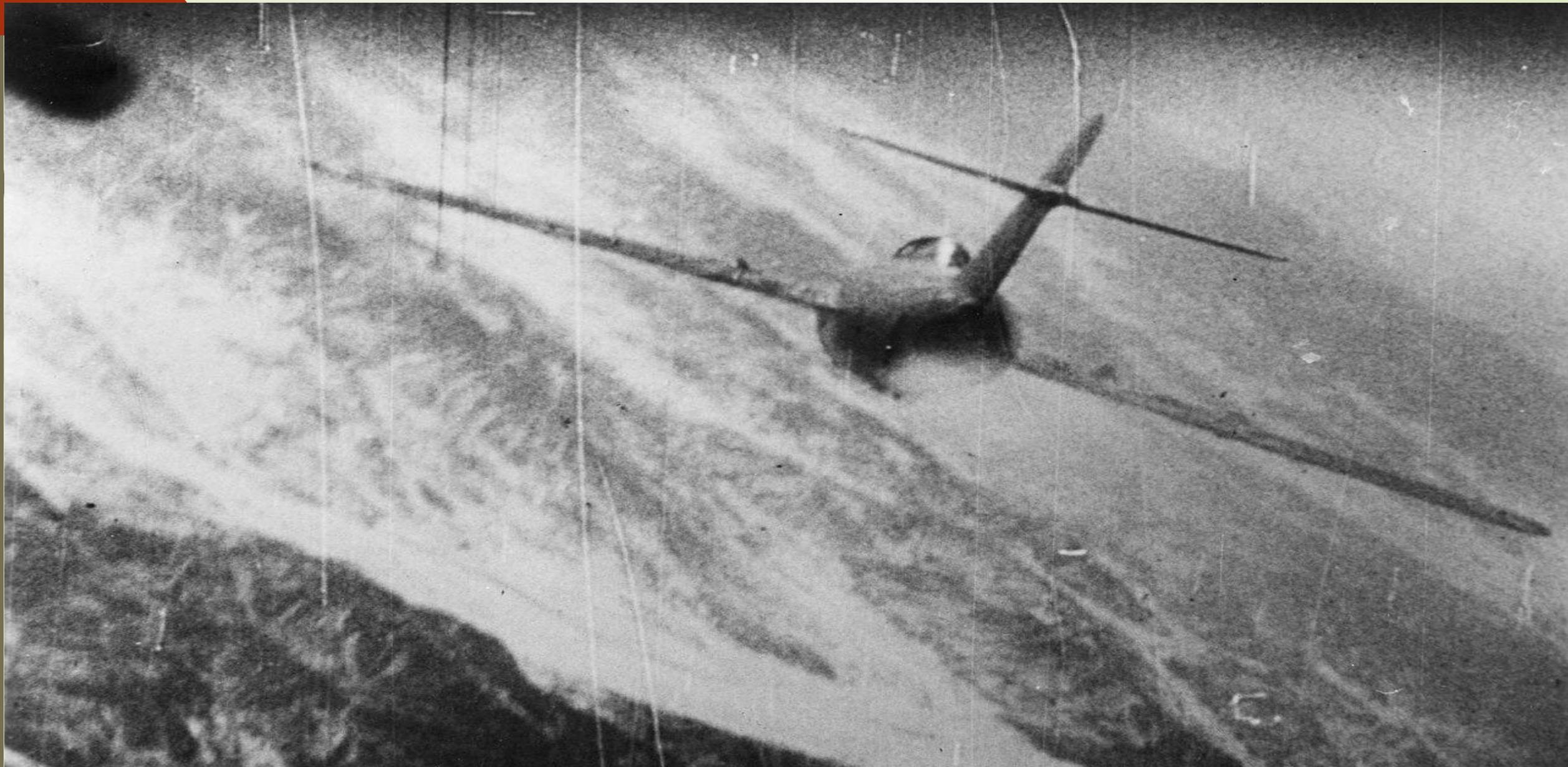
Vietnamese SAMs



gettyimages

Credit: Pictures from History

Multiple “dog fights” (US kill rate 2:1 vs 10:1 Korea)



Operation Rolling Thunder

US losses

- 922 aircraft shot (150 by MIGS), 700 pilots killed, 350 captured
- Cost \$900m

➤ North Vietnamese

- 200 aircraft shot down by US planes, 30,000- 50,000 soldiers and civilians Damage estimated at \$600m

➤ Bombing impact

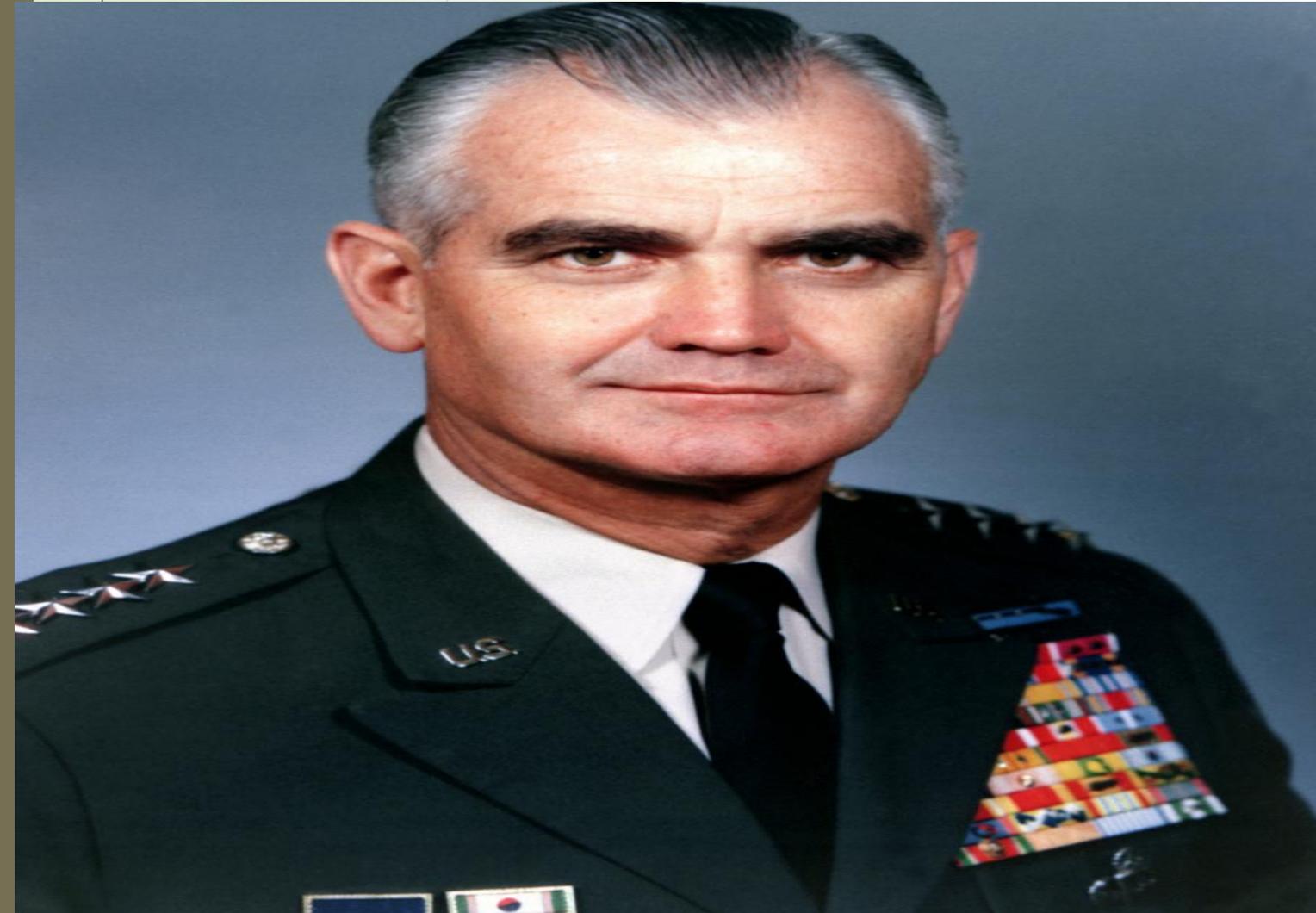
- 850,00 tons of explosions (vs 500,000 Korea. 500,000 tons Pacific in WW2)
- \$500m in infrastructure damage
- No significant impact on North Vietnam ability to supply south

Operation abandoned November 1967..cost too high/

... bombing restricted to Ho Chi minh trail, military support South

General Westmorland (1914-2005)

Commander US Army Vietnam 1965-1968



- Upper middle class, West Point
- US Army (artillery ww2, Parachute regiment Korea)
- Brigadier General @38 in 1952 one of the youngest US Generals
- To Business School .."corporate Executive in uniform".....accept civilian direction..."manage upward"
- Commander Vietnam 1964-1968

Remit: destroy N vietnamese/ VC
....but avoid widening war
maintain "strategic defensive"

US Military Strategy Vietnam 1965-1967

Build overwhelming strength & side-line South Vietnamese Army

- ▶ 1965....200,000
- ▶ 1967....550,000
- ▶ Refresh soldiers by rotating out after one year's service
- ▶ "Search and Destroy"
 - ▶ US army to conduct "sweeps" through enemy held territory/ South Vietnamese in support
 - ▶ Garrison "hamlets", fortified camps
 - ▶ Relocate local population to protected hamlets...by persuasion or force
 - ▶ Create "Free Fire zones" and kill anything moving within it"
 - ▶ Maximise use of air power, artillery, helicopters,
- ▶ Metrics
 - ▶ "Body" count after each mission
 - ▶ Measure success by attrition...kill ratios

Viet Cong/ North Vietnamese strategy 1964-1967

Propaganda as important as military strategy

- ▶ Propaganda...the Americans Imperialists
- ▶ Austerity...."we are the same as you"
- ▶ Enforce discipline by terror, use of assassination quotas...hide atrocities from media

- ▶ Avoid large scale contact
 - ▶ Maintain constant movement..move camp every night
 - ▶ Fight/kill at night, sleep, hide during the day
 - ▶ Delay and demoralise the enemy by mines and booby traps

- ▶ "Hug the enemy" during battles
 - ▶ Fight only when numerical superior
 - ▶ Minimise exposure to air bombardment and artillery

Maintain invisibility by tunnel systems.....ambush, safety, hide supplies

Vietnamese tunnel network

FEATURE

Deadly Underground Mazes

The Viet Cong tunneled deep below the earth's surface, creating spaces where they could live, work, and ambush American troops and their allies. The mazes, rigged with lethal devices, often became death traps for soldiers who entered as well as the VC hidden inside.

Spider holes, bunkers, and concealed niches at the earth's surface often hid entrances to vast tunnel complexes below ground.

American and allied patrols had to keep a careful watch for potential tunnel openings which were often well-concealed.

The tunnels were rigged with booby traps designed to maim and kill troops who entered them.

Ventilation shafts, camouflaged at the surface with brush and spaced apart for secrecy, released smoke from cooking.

Blind corners, pitch darkness, and hidden spaces inside the tunnels provided the VC with opportunities to ambush soldiers who got too close.

Pits with punji stakes, often poisoned with feces to cause infections, were sited near tunnels.

Canals contained secret entrances to tunnel complexes that could be accessed underwater.

Chambers hollowed out below ground were used for various purposes including as storage rooms and sleeping areas.

Venomous insects like spiders and scorpions were released from traps to bite and sting intruders.

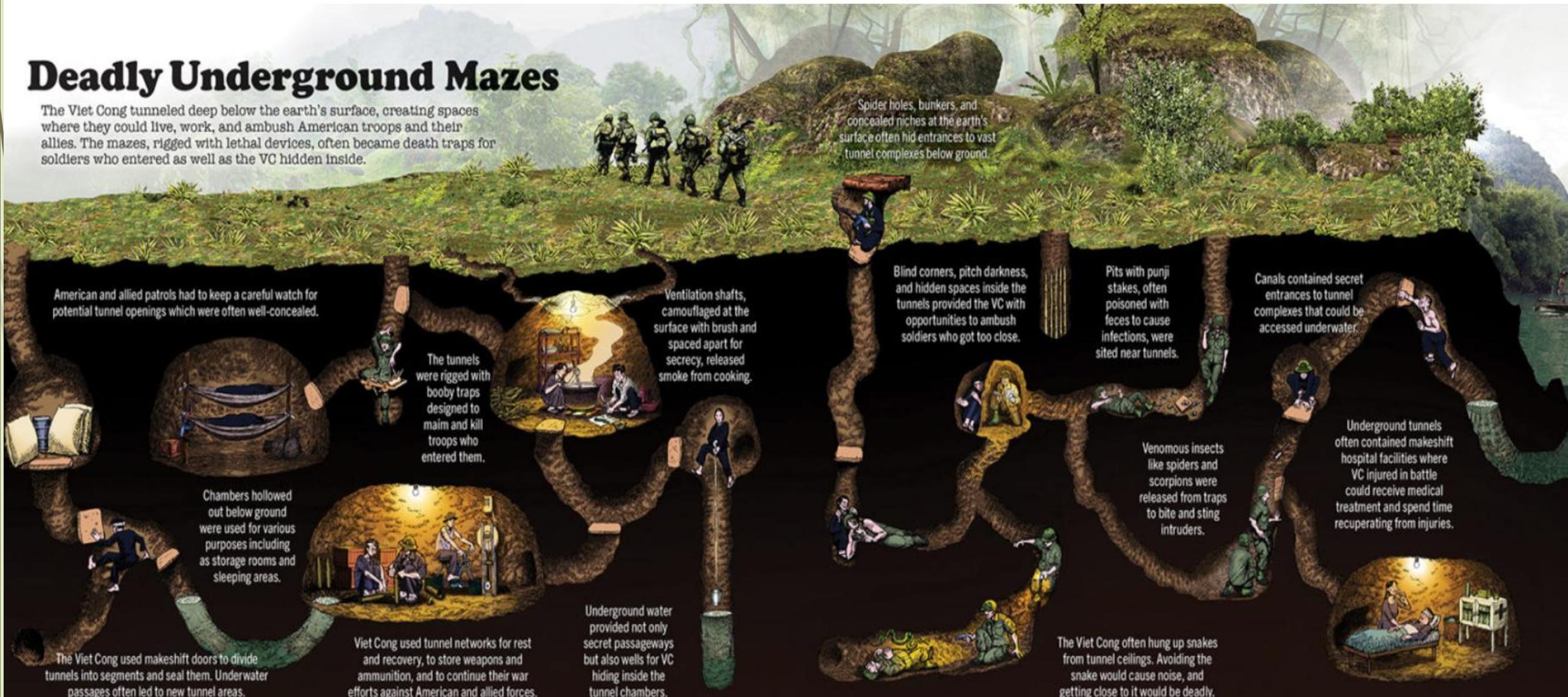
Underground tunnels often contained makeshift hospital facilities where VC injured in battle could receive medical treatment and spend time recuperating from injuries.

The Viet Cong used makeshift doors to divide tunnels into segments and seal them. Underwater passages often led to new tunnel areas.

Viet Cong used tunnel networks for rest and recovery, to store weapons and ammunition, and to continue their war efforts against American and allied forces.

Underground water provided not only secret passageways but also wells for VC hiding inside the tunnel chambers.

The Viet Cong often hung up snakes from tunnel ceilings. Avoiding the snake would cause noise, and getting close to it would be deadly.





gettyimages®
Credit: tim page





gettyimages®
Credit: Mirrorpix



gettyimages®
Credit: Hulton Archive

US military experience

Multiple small engagements....no set piece battles, ...30% US casualties booby traps

US soldiers alienated from Vietnamese people...booby traps, zero language skills/ education...."not really people: Gooks

Winning support?... "You grab them by the balls and the hearts and minds will follow"

"We were looking for a fight every day, hopefully on our terms. I soon began to realise this guy's sitting back and he's watching. Some time he's going to see a moment when you get a bit careless and he's going to whack you. We were advancing down a very narrow valley of mixed brush and we got pretty hard: they ambushed a platoon which had three men killed.....the operation wasn't part of anything larger,, it was just me and the company going through the countryside and clearing...what that meant. How many of them did we kill? I don't know. Headquarters was furious about the poor kill ratio"

"Body count" approach: brutal/ pointlessloss of control and multiple female fighters

,,,,,mass killing of entire village population by air...and sometimes "out of control soldiers"

Westmoreland asked about negative impact of high civilian casualties..." yeh, it's a problem but it does deprive the enemy of population."

Viet Cong/ North Vietnamese

“Keep the enemy constantly in a defensive reactive posture. Force him to fight on our terms,...in a constant state of psychological tension...ambush and annihilate small parties”...N Vietnamese battle instructions

“From a thousand yards away the sonic roar of the explosion tore eardrums, leaving many victims permanently deaf, while the shock waves knocked some senseless. ..I felt that I had been caught up in the Apocalypse: terror was absolute. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out of the bunker...N Vietnamese soldier

“We are not defeated.the enemy has burned this house, but we will build another.It’s not hard. A few palm leaves are enough. One needs very little to live at war , when Life is solely about fighting and working. We need only a pot of rice with pickled fish. A sheet of plastic to lay out in a bomb shelter, clothes, and sale ready in a pair of Baskets to carry` on our shoulders when the enemy descends” VC “Long Hair” after air raid

British newswomen to VC commander on why he had hanged pro government village Chief and killed his family “We are Marxist Leninist revolutionaries, that is what we do”

Situation end 1967

South Vietnamese people

- ▶ Presidential Elections held @ “General Thieu ” wins 34% vote (9 candidates)
...demonstrations...not considered legitimate
- ▶ Army disillusioned by “Americanisation” ..lack of progress, destruction, vulnerability, families
- ▶ North Vietnamese/VietCong
 - ▶ High casualties....two factions: USSR / peace.. China aggression...militants dominant
 - ▶ Fully aware of weakening support for war in US, political unrest South
 - ▶ Believe South ready for “Great National Rising”: now or never....
- ▶ US Army/ Government
 - ▶ Public “Success campaign”everything going to plan, victory imminent
 - ▶ Private: MacNamara....rising doubts about “body counts”Westmoreland...something big due



Growing anti-war movement

Mass anti war demonstrations

60% US public support war
....opposition 40%....and growing

Popular Anti War Song

...Country Fish (I'm fixing to die) 1967

Well, come on all of you, big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again.
He's got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam
So put down your books and pick up a gun,
We're gonna have a whole lotta fun.

now come on wall street don't be slow,
why man this's war a-go-go,
there's plenty good money to be made,
supplyin' the army with the tools of the trade,
just hope and pray that when they drop the bomb,
they drop it on the Vietcong.

Chorus

And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for ?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;

And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.

Country Fish (continued)

now come on generals lets move fast,
your big chance is here at last.
nite you go out and get those reds
cuz the only good commie is one thats dead,
you know that peace can only be won,
when you blow em all to kingdom come.

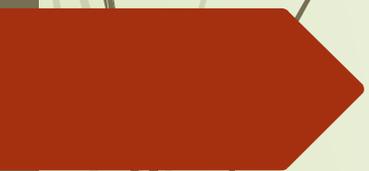
Chorus

Come on mothers throughout the land,
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.
Come on fathers, and don't hesitate
To send your sons off before it's too late.
And you can be the first ones in your block
To have your boy come home in a box.

Chorus

And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for ?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;

And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.



Talk 38 Vietnam War part three



TET 1968

Tet Offensive: January/ February 1968

VC Attacks

Truce announced during TET holiday

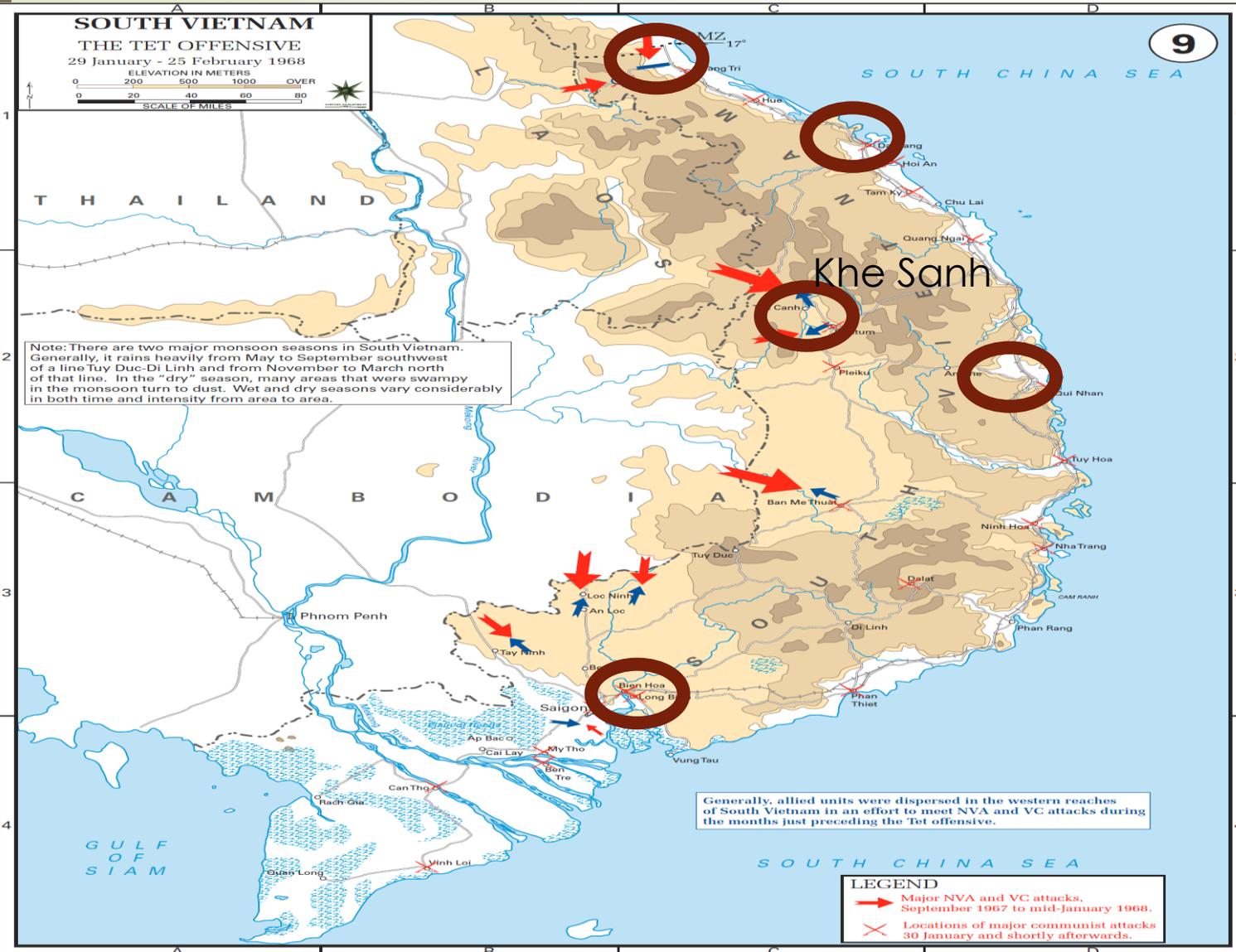
N Vietnamese: 200,000 reinforcements
...total army 400,000,

Attack US base Khe Sanh
...6,000 US/ Viet surrounded
...50,000 North Viet
US massive response...250,000
...fear of "Dien Phien Phu" repeat

VC & NV mass attack across country"
....seize cities
....target/ execute civil authorities
(3,000 mass killings city of Hue)

Westmoreland....assumes Khe Sanh
Still target...communist not enough
Power..believes "body count"

Symbolic "suicide attack"
...Saigon...US embassy



Attack on US embassy (note “Long Hairs!”)
...kill guards, enter compound, all killed
...attack televised on US nightly news





Viet Cong “human wave” attack



gettyimages®
Credit: Sovfoto

Recapture Hue...street fighting/ full scale war



gettyimages®
Credit: Bettmann

Intense street fighting...high casualties



gettyimages®
Credit: Bettmann



Saigon after Tet



gettyimages®
Credit: tim page

The picture that lost the war.

.....execution of Vietcong..depicted as symbol of corruption

...after discovery he had killed wife and children of general Loan colleague



Epilogue: Duan flees to US....pursued by media rest of life...sets up restaurant to support family ..driven to bankruptcy“The general killed the VietCong with his gun, I killed the General with my cameraEddie Evans (1985)

Tet Offensive Military Impact

No national rising...South Vietnamese army fights

- Offensive fails....US / South Vietnamese counterattack
 - 100,000 North Vietnamese/ Vietcong casualties (50,000 deaths)
 - Vietcong destroyed as military force: 50% plus of available fighters
 - North Vietnamese consider TET major defeat...return to guerrilla war
- US military claim victory: 12,000 US killed and wounded, 25,000 Vietnamese army
- Widespread devastation/ horror
 - 16,000 civilians killed
 - Mass execution of 3,500 Hue Civil Servants by VC 3,500

US Army....."not winning war".....increased brutalization

TET and the news....every night
...and we were told that we were winning



Political Impact

- ▶ US public lose belief in government
 - ▶ Public support collapses from 50% to less than 30%...promise of victory ..lies
 - ▶ Anti War demonstrations increase across country
 - ▶ Media portray war as “unwinnable”...compounded by Race Riots across USA
- ▶ LBJ Strategy Change
 - ▶ Removes/ “promotes” McNamara (to World Bank) Westmoreland (Chief of Staff)
 - ▶ Invites North Vietnamese, Vietcong to Peace Conference Paris
 - ▶ Announces decision to withdraw from 1964 Presidential election

Vietnam becomes focus of US Presidential election
....and future of Vietnam War dependent on result

Elections and Negotiations

US elections “all about the war” (for review next talk)

- Democrats split Anti War vs Wind down War factions...violent 1968 Convention
 - Choose LBJ preferred Hubert Humphrey (after Bobby Kennedy assassination)
- Republican choose Richard Nixon “Secret Plan to End the War”

- Paris negotiations
 - Start May 1968...table shape negotiation till October
 - “The problem of the South...North rejects each other’s presence
 - Break through ...all agree to start talks

- Nixon sabotages Peace Talks
 - Humphrey support increases 10% as Peace talks start
 - Nixon intervention...advises Thieu not attend, wait for him to win
 - Talks collapse....Nixon support recovers....

Nixon wins narrow election
... "secret plan to be revealed"



gettyimages®
Credit: Washington Bureau