



## FOREWORD

*[Viet Nam] was the kind of war that since the dawn of history was fought by professionals, by legions. It was fought by men who soon knew they had no support or sympathy at home, who could read in the papers statements by prominent men that they should be withdrawn. It was fought by men whom the Army — at its own peril — had given neither training nor indoctrination, nor the hardness and bitter pride men must have to fight a war in which they do not in their hearts believe.*

T. R. Fehrenbach

*This Kind of War (Korea)*

**THE TET OFFENSIVE** has been described as the turning point of the war in Viet Nam, and, on several levels, it was. From the enemy's perspective, it was a mixed bag. Tet



was clearly a military disaster for them. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was battered in battle; the Viet Cong were butchered. After 1968, the VC were no longer a credible military force, and the burden of waging the war increasingly fell on the northerners, who claimed ownership of the eventual victory. The Popular Uprising, which the Popular Liberation Front (PLF) leadership honestly felt the Offensive would precipitate, didn't happen. And the well-documented atrocities committed by the Communists during their brief occupation of Hue gave many Southern supporters of reunification second thoughts.

North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap's military onslaught was a military debacle. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong lost, by their own estimate, 45,000 men; a comparable number of civilians died. And, in the end, it accomplished nothing - in Viet Nam.

But in New York, Walter Kronkite folded, so in Washington, Lyndon Johnson quit. The fate of South Viet Nam was sealed, later rhetoric about *Vietnamization* notwithstanding. From Tet onward, American policy was cut and run. Nixon could only try to add some dignity to the process. He added 20,000 names to the Wall.

The war, if it was to be won at all, had to be won by the Vietnamese. With all our fire power and technology, we couldn't have done it, and I wince when I hear some loud-mouth, often another veteran, claim that we could have, had "they" only turned us loose.

At about the time Barry Goldwater was running for President in 1964, Air Force General Curtis LeMay (Strategic Air Command leader and America's leading proponent of "strategic bombing") suggested we bomb North



Viet Nam back to the Stone Age. He overlooked the fact that they weren't far out of it to begin with. Bombing them back wouldn't have inflicted any particular hardship on a country where 85% of the population had never been exposed to electricity or running water. The Vietnamese had no real industrial capacity, and had we leveled Hanoi and Haiphong, bombed the Viets to the bargaining table and imposed a peace which was acceptable to us, it would have been only temporary. The North and the Viet Cong saw the war as the continuation of a hundred-year struggle to unify and free the country of foreign domination, and nothing short of total extermination would have deterred them from that goal.

We came very close to exterminating them. In 1995, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their victory, the Hanoi leadership quietly announced their war casualties: 1.1 million soldiers had died, and two million civilians each in the north and south. Our side had lost just under 300,000 (including 4,500 Koreans, 500 Australians and New Zealanders and another 500 Thais). Simple math shows we out-killed them by a significant margin; they out-lasting us. Their patience was limitless, and they knew ours wasn't. It is no coincidence that every major offensive, save the last, conducted by the Communists throughout the war occurred during an American election year.

We didn't understand that at the time, of course. In the days before Kissinger gave us a more sophisticated view of *Realpolitik*, we were into *containment*. We thought Commies were all alike, and that all marched to the beat of a Russian drummer. All so-called *brushfire* wars were, we thought, orchestrated in Moscow, and designed to draw our



attention - and resources - away from the real prize, Europe. We believed in the domino theory: if Viet Nam fell, then Cambodia and Laos would go (as they did within a month), followed by Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, etc., and soon the Soviets would control the sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Victory in Southeast Asia was necessary for the maintenance of our idea of a proper world order.

We failed to recognize that virtually all the Communist revolutions going on around the world at the time were almost exclusively nationalistic, and that their leaders had no ambitions beyond their own borders, unless it was to settle some ancient ethnic feud. Russia and China were viewed only as sources of material support.

In the mid-60s, after American ground forces were committed in Viet Nam, the Chinese offered Ho Chi Minh the services of the Red Army. Ho, who had once been called (among his many *nom de guerres*) Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen The Patriot) declined, commenting to his staff, "I would rather smell American *merde* for ten years than Chinese *merde* a thousand."

The great Socialist Brotherhood never existed. Poles and Germans, Russians and Ukrainians, Viets and Khmers continue to hate one another as they have for centuries, tribalism being a stronger bond than politics.

At rice paddy level, Americans and Vietnamese were especially unnatural allies. The average GI hated the Vietnamese (Dinks, Zips, Slopes, etc.), and didn't particularly care which brand he killed. Given our mutual



racially-inspired animosity, it's amazing that the alliance lasted as long as it did.

Tribes separated by outsiders will instinctively strive for reunification. The French had pretended that Indochina consisted of three Viet Nams; we pretended there were two. In the end, the Viets had their country; for even two Viet Nams could not have continued to exist side-by-side for eternity any more than could two Germanys or two Koreas.

That, too, is something we failed to recognize.

