



The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War

by Edwin E. Moïse.

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The Tet Offensive, which began in late January 1968, was a major turning point in the course of the Vietnam War. Historians and popular writers, journalists, military veterans, government officials, and political pundits have discussed at length how and why the campaign so affected the outcome of the war. In *The Myths of Tet*, historian Edwin Moïse¹ (Clemson Univ.) challenges certain of these assessments by making astute use of military and government documents concerning estimates of enemy force strength in South Vietnam and the manipulation of such estimates for military and political purposes. He also canvasses many secondary sources and journalistic materials to clarify how Tet and related issues were viewed at the time and ever since. He gives credit where it is due and genuinely tries to understand the motives of those who offered mistaken or deliberately falsified evidence and arguments. All this in a clear and concise prose style.

Moïse opens by listing interpretations of Tet that he considers to be “myths.” These include prominently the myth of the stolen victory, which claims the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong quickly suffered a catastrophic defeat and that American casualties were relatively light. He denies that the offensive was well planned and coordinated, and that the Americans missed a chance to follow up their initial successes and destroy their enemies completely. He disputes as well that negative and biased media portrayals of the offensive turned the American public against the war. Moïse credits some scholars for rejecting many of these myths,² but notes that they live on in best-selling books for popular audiences.³ He also criticizes the views of certain Vietnam veterans and military and civilian officials involved in the war, as well as more recent commentators who have perpetuated myths of Tet to advance their own agendas. In short, the author presents an exposé of both popular and scholarly misconstructions of the Tet Offensive.

Moïse devotes the first third of the book to a painstaking assessment of the US military and civilian officials’ calculations of enemy force strength in Vietnam and the veracity of estimates offered by various agencies at specific points in time. He argues that, despite the incomplete evidence available to American analysts, data culled from the South Vietnamese, US military personnel, enemy POWs, captured documents, and above all signals intelligence allowed them to arrive at figures that more or less matched data gleaned from North Vietnamese records. He also demonstrates that, through the first half of 1967, the numbers offered by different agencies consistently showed a significant buildup of communist forces. But, that same year, Gen. William

1. His earlier work includes *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1996), and *The A to Z of the Vietnam War*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Scarecrow Pr, 2005).

2. Viz., John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009), and Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (NY: Free Pr, 1993).

3. E.g., Victor D. Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (NY: Doubleday, 2001), and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot’s History of the United States* (NY: Sentinel, 2004).

Westmoreland and his military analysts in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon began to slant the evidence to create the impression that communist forces were weakening as the Americans escalated their military activities. CIA analysts, in contrast, argued for higher numbers, challenging claims made by their MACV counterparts.

Things came to a head in mid-1967, when military and civilian analysts together created a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) of enemy forces in Vietnam. A CIA analyst named Sam Adams, whom Moïse characterizes as a “hawk,” prepared a detailed estimate much larger than MACV’s, triggering an extended debate. While Adams’s figures proved to be more accurate, they were not reflected in the final SNIE report; hence the Tet Offensive came as a greater shock than it should have.

In his chapter on the preparation of the SNIE, the author systematically dismantles the criticisms of Adams and defenses of MACV estimates found in most discussions of the debate over reliability. Moïse adds significantly to that debate by using records of a lawsuit filed by Westmoreland against CBS News regarding a report on MACV’s falsification of enemy strength numbers. The depositions and documents assembled by the defense team clearly proved that Adams and the CIA analysts had been right, and Westmoreland ultimately dropped the suit.

Both Westmoreland and President Lyndon Johnson were, naturally, concerned about the public opinion of the war. The general and his supporters launched a publicity campaign in late 1967, adducing SNIE numbers to argue that communist strength had leveled off or was weakening, and that the Americans and South Vietnamese were winning the war. Westmoreland and his MACV staff were simply telling the president, administration officials, Congress, and the American people that things were well in hand. These prevarications, Moïse suggests, made Tet much more stunning than it would have been otherwise.

On the Vietnamese side, communist planners in both North and South Vietnam were even more optimistic than the Americans. Overestimating their own strength and popular support within South Vietnam, they seem to have assumed they could spark a national uprising and decisively defeat the Americans and their “puppets” in the South Vietnamese government and army. What they failed to do, however, was devise a judicious and comprehensive plan for the offensive itself. In this, Moïse is debunking the myth that Tet was meticulously planned and executed. He follows (and cites) other historians who have pointed out that confusion over which version of the calendar to use led NVA forces to jump the gun in some places on the night of 29–30 January, a day before the attacks were supposed to begin, giving their enemies time to prepare in other areas and completely upsetting the agreed-upon schedule. Moreover, because the hastily prepared plans were often kept secret until just before the attack was to begin, many troops lacked adequate instructions, which caused elements of the plan to misfire.

The Tet Offensive lasted well into 1969. Eventually, American forces (not their Vietnamese allies), under President Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization plan, backed off after the bloodiest year of the war. This was far from the quick, clean US victory portrayed by many writers and commentators.

Of all the myths of Tet, Moïse objects the most to the idea that the media turned Tet from a US victory into a catastrophic defeat. He finds instead that the major news outlets unflinchingly presented the campaign as a failure for the communists and a military victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese; only occasionally and speculatively did they concede (well after the initial attacks) that it had been a political victory for the enemy. He attributes the negative view of the media to Peter Braestrup, a former Marine Corps officer sent to Vietnam by the *Washington Post* to provide a more positive view of the war than other reporters; this resulted in the 1977 publica-

tion of Braestrup's book *Big Story*⁴ a lengthy assessment of reporting on Tet that later authors and pundits regularly cite when criticizing the role of the media in Vietnam. Moïse stresses that Braestrup never cites any specific report claiming that Tet had been a military victory for the communists, despite constant claims to the contrary. Moïse focuses on Braestrup's treatment of CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, whose reporting from Vietnam in February 1968 was generally seen as negative; he uses the texts of Cronkite's reports to prove that the newsman always presented the communist efforts as failures, while never actually stating that the Americans had been defeated.

Cronkite's broadcast was regarded at the time, and is remembered today, as shockingly negative. But if the general mind-set of the media had been to treat Tet as a military defeat for the American forces, Cronkite's judgment that it had been a draw, not a victory or defeat for either side, would have seemed refreshingly positive. If even a strong minority within the media had been treating the offensive as a military defeat for the United States, Cronkite's broadcast would not have seemed startling or extreme. The reason it seemed shockingly negative, in the context of the time, is that the notion that Tet had been a serious military defeat for the American forces had been *almost entirely absent* from the media coverage during this period. It had not been the consensus; it had not been the viewpoint even of any important minority within the American media. (184)

Moïse cites polls showing that public confidence in the war effort was higher in February 1968 than it had been earlier, but notes that in March, as casualty figures mounted, public confidence fell. Braestrup's ascription of the drop in public support to media coverage of the first days of Tet does not hold up in light of the evidence. Moïse argues that the real, painful surprise of Tet was felt less by the military, the media, and the public than by Washington, which had been falsely led to believe the war was already won. Public opinion and the media did soon turn against the war, but the Johnson administration had turned first.

Taken as a whole, Edwin Moïse's new book is a salutary corrective to the "myths" of Tet. Its thoroughly researched and nuanced analyses should make it required reading for all serious students of the Vietnam War.

4. Subtitle: *How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977).

But much that has been written about the Tet Offensive has been misleading. Edwin Moise shows that the Communist campaign shocked the American public not because the American media exaggerated its success, but because it was a bigger campaign—larger in scale, much longer in duration, and resulting in more American casualties—than most authors have acknowledged. MACV, led by General William Westmoreland, issued regular estimates of enemy strength in South Vietnam. At the beginning of 1968, both Communist and anti-Communist forces in Vietnam announced plans for a brief cease-fire to allow celebration of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, which is more important in Vietnam than any single holiday is in the United States. The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War. Edwin Moise. Late in 1967, American officials and military officers pushed an optimistic view of the Vietnam War. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) said that the war was being won, and that Communist strength in South Vietnam was declining. Then came the Tet Offensive of 1968. In its broadest and simplest outline, the conventional wisdom about the offensive—that it was a military defeat for the Communists but a political victory for them, because it undermined support for the war in the United States—is correct. But much that has been Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) said that the war was being won, and that Communist strength in South Vietnam was declining. Then came the Tet Offensive of 1968. In its broadest and simplest outline, the conventional wisdom about the offensive—that it was a military defeat for the Communists but a political victory for them, because it undermined support for the war in the United States—is correct. Their underestimation of enemy strength was most extreme in January 1968, just before the Tet Offensive. The weak Communist force depicted in MACV estimates would not have been capable of sustaining heavy combat month after month like they did in 1968. Moise also explores the errors of the Communists, using Vietnamese sources.