



# GIAP

## The war against America

### Part Two of James Fox's profile of North Vietnam's legendary military leader

The years of war have left their mark on the features of General Giap. Recently his face has shown signs of the strain and tension involved in military decisions and political conflict. The marks of age are appearing under his eyes, and the beaming smile which has earned him the epithet 'jovial' in many an agency report gives way often now to a grim fixed stare. He is formal and intense, his tiny round frame clothed in a Russian-made uniform with simple braid on the lapels - an innovation of the last few years designed, appar-

ently, "to stiffen the dictatorship of the proletariat". It is all a long way from the early days of the struggle against the French, when his friends described him as "tiny and sentimental", and he went into battle dressed in civilian clothes with a trilby which came down over his ears; the hard master-organiser has submerged the man whom the French once called "the volcano under the snow" on account of his occasional outbursts of rage. To President Johnson he was just "the little yellow man with a jack-knife".

One visitor to Hanoi in recent times says he detected a certain vanity in Giap's manner, particularly when he spoke about the exploits of the People's Army. It is, more accurately, an almost religious belief in the infallibility of his methods. "If it can be said that there is nowadays a greater invention than the people's war, then the Vietnamese people have contributed to the perfection of it," he says. "The imperialists could never understand the strength of a nation, of a people. This strength is immense. It can overcome any difficulty, defeat any enemy." Would-be

interviewers tend to be defeated by his leaden Marxist style. While Giap's compatriot, Pham Van Dong, waxes expansive and imaginative, he himself keeps rigidly to the book, demanding written questions, savouring the repetition of slogans as if their blinding simplicity put everything in a nutshell. On one occasion he announced: "The great secret I am revealing to you today is: 'All the people to the fight'. That's the celebrated formula of Ho Chi Minh. Union, union, the great union . . . victory, victory, the great victory."

And in his books too there is a certain monotony of style. His *People's War, People's Army* was received as a major handbook on revolutionary warfare, and in the American edition, published in 1961, a foreword was written by none other than Roger Hilsman, Director of Intelligence and Research in the State Department. "Though far less ambitious," he wrote, "this book can be compared with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which expressed a distorted view of history as seen by a fanatical personality." Hilsman's counter-propaganda may seem somewhat crude,

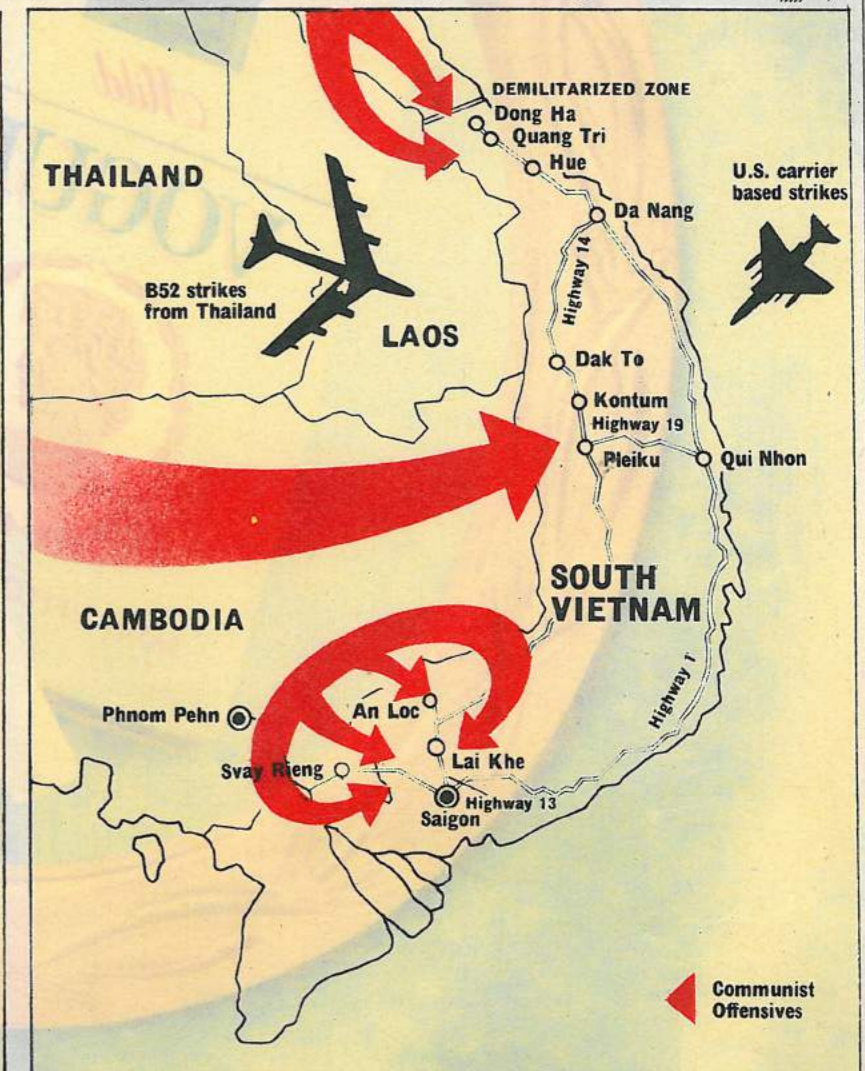
but certainly with its endless clichés, repetitions and bombastic assertions, Giap's book makes heavy going for the unaccustomed reader.

The watertight secrecy of the Hanoi regime makes it difficult to follow Giap's career after Dien Bien Phu in 1954, but there have been some interesting leaks, and they are sufficient to show that Giap's political career has not been as untarnished as his military one.

Giap's main rival in the Hanoi leadership is Truong Chinh, Leader of the National Assembly and traditionally the head of the extremist Left, pro-Chinese faction since the early days of the Revolution. Truong Chinh, a name he adopted, means appropriately "Long March" (Giap's name has rightly or wrongly been translated as "armour plating"). In the early Thirties they wrote a book together called *The Peasant Problem*, soon after Giap had turned from a Left-wing nationalist into a member of the Communist Party. But in 1947 Truong Chinh created a split by writing *The Resistance will Win*, a treatise on guerrilla warfare, plagiarised almost directly from Mao Tse-  




The Tet Offensive, 1968: the psychological blow replaced hopes for military victory. NLF North Vietnamese units simultaneously attacked more than 800 centres when Westmoreland said the U.S. were winning



The Spring Offensive, 1972: the classic Giap strategy. ARVN units concentrate in three main areas against the North Vietnamese onslaught, while minor guerrilla attacks are launched on the ARVN rear

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Above: General Giap and his fellow officers pay homage to 'Uncle' Ho Chi Minh during his funeral in 1969

tung with a Vietnamese angle. For this he won a reputation as the guiding light of Vietnamese politico-military strategy, and the Party's chief theoretician. In 1950 he mounted a campaign against Giap, accusing him of choosing unreliable subordinates, and later that year organised the execution of Tran Chi Chau, Chief of Giap's military supply service.

During the battle of Dien Bien Phu the stage was set for a confrontation between the U.S. and China in Vietnam, and Truong Chinh is thought to have demanded of Ho Chi Minh that North Vietnam become a full Chinese satellite - a policy Ho "needed all his prestige to fight off", according to a well-informed source.

Giap on the other hand is pro-Soviet, as much as his position allows, and actively anti-Chinese. He is given to making warnings to China not to threaten Vietnam's independence. Like every Vietnamese he is aware of China's imperialist past in Vietnam - when China has been strong she has invaded and subjugated the Vietnamese. Truong Chinh, however, trained in China like Giap, has never wavered from the Maoist line. "When I reminded Giap in 1945 that the Chinese had been charged with disarming the Japanese, he was visibly shaken," said Jean Saintenay, the French Commissioner in Hanoi who



Left: areas controlled by the 'People's Revolutionary Government' of South Vietnam after one month of the 1972 offensive. Above: some of Giap's new Russian armaments - a T54 tank and a 130mm. field gun



signed the peace pact with Ho. Giap's concern was justified. The Kuomintang troops looted and plundered their way into Tonkin from China, stripping houses bare. The Chinese provided for the Revolution, but Giap now goes to Russia for his tank training, and in his books the Chinese Revolution is paid no more than lip

service. The disastrous land distribution programme of 1955-56, promised to the people as a victory reform, was largely the work of Truong Chinh. Anyone who gave the slightest inkling of having more than bare subsistence to live on was purged by the Party cadres, and Bernard Fall, a

recognised scholar of Vietnamese history, puts the number of assassinations at 50,000. Others say 100,000. Truong Chinh was sacked as Party Secretary by Ho when things started getting out of hand, and made to confess his errors, while Giap was given the job of preparing one of the most startling self-criticisms to

have come out of a Communist country. "The cadres," he wrote, "seeing the enemy everywhere and acting without discrimination, and sometimes overvaluing the cultivated areas and productive capacity of the land, injured and even acted against certain poor peasants and agricultural workers. In certain regions the habits and customs of the people were violated. All landowners were routinely considered as enemies, even those who had participated in the resistance. During the repression excessive severity led to a lack of prudence, and illegal means of pressure were applied. Countless innocents were labelled as reactionaries and arrested, judged, held in detention, isolated." Wilfred Burchett, who was a reporter in Hanoi at the time, says that Giap had stuck his neck out at great risk and that it was he who brought the evils of the land reform programme to Ho's notice.

Nevertheless, that did not stop him from taking a division into Nghe An province to suppress the peasants who were by that time in open rebellion against the Government, killing a large number of them. Burchett says that at this stage Giap's position was declining so fast - a decline that was no doubt affected by the massive flow of arms, aid and personnel from China - that he was on the point of being arrested. He disappeared from view for three months in 1957 when Ho was in Moscow and Truong Chinh, who had been reinstated, was in effective control of the Government. It was observed that Ho stayed a surprisingly long time in Russia and that while he was away his name was never mentioned on the radio or in the Press. Giap reappeared soon after Ho's return, but since then he has never held any of the top four political posts in the Government.

There is, too, much argument about the success or extent of Giap's military efforts during American involvement in Vietnam.

## U.S. bulldozers left V.C. hideaways like a desert

When American troops landed to prop up the crumbling ARVN (South Vietnamese army) in 1965, Giap had little opportunity to perform grand strategies, to emulate the "marvellously fast troop movements" of his

13th-century hero General Nguyen Hue, as he had done in Tonkin and Annam against the French. It is perhaps incorrect to attribute any single piece of strategy to Giap, or to remove him from the context of the collective leadership, and it is uncertain how much direct control he or Hanoi had over the Vietcong guerrillas in the south. The U.S. has always insisted for political reasons that the control is total, despite the revelations by a high official of the National Security Agency - which provides 80 per cent. of all U.S. intelligence - that they have determined that the Vietcong, or NLF, runs its own affairs.

The North did, however, send men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail and they provided a leader, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, who commanded the Vietcong until he was killed by an American bomb in 1967. He and Giap clashed during an intense debate on strategy, which was continuous from 1965-1967 and which showed that, as far as southern strategy went, the NLF did most of the talking.

Until 1964 the NLF had great successes, symbolised by the battle of Ap Bac in the Delta, where a heavily-armoured expedition of 2500 ARVN and U.S. advisers had to retreat with heavy casualties from the band of 200 guerrillas they were trying to wipe out. The guerrillas themselves went almost unharmed. But, when the Americans went to war in force two years later, the NLF and their North Vietnamese reinforcements were at first dazed by the massive firepower they met. In November 1965 a large force of the NLF attacked the garrison at Plei Mei, south of Pleiku, hoping to ambush the units who came to its rescue. Instead, for the first time, the Air Cavalry arrived in helicopters. The fight lasted a month, with a high U.S. death toll, but then the NLF broke and ran under the rockets and artillery and were chased into the Ia Drang Valley, where 2362 of them were slaughtered.

The Americans had moved their 105 howitzers by helicopter 67 times during the campaign, while the battalions were moved 47 times. Thirty-three thousand shells were fired, a third of the amount fired by Giap during the whole Dien Bien Phu campaign. That represented a mobility the French had never had. The Americans' search and destroy operations, which began in earnest in 1966, were an awesome sight for a

band of guerrillas. At Chu Chi, north of Saigon, for example, the U.S. Infantry arrived one day in June that year equipped to take on a Panzer division. For a company of guerrillas they had 80 armoured personnel carriers. First they would spray the whole area with machine-gun fire; then salvos of 105mm artillery would be called in; then aeroplanes with 20mm cannon and 2.75 rockets; then, if so much as a shot rang out in reply, huge 175 guns would open up from positions a few miles in the rear. After that the bulldozers would go forward, and then the bunkers of the suspected V.C. hideaway would be blown and the place left like a desert, or what the Americans called a 'white zone'. The U.S. army claimed to have killed 16,000 Vietcong in the first four months of 1966, by which time there were 22,500 Vietnamese dead and 6500 dead Americans.

## The villages united to form a continuous fighting line

Nevertheless, Giap's system of 'offensive entrenchment', which had slowly throttled the French forces at Dien Bien Phu, developed into a major strategy and into a major cause of frustration for the Americans. It was used effectively by guerrillas in the south and for the defence of the north, and of the Ho Chi Minh trail, whose traffic was never seriously disrupted by the American bombardments.

Leading from infiltration points along the Ho Chi Minh trail was an elaborate structure of base areas, all interconnected by miles of tunnels deep underground, fortified and stocked with supplies. One day in 1967 U.S. forces in Tay Ninh province captured enough rice to feed 10 Vietcong battalions for 17 months.

Groups of two or three guerrillas, coming down the trail, would take different routes to staging areas where they would form into battalions. If 'heavy' contact was made they would split up, and a formal battle would become a guerrilla operation, as the soldiers melted into the villages. "Surrounded in the great ocean of the People's War," said Giap, "the enemy finds that his eyes and ears are covered. He fights without seeing his opponent, he strikes without hitting,

and he is unable to display his strong fighting method."

Giap, who became preoccupied with an invasion of the North and the problems of aerial bombardment, mobilised all the civilian inhabitants to work with the military to make the whole country into a huge entrenched camp, "a springboard of continuous and widespread attack. The villages of the mountains and plains connected to form a continuous fighting line. Hundreds of thousands of people were put to building tunnels and trenches."

But by the end of the 1966 dry season, the Vietcong had obviously been thrown off balance by the U.S. firepower and seemed to have lost the initiative. They had taken serious losses. Nguyen Chi Thanh - the southern commander - was blamed, and he hit back at Giap. Thanh was known for his pro-Peking view and in 1961, according to Bernard Fall, he had been demoted from chief of the army's political services to an unpromising job as head of the agricultural co-operatives. The argument was a fundamental one. Giap was sticking to Mao's three phases for guerrilla war and he saw the third phase, the counter offensive, as a mistake for the South at that moment. He recognised that a purely military victory was impossible. He wanted to wage a protracted guerrilla war of attrition and mount a parallel political offensive aimed at the weaknesses of the U.S. democratic system which would not bear for ever a long and inconclusive war. It was in seeing and attacking this weakness that Giap made a major innovation in Vietnamese strategy.

Giap believes that "war is to be fought only to the point where the enemy can be brought to the conference table and there defeated". Thanh took the Maoist view that only armed struggle would bring victory. He wanted more North Vietnamese units to launch concentrated offensives against the Americans, whose strength was being overestimated in a "Rightist conservative" fashion. He wanted to prevent them establishing offensive bases. He attacked Giap's "empty reasoning", his "conservative spirit which prevented him from discovering new facts", and made him "incapable of analysing the new situation and responding to it creatively". He was "mechanically copying his own past experiences".

The deadlock reached its



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zenith in 1967, when the Americans launched several enormous operations to try and wipe out the Vietcong bases. Operation 'Cedar Falls' took 30,000 troops into the 'iron triangle', a major base northwest of Saigon, with the object of destroying the whole area. In 15 days the U.S. claimed 671 Vietcong killed. "We are developing a new style of jungle warfare here," said a colonel. "We remove the jungle." And there was 'Junction City' - 40,000 men preceded by B-52 bombers. Search and destroy was now combined with 'pacification', which meant long operations to occupy V.C. areas and an attempt to establish a political structure which would remain loyal to the Government. Although it never really took hold, pacification was the only serious threat to Vietcong strategy; but by now the U.S. Commander, General Westmoreland, had put himself in Giap's classic 'contradiction', between the concentration of his forces for offensives and their dispersal to occupy the land for pacification. It was estimated that, to make any headway at all, Westmoreland would have needed two million troops. At the height of the U.S. operation he had about half that number, including the ARVN forces. And, to exploit the 'contradiction', Giap moved the action northwards, to the Demilitarised Zone, a move he considers the most important of the whole war.

Between that move in 1967 and the eruption of the mighty Tet Offensive in 1968, which began the American withdrawal, Giap simply pinned down U.S. forces in costly and - from the U.S. point of view - futile firefights at Con Thien and Khe Sahn in the north, and at Dak To in the Central Highlands. At Tet in 1968 the Vietcong, in a synchronised and simultaneous operation, hit more than 80 centres, occupied the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, took several important towns briefly, including Hue for two months, and dealt a rude psychological blow to the Pentagon and especially to the American public, who thought, rightly, that they had been deceived with stories of impending military victory.

To answer Giap's northern offensive, Westmoreland had taken his troops off town patrol and perimeter defences, and neither he nor the ARVN had any strategic forces left to deal effectively with the Tet Offensive when it broke. "It was characterised by treachery and deceitfulness," said Westmoreland, who was

subsequently removed from his command.

Although it was thought to be one of Giap's great politico-military successes - it led to Johnson's standing down from re-election and began the U.S. troop withdrawal - it is also possible that Giap wanted nothing to do with it. No-one can have predicted its political effect, and it failed to achieve its military aims. Jean Lacouture, one of the foremost French historians of Vietnam, said that Giap saw the offensive as "Leftist voluntarism". Giap dismisses the offensive rather unenthusiastically in his writings. The idea had been to promote a "general uprising in the South", an argument which the Maoists supported with blind faith. But it would have been out of character for Giap to rely on the revolutionary fervour of the masses. He believes in control down to the last village cell.

## Spring Offensive 1972 - "the decisive battle of the war"

Still the Tet Offensive changed the course of the war. In spite of any misgivings he may have had about it, he had no doubts about its political effect. After it he said: "The Pentagon circles realised that they no longer had a chance of winning the war militarily. Furthermore they saw they were losing militarily. It was in this situation that the problem of 'Peace with honour' was posed for them. This expression was used previously by the French colonialists before Dien Bien Phu. That the world's greatest imperialist power has been driven to seek such an outcome to a war of aggression is a very bitter thing for the imperialists and a very heartening thing for us, for progressive humanity."

The Spring Offensive that Giap launched across the DMZ this year was a demonstration to Nixon that the South Vietnamese army could not, to use his words, "hack it alone". A convincing decimation of ARVN troops, a gaining of significant territory, would rob Nixon of any further moves except negotiation-with-concessions.

With Hanoi apparently isolated diplomatically by Nixon's accords with Moscow and Peking - a situation strangely similar to that

which Ho Chi Minh faced after Dien Bien Phu and which forced him into a compromised settlement - the 1972 offensive was a critical test. Thieu called it the decisive battle of the war.

In 1970 Giap announced his new theme in a pamphlet which he published in Hanoi. "Guerrilla warfare allows the masses to launch insurrections and seize power at the base. But only regular warfare is capable of destroying the enemy, of liberating vast regions. Guerrilla warfare must progress to regular warfare."

In a massive new effort for that poor and backward nation, Giap had begun training and equipping a regular army, with tanks, artillery and guided missiles, and for the first time planning to fight a conventional war - hoping to liberate vast areas. Ever since 1965, when the U.S. bombing raids had forced the North Vietnamese to build missile sites and learn to fly MIGs, the debate on build-up had been going on in the Party. The main problem was not to lose sight of the essence of the People's War, with its mobility and spirit and inventiveness, not to be blinded by technology. "Our victory," said Pham Van Dong recently, "will be the victory of men over technology." And for Giap the offensive was a terrible responsibility. If it failed, those 30 years of struggle and sacrifice would possibly be destroyed and the Party might lose control.

## Peace with "honour": President Nixon could only pretend

Already there were problems with recruitment. Complaints were voiced in the army newspaper that political cadres were not doing their job in the countryside. Giap began a new campaign for economy. Before, he had said: "To their modern armaments, one opposes boundless heroism." Now in a series of major speeches he was saying: "When concentrating our forces we must make careful calculations. As for numbers, the fewer the better." The people must master the battlefield, "while sustaining fewer losses on our side".

"When it is necessary," he said, "we must change outdated forms of warfare. We should not reapply old experience mechanically." Turning 25

years of practice upside down, Giap said that in future the main force units would create the conditions for guerrilla operations. Previously it had been the reverse. His slogan for the coming campaign was: "Defeat the many with the few."

When, early this year, Giap's deeply dug-in 130mm guns opened fire on the ARVN firebases south of the DMZ, the U.S. advisers were amazed by the ferocity of the bombardment. "We were very uptight at Tet," a U.S. adviser told me, "and we were waiting for something, but nothing like this." It suddenly seemed to lack sense to put ARVN soldiers on these lines of hills to protect the northern zone. There was no question of holding it. The Third Division fled in disarray, never to be reformed. Not only had U.S. Intelligence not seen it coming, but they had no idea Giap had amassed so much hardware. Nor could they imagine, like the French at Dien Bien Phu, how it had arrived undetected. From that moment on, U.S. advisers treated Giap's offensive as a Western-type war of conquest, and were pronouncing very early on that he had lost. They said he couldn't sustain the onslaught so far from his bases, forgetting that Giap's traditional strength has been his well-stocked underground arsenals.

By September U.S. officials were saying that Giap had failed because he had been unable to take and hold a provincial capital. They were puzzled when he didn't go straight on from Quang Tri down Highway One to take Hue. But that was not the Giap doctrine either. It would be suicide to take a town and be wiped out by B-52 raids. The principle Giap used was the same he had used at Dak To, Con Thien, Hamburger Hill: "One must avoid suffering losses by trying to hold one's ground at all costs. Our troops must never be wasted merely for the sake of the defence or occupation of territory."

When the citadel of Quang Tri was recaptured by ARVN forces in September, on orders from Thieu after a very costly five-month battle, it was nothing more than a pile of stones. Giap had switched his attack elsewhere, and the province itself remained in his hands. In the end he seemed to have succeeded. The ARVN, by October, were severely short of strategic fighting units. Those that were left were concentrated in very damaging fire fights in three or four major points, or were strung out

thinly all over the country coping with guerrilla attacks or defending population centres. They were clearly unable to recapture or reoccupy 'liberated' areas.

In one month, having drawn away all the ARVN main units, the Vietcong had destroyed pacification in the Delta completely, and once again it was unsafe to go outside the towns. By the time a settlement was being talked about in October, NVA divisions were massing on the Cambodian border on the edge of the Delta and their infiltration went almost unchecked. Wilbur Wilson, the senior U.S. adviser for the Delta, told me that the situation was back where it was in 1965.

Announcing to the Press in Washington that the South Vietnamese army had indeed been badly "whipsawed," Mr Bray, the State Department spokesman, added that the Communists had the advantage of being able to focus their attacks on a particular target, whereas the South Vietnamese had to move their reserves about to defend the whole country. It was as if the Red General's magic formula had finally been uncovered, but there was nothing anyone could do about "the contradictions of the aggressive colonial war".

In the end it seemed that each side would claim victory in the peace settlement - and certainly each side seemed to be making compromises - while the Vietcong and Thieu's police prepared for an inevitable and bloody war of attrition in Saigon and the countryside. An actual settlement seemed, as ever, a long way off. Nixon could only pretend that he was achieving peace with "honour". The genocidal bombardment of the North, unleashed during the settlement talks, seemed to underline that point.

In his books and pamphlets, Giap likes to dwell occasionally on the hurt it has caused the American people to have been continually frustrated by the lack of victory in Vietnam, how it has shaken their idea of being the most powerful nation in the world. He points to the cruelty of the world's largest war machine being unleashed on a nation of peasants. He sees himself, so it seems, as one in the long line of Vietnamese commanders who have held off the Mongols, the Chinese, the Siamese. "Who are the barbarians of the 20th century?" Giap said recently. "And who are the only ones to have stopped them?"



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