

[In Retrospect: Public Intellectuals and Activists Weigh In on the Tet Offensive 50 Years Later](#)

The US is still peddling illusions of winnable wars.

This marks the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive. On January 30, 1968, thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers and their Viet Cong support organized a sweeping attack of multiple cities in South Vietnam. The event is said to have reinforced the United States opposition to the Vietnam War. The following is a compilation of thoughts across a diverse spectrum of academics, activists, organizers and progressive thinkers on the significance of this event in history.



File picture of a female Viet Cong soldier in action with an anti-tank gun during fighting in the Mekong River Delta during the Tet Offensive in 1968. (Photo: AFP / Getty Images)

Daniel Falcone: Could you briefly share with me your thoughts on the Tet Offensive and its meaning and significance historically? Can you also expand on our political culture in the US and how it might be related to knowledge gaps regarding the Vietnam War? Professor [Norman Finkelstein](#) has called this war and others difficult to grasp because of the intense differences between “[US] government propaganda and reality.”

[Noam Chomsky](#), professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: The Tet offensive is perhaps the most remarkable example of popular resistance in history. The attack on South Vietnam had been so severe that Bernard Fall, one of the most knowledgeable and respected specialists and direct observers, had warned a year earlier that Vietnam might not survive as a cultural and historical entity under the most extreme attack that had ever been launched against an area that size. South Vietnam was saturated with half a million US troops, and a much larger army of the client state. Hardly a square meter was not under surveillance.

The uprising came as a total shock, all over the country. It took immense firepower and destruction to control it. US elites understood that the rosy predictions about victory were complete nonsense. [President Lyndon Johnson] was pressured to begin to move towards withdrawal. The last part of the Pentagon Papers ... reports that the Joint Chiefs were reluctant to send more troops because they feared that they would need them for civil disorder control at home if the war escalated.

Michael Klare, professor of Peace and World Security Studies in the Five College Consortium: In the spring of 1968, I was a student at Columbia University, where anti-Vietnam War sentiment was boiling up and was to reach a crescendo with the famous student strike of April '68 (to be recognized with a series of events at Columbia this spring and memorialized in a new book by [Paul Cronin](#), *A Time to Stir*).

The Tet Offensive was viewed by me and my comrades in the antiwar movement as another sign that the war was a monumental disaster, and that the only rational path forward was a US troop withdrawal. The [US] government and the nation's ruling elites (like Columbia's administration) did not see the folly ... of the war, and [that they did not take] immediate action to end it only fueled our activist passion.

Arthur Shostak, futurist and professor emeritus of sociology at Drexel University: The Tet Offensive in January 1968 is likely to be regarded by historians looking back as a major turning point in four regards: Forever after, the American public was skeptical about any pronouncement from its military, since before the Offensive, it had been assured US victory over the Viet Cong was imminent.

Second, forever after, the American public understood it had the power to discourage a sitting president from seeking another term after he/she had lost the confidence and respect of the nation.

Third, forever after, the American public was haunted with guilt by two iconic images — a [napalm-burned naked little girl](#) running screaming down a Vietnamese rural road (“collateral damage”), and a young male [Viet Cong prisoner being executed](#) in cold blood on a Saigon Street by a Vietnam[ese] officer allied with the US. Both images left in their wake a deep-set opposition to any further American involvement in such boots-on-the-ground military actions.

Today, we have an upscale Hilton Hotel operating in Saigon, and affluent American tourists passing through the city can “tour” the “Hilton Hotel” prison in which Sen. John McCain was tortured.

The bloody saga of the Tet Offensive underlines the lesson that armed combat is always a regrettable costly error — and we ought to emphatically avoid the employ of young American troops in combat overseas. Diplomacy and global alliances ought to trump military action now and forever after.

Richard Falk, professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University: The magnitude of the Tet Offensive ... came as a shock in 1968, unsettled the [US] presidency to such an extent that Lyndon Johnson dramatically decided not to seek reelection, and resulted in “a bombing pause” that was regarded at the time as a gesture toward a negotiated end of the war. The main effect of this spectacular turn of events in the Vietnam War was psycho-political, making the government, the media and the public feel that they had been manipulated by misleading propaganda to the effect that the Vietnamese were on the verge of defeat, lacking in offensive capabilities, and that the [US] war effort was going forward according to schedule.

The think-tank cheerleaders for the war argued vigorously that the Tet Offensive was misinterpreted. Their view was that this tactic of the North Vietnamese was a desperate effort to reverse perceptions of the war, and that the results of the battlefield suggested the failure of this initiative designed to shock public opinion. These apologists for the war pointed to the heavy casualties sustained by the Tet attacks, and the failure of the Vietnamese to hold any of the urban centers that they had briefly captured. In effect, the shift in US approach from war to diplomacy, a search for [“peace with dignity”](#) was presented as “seizing defeat from the jaws of victory” by its diehard supporters.

In a sense, these opposed lines of interpretation were both correct. The Vietnamese resistance to the American intervention was not on the verge of defeat. The evidence showed a resolve in Hanoi and among the leadership of the National Liberation Front (NLF) to carry on their national struggle indefinitely, if necessary, and

regardless of its costs. For the Vietnamese, the war against the Saigon regime and its American backers was a continuation of the anti-colonial war earlier waged against the French. At the same time, the Vietnamese paid a heavy price in personnel, and possibly in short-term morale, by attempting to reverse perceptions as to the war by such drastic means. It should be recalled that the war went on for more than four years, adding significantly to casualties on both side.

What is the saddest reflection about the American experience of the Vietnam War on its 50th anniversary is how [little has been learned](#) by the [US] government and the citizenry about the limits of military superiority in wars waged by native peoples against Western adversaries. The leadership in this country has tried to [reinvent](#) counterinsurgency warfare repeatedly, and experienced similar costly defeats in such varied national settings as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Our security experts are so dedicated to the militarization of foreign policy that they are unable to think outside the military box — a reflection of the military-industrial-complex's chokehold on the political and moral imagination of those entrusted with shaping the [US] response in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world. This 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive can be best remembered in the US by finally learning this most basic lesson of the Vietnam War.

[Stephen Zunes](#), professor of politics at the University of San Francisco: The Tet Offensive underscored in the minds of millions of Americans — including some important opinion-leaders — that the war was not winnable. Though there had been opposition to the Vietnam War from the outset for moral or ideological reasons, the majority of Americans turned against it as it became increasingly apparent that the United States was not going to win easily and the costs would be too great.

The NLF and North Vietnamese were able to seize major cities (and even briefly capture the US embassy in Saigon) because they had infiltrators ... practically everywhere in the country, serving as a reminder that this was not the case of an invading army as Washington claimed, but a popular resistance movement.

Though the NLF was Communist-led, the Tet Offensive served as a reminder that it was not an outside force directed from Moscow, but the manifestation of [widespread nationalist sentiments](#) that even a half million foreign troops and relentless bombing could not dislodge.

For the NLF and North Vietnamese, this political victory came at the cost of what was ultimately a military defeat that took the lives of many tens of thousands of soldiers, including much of the NLF's best cadre and leadership. One result was that when they finally won seven years later, the more hardline, rigid, ideologically-driven Communist leaders from the north ended up dominating the new order, marginalizing those from the southern half of the country who were more sensitive to the population's needs and desires.

Without the enormous losses from the Tet Offensive, the transition to a unified socialist Vietnam would have likely been less repressive, more deliberate, more inclusive and thereby, more successful.

[Carl Dix](#), founding member and representative of the Revolutionary Communist Party: As a teenager who was fighting a losing battle with my draft board, the 1968 Tet Offensive had a huge impact on me. At that time, it felt like going into the Army meant that you would end up in Vietnam, and the uprising that the Vietnamese revolutionaries unleashed on Tet destroyed any and all talk that had been coming from LBJ and co. that there was "light at the end of the tunnel" and that the US was winning the war. If the US was winning, how could the revolutionaries pop up seemingly out of nowhere and take over whole cities throughout the country and even hold part of the capital?

Also, the brutality the US forces unleashed in taking back the cities and villages that had been seized ... had a big impact on me. A friend of mine who had volunteered for the military at the age of 17 had just come back after a tour in Vietnam, and he was a totally different person. He was constantly complaining about how they had taken his belt at the airport when he flew back from Vietnam. It turned out that this belt had the ears of the Vietnamese people he had killed! The sweet kid I had known for years had turned into a killer who relished killing. I didn't want to become the kind of person it seemed you had to be [in order] to be part of the kind of war that was being fought by the US in Vietnam.

Looking back on the Tet Offensive after I had refused to go to Vietnam, served two years in [Leavenworth Military Penitentiary](#) for taking this stand and become a revolutionary communist, I realized that Tet was a bold military initiative that also had a big political component. It was aimed not just at inflicting a military defeat on the US forces, but also sapping the will of people in the US to continue to support the war effort. And if anything, it was even more successful in its political aim than in its military goal.

[Eleanor Goldfield](#), creative activist, singer and writer: Hindsight is only 20/20 if we see what really happened. Vietnam pulled back the veil on our government's ulterior motives with regards to the use of military power. I remember protesting the war in Iraq in 2002 and seeing signs that read: "[Iraq is Arabic for Vietnam.](#)" It was the repeat of the same story: war for resources, war for money, war for hegemony — never for the greater good — and that includes WWII.

The Tet Offensive helped birth a new era of [grave mistrust in government](#). The fact that [Martin Luther King Jr.] and [Robert F. Kennedy] were murdered the same year only added to the gross disillusionment that would continue to grow — Kent State in 1970 being perhaps the most covered, but certainly not the only violent government backlash against progressive and peaceful ideals. As the truth and reality of our government's goals and interests became clearer, the disillusionment grew, and my concern has always been as an activist that we will rest on disillusionment and not rise to fight, not rise to build.

The anti-war, pro-peace movement is pathetic, and it's not because people want perpetual war. It's because they don't think it's worth it to go up against the system. That is the scariest part. Not evil — but the indifference to evil, the acceptance, the adaptation to a world where the horrors of Vietnam that birthed the horrors in the Middle East are not horrific at all — but rather normal; a banal evil.

[John Halle](#), professor of music at Bard College: My main connection with it is personal: My cousin was living with us at the time, [and] received a late-night phone call informing her that her husband was a casualty. It is 50 years ago, and I remember her scream as if it were coming from the next room. I was 9 years old.

He came back with a severed spine — never walked again, though through the Veterans Administration (probably the greatest governmental agency), was able to make a life for himself, and have a family with whom I am very close — though there was a question as to whether he would recover.

The inexpressible senselessness of war was deeply imprinted on me from that day forward. As it was for many hundreds of thousands who had similar direct experience with its carnage. This was during the draft. Nixon's smartest move was eliminating it which changed everything, including the peace movement, which I remember very well, and which has never figured out how to negotiate the organizing conundrum presented by a volunteer army.

NOTE: This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.