



*Huế 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* by Mark Bowden.

New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017. Pp. 610. ISBN 978-0-8021-2700-6.

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The year 2018 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Tet Offensive during the War in Vietnam. In *Huế 1968*, veteran journalist Mark Bowden<sup>1</sup> provides a timely, well researched history of that pivotal campaign with a focus on the exceptionally fierce, sustained combat in and around the city of Huế. He also uses the battle as a lens through which to analyze the US military experience in Vietnam more generally. In lucid, jargon-free prose, he conveys the grotesque human costs of the remorseless unconventional warfare that American forces encountered in Southeast Asia.

On 30 January 1968, during an agreed ceasefire, the Viet Cong (VC<sup>2</sup>) and some detachments of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) suddenly attacked virtually every city and town across South Vietnam. Weeks of heavy fighting were followed by sporadic military action continuing into the fall of 1968. Taking advantage of the tremendous shock effect of their short, sharp, well coordinated offensive, NVA and VC forces killed many American and South Vietnamese soldiers. Viet Cong forces used Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) sewers for movement. Suicide squads even penetrated the grounds of the US Embassy and, although they never entered the embassy building, American personnel were trapped during the assault.

Much of Huế, a former regional capital filled with historic architecture, was subjected to days and nights of brutal house-to-house, street-by-street combat, until South Vietnamese and US forces, including Marines and the 1st Cavalry Division, finally defeated their enemy. In Huế as elsewhere, the communists had executed many civilians. Bowden provides details regarding leaders, fighters, and civilians on the ground. He is especially insightful in recreating the complex negotiations among the communist leaders in Hanoi over the wisdom of launching an offensive as ambitious as Tet during the formal ceasefire of the Lunar New Year. They were, we learn, dedicated ideologues, operating within a merciless dictatorship, but their aged and frail revolutionary leader, Ho Chi Minh, was surprisingly skeptical about the surprise attack. Moreover,

His opinion was echoed by the Chinese, who pointed to the protracted nature of Mao's struggle. They saw the planned Tet campaign as a nod to Soviet tactics, and, in effect, a sign that the party was leaning more toward Moscow than Beijing. More significantly, the plan was also opposed by [Gen. Vo Nguyen] Giap. (63)

And, too, Ho was often away getting medical treatment in China, an ideological ally but historical enemy. General Van Tien Dung, technically a subordinate to Giap, lobbied hard and successfully for the attack. Tellingly, when the offensive commenced, Giap was in Moscow, partly to attend a

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1. His dozen or so previous books include *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1999) which tells the harrowing story of US Army Rangers trapped in a failed operation in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. The book was the basis of a successful feature film directed by Ridley Scott (2001).

2. The Viet Cong were the military arm of the National Liberation Front, the revolutionary movement closely allied with the communist regime based in Hanoi. The International Phonetic Alphabet rendering of the letters V and C was "Victor Charlie"; hence US soldiers' informal reference to their enemy as "Charlie."

performance of the Bolshoi Ballet. He entered and exited the theater when it was dark, not wishing to be seen enjoying the performance while his troops were going into desperate battle.

American and international news media, especially television networks, quickly disseminated film of the carnage of the Tet Offensive. These disturbing images had an immediate and profound impact, but President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration refused to impose military censorship in the war zone, a departure from the regulations enforced in wars before and since Vietnam. The president, though a shrewd and devious politician, apparently felt that censorship would only serve to erode public support for the war. Although this was decades before the advent of the Internet and the instant dissemination of information—and misinformation—the global electronic communications revolution was nevertheless underway. The highly respected CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite delivered an unusual on-air personal antiwar editorial, urging US flexibility in the face of military stalemate. Bowden rightly stresses Hanoi's acute interest in American public opinion.

American public support for the Vietnam War, long relatively strong, rapidly collapsed after Tet, with important political repercussions. In the New Hampshire primary (12 Mar. 1968), the antiwar challenger Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) won 42 percent of the vote to Johnson's 48. After Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-NY) entered the race, LBJ avoided being defeated by his hated enemy and withdrew from contention. Bowden details Kennedy's cautious, calculating approach to declaring his own candidacy, as he criticized the Johnson administration's failing war policy. McCarthy, though a difficult personality and rather isolated legislator, showed courage in challenging the incumbent if beleaguered LBJ. After New Hampshire, his campaign, Bowden observes, changed from a lonely quixotic journey to a real movement with strong public support.

South Vietnamese and US forces eventually quashed the Tet Offensive, but Hanoi was focused on the wider strategic context. Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and field commander Gen. William Westmoreland had spent 1967 trumpeting imminent military victory. Tet proved them wrong. After 1968, endemic crime, drug abuse, and poor morale plagued the US Army. Tet decimated the Viet Cong, who ultimately facilitated NVA dominance of the South from 1975. Bowden clarifies the fissures and tensions between the regime in the North and the revolutionaries in the South, which American antiwar activists at the time and Vietnam War revisionists ever since have wrongly minimized.<sup>3</sup>

Bowden's portrayal of US war leadership during the Johnson administration is unsparing and devastating. Johnson was by turns anxious, desperate, and self-righteous. Persuasive documentary evidence proves that Westmoreland forcefully advocated using nuclear or chemical weapons after the Tet Offensive. Bowden calls his public pronouncement that the war's end was near "preposterous" (314–15, 317).

The Vietnam War is still often misunderstood by biased or ill-informed commentators and historians on both the left and the right, as well as armchair strategists drawn to the image of US advisers "winning hearts and minds," among others. Mark Bowden has now provided a truer, more discerning study of the terrible costs of the actual war in Southeast Asia. His arguments deserve serious reflection by all readers with any interest in the conflict in Vietnam.

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3. See, further, Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2nd ed. (NY: Praeger, 1967).