

# Provoking America

## Le Duan and the Origins of the Vietnam War

❖ Zachary Shore

Some decisions make no sense at first glance. Why did Adolf Hitler send troops into the Rhineland in 1936, when German forces were so much weaker than the French? Why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor if the United States was so much stronger in military and economic might? Although scholars have puzzled over many such perplexing strategic gambits, few investigators have considered an equally peculiar decision in the Vietnam War. Why did Hanoi condone attacks against U.S. forces after the Tonkin Gulf incident? Hanoi's policy had been to avoid a U.S. escalation. The last thing Hanoi should have wanted was to provoke a full-scale invasion by the United States, especially at such a precarious time. Nevertheless, Communist forces in South Vietnam continued to strike U.S. bases after Tonkin, when the risk of escalation was at its peak. Could Hanoi have actually believed these attacks would deter the United States? Was Hanoi not able to control southern Communists at so pivotal a moment? Or did party leaders egregiously misread their primary foe?

Hanoi's victory in the Second Indochina War has fostered a mystique of shrewdness on the part of the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)—an image that has been preserved in part by the inaccessibility of key records about DRV decision-making. Scholars are still at an embryonic stage in determining how the North Vietnamese leaders functioned, thought, processed intelligence, and reached decisions. Because the most crucial archives in Hanoi—those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Central Executive Committee Office—all remain largely closed, historians are limited in what they can assert. But thanks to the release of the voluminous *Van Kien Dang* records of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) and numerous Vietnamese official histories of the war, along with burgeoning scholarship on internal dynamics, we are gaining new insights into what

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the DRV leaders actually thought about their principal foe.<sup>1</sup> By scrutinizing Hanoi's thinking, we can gain purchase on the larger questions of just how well North Vietnamese leaders understood the United States and how much that knowledge helped them win the war.

This article asks two questions. First, how well did Hanoi understand its U.S. enemy? Second, and closely related to the first, why did Hanoi permit attacks against U.S. forces after the Tonkin Gulf incident if Hanoi had hoped to avoid an escalation of U.S. military involvement? Fifty years after that escalation began, it is fitting to explore more deeply how Hanoi perceived this episode. The article concentrates on the person who became the driving force within the party and a key shaper of the Vietnamese Communists' protracted war strategy. Much has been written about the person and policies of Ho Chi Minh, but Le Duan's powerful influence on strategy has undergone little scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Although other party leaders influenced wartime strategy, Le Duan as VWP First Secretary carried the greatest weight within the Politburo. He exerted the strongest influence over the southern Communists, who were pivotal in fighting both U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. It was in this role as head of the southern Communists, that Le Duan initially devised his strategies for defeating the United States—concepts he developed and executed as his power grew. We need therefore to spotlight several recurrent themes in his thinking: the nature of a protracted war, the role of casualties, and U.S. global standing. Each of these subjects influenced how Hanoi intended to defeat the United States over the long term and offers insights into how Hanoi understood its enemy. In short, by excavating how Le Duan thought, we can

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1. The *Van Kien Dang* is a collection of Politburo and Central Committee directives, speeches, and cables emanating from Hanoi and covering most of the post-World War II era. The collection is assessed in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2010). From among the many official DRV histories, this article has been informed in part by the histories of the Foreign Ministry, the People's Army, the People's Navy, the Sapper Forces, the Central Office of South Vietnam, histories of combat operations, histories of the Tonkin Gulf Incident, the memoirs of prominent military officers, records of the secret negotiations with the Johnson administration, and some Vietnamese newspapers.

2. Pierre Asselin has highlighted the Party Secretary's importance in state-building. See Pierre Asselin, "Le Duan, the American War, and the Creation of an Independent Vietnamese State," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 10, Nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2001). See also Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). A 2007 biography of Le Duan, although essentially a hagiography by the official state-run publishing house, covers his general background and impact on Vietnamese history. See Tong Bi Thu, *Le Duan: Party General Secretary* (Hanoi: VNA Hanoi Publishing House, 2007). Lièn-Hang T. Nguyen's *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) spotlights intraparty factionalism, emphasizing the roles of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho. Still largely absent from the literature is a focus on the party General Secretary's ability to know the United States and the impact it had on the war.

better grasp how much strategic empathy the party leader possessed for the United States.<sup>3</sup>

## The Benefits of Escalation

On 2 August 1964, the USS *Maddox* snaked its way through North Vietnamese waters. Its presence drew the enemy's attention. Three North Vietnamese torpedo boats fired on the vessel, most likely in response to U.S. shelling of two North Vietnamese islands a few nights before. What became known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident profoundly altered both U.S. and Vietnamese history.<sup>4</sup> A suspected second torpedo attack on 4 August never actually occurred, but the episode enabled President Lyndon Johnson to obtain congressional approval for expanded military action. After Tonkin, Communist forces continued to attack U.S. targets. The most damaging of these assaults came on 6 February 1965, when Viet Cong (VC) forces bombarded numerous military targets, including a U.S. air base at Pleiku, killing nine servicemen and wounding 128. President Johnson responded with Operation Flaming Dart, a series of air strikes against enemy targets. The incident at Pleiku, as much as Tonkin, is what triggered the deployment of U.S. ground troops. The first waves of Marines arrived on 8 March 1965. By the summer, roughly 85,000 of them were in Southeast Asia, and U.S. forces ultimately numbered nearly 550,000 at their peak. By the time the last U.S. soldier departed, roughly 58,000 of them had died and nearly 3 million Vietnamese had been killed, with countless more seriously wounded.

Why did the North Vietnamese approve these attacks after Tonkin? Party leaders sought no wider war. Officials in Hanoi certainly did not want full-scale U.S. escalation. Yet, southern Communist forces continued their assault on U.S. bases after Tonkin, provoking the country they supposedly hoped to deter.

The reason for the attacks at Tonkin has never been fully clear. Lieutenant-General Hoang Nghia Khanh was serving as chief of Combat Operations Office A on the night of 2 August 1964, when the *Maddox* sailed into North Vietnamese territorial waters. His memoirs allege that the torpedo attacks were

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3. See Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), in which the concept of "strategic empathy" is defined as the ability to discern an enemy's underlying drivers and constraints.

4. One of the best works on the Tonkin Gulf incident is Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

authorized by the high command, but he added that his superior, General Van Tien Dung, thought this was a mistake at a time when the North sought to prevent the war from expanding to North Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Hanoi's official history of combat operations states that it was an error for the General Staff command duty officer to have issued the order to attack the *Maddox*.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the torpedo attacks were not directed from the highest party officials but were a knee-jerk response from the high command to retaliate for both an incursion into territorial waters and the recent covert U.S. shelling of the North's islands. If this were the case, it would indicate the inadequacy of Hanoi's command over its military, insofar as the aim up to this time had been to avoid U.S. escalation. The fog of war could account for Hanoi's attack on the *Maddox*, but why did it continue to permit attacks on U.S. soldiers, culminating at Pleiku?

On 7 August 1964, just days after the Tonkin episode, Ho Chi Minh presided over a ceremony to commend the DRV forces on their fighting spirit in the Tonkin Gulf and subsequent air battle. The military had undertaken a "scientific analysis" of the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy's air force. As any serious modern military would do, it scrutinized errors made during the battles in order to draw lessons and improve combat performance. The DRV navy had engaged a U.S. destroyer and fighter jets, and all three of the DRV's torpedo boats had survived. The tiny DRV navy had acquitted itself well, but Ho cautioned his soldiers not to become complacent. He told the troops:

You have won a glorious victory, but don't become self-satisfied. Don't underestimate the enemy because of this victory. We must realize that, with regard to the American imperialists and their puppets, "even in the face of death these leopards will not change their spots." They still harbor many evil plots.<sup>7</sup>

That same day the VWP Politburo issued a directive in which it assessed the U.S. government's likely next steps. The Politburo concluded that the United States, despite having alternatives, would continue to escalate the war, particularly by increasing its attacks against the North.

Tonkin marked a break in the pattern of U.S. involvement. Rather than advising and fighting alongside the soldiers of South Vietnam, and rather than

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5. Lieutenant General Hoang Nghia Khanh, *The Road to the General Headquarters Staff* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2008), pp. 112–113.

6. Combat Operations Department, General Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam, *History of the Combat Operations Department 1945–2000* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2005), p. 210.

7. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. by Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 133.

conducting intelligence or sabotage operations within the DRV, three U.S. actions combined to heighten Hanoi's fears of escalation. One was the shelling of islands on the night of 30–31 July. The second was two bombing raids on 1 and 2 August over Laos and North Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> The third was the *Maddox* mission. Taken together, these suggested a sudden spike in U.S. aggression. They appeared to Hanoi as serious, provocative acts. Following the attack, the *Maddox* was ordered back into the area. The ship's captain, George Merrick, suspected that he was being used in a game of cat-and-mouse—with his ship as the mouse. He requested permission to withdraw, but Washington refused.<sup>9</sup> President Johnson's intentions aside, the question is whether Hanoi interpreted the *Maddox* and its attendant actions as a provocation. Based on the VWP Politburo's directive of 7 August, it clearly did.

The post-Tonkin Politburo directive, "Increasing Combat Readiness to Counter All Enemy Schemes to Commit Provocations and to Attack North Vietnam," repeatedly spoke of the need to crush the enemy's expected provocations. The directive outlined three principal U.S. options for future action. First, the United States could intensify the war in the South and continue to provoke and sabotage the North in order to block the flow of supplies southward. Second, it could expand the war into the North. Third, it could seek a diplomatic solution. The directive concluded that the United States would choose the first option.<sup>10</sup>

The VWP Politburo anticipated that the United States would engage in a variety of new and intensified provocations. These included the possibility of naval blockades, amphibious landings to destroy coastal areas and then withdraw, larger commando raids inside the DRV than those previously conducted, and the incitement of ethnic minorities and regime opponents to create disorder. The Politburo assumed that such actions could either be coordinated and launched simultaneously or taken in a gradual, step-by-step fashion for the purpose of testing the Communist states' reactions.<sup>11</sup>

The directive of 7 August suggests that Hanoi's leadership had come to see full-scale war with the United States as unavoidable. In fact, as early as March 1964, North Vietnamese military leaders believed that the covert U.S. raids into DRV territory were a precursor to a wider U.S. assault upon the

8. Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf*, p. 60.

9. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 200.

10. Politburo Directive No. 81-CT/TW, 7 August 1964, in *Van Kien Dang*, Toan Tap, 25, 1964, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), p. 185.

11. *Van Kien Dang*, 1964, p. 186.

North.<sup>12</sup> Le Duan's adherence to Marxist-Leninist ideology might have convinced him that U.S. expansion was historically inevitable, deeply rooted in the nature of capitalist states. More likely, however, his estimation was based on careful observation of the U.S. military's steadily waxing involvement. By the time of Tonkin, there was little evidence to suggest that U.S. officials planned to back down, regardless of the party's earlier insistence that the United States would surely be deterred.

On 20 May 1964, President Johnson ordered an executive committee (ExCom) to develop plans for graduated bombing against the North. Following the presentation of the ExCom's recommendations, the president cabled Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., in Saigon with a synthesis of the group's conclusions: Southeast Asia could not be lost; time was on the Communists' side; and Congress should authorize the administration to take all necessary measures before it became too late.<sup>13</sup>

Hanoi's assessment of U.S. options after Tonkin closely resembled the options being considered in Washington at the highest levels, suggesting that either its strategic empathy was especially strong at this time or that Hanoi had penetrated the U.S. embassy in Saigon and was literally reading the enemy's thoughts. Unfortunately, DRV intelligence records from this period are still tightly guarded secrets. We therefore know little about how deeply Hanoi's espionage had penetrated U.S. sources. Nonetheless, the VWP Politburo directive of 7 August did accurately gauge the mood within Washington's innermost circle. President Johnson's ExCom, which included various departmental principals (Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy), had all but excluded negotiation as an option, just as Hanoi recognized. The Johnson administration's idea of negotiation amounted to Hanoi's capitulation to the main U.S. demands and therefore would not have been taken seriously by Hanoi. Instead, by the fall and early winter of 1964, the ExCom was increasingly pressing for attacks against the North, just as Hanoi anticipated, though no action was taken before the presidential election in November.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf*, ch. 2.

13. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 147.

14. Dubbing McNamara the "high priest of rational management," the historian Barbara Tuchman critiqued his strategy of incremental escalation for its cool calculation. "One thing was left out of account: the other side. What if the other side failed to respond rationally to the coercive message?" she asked. "Appreciation of the human factor was not McNamara's strong point, and the possibility that human kind is not rational was too eccentric and disruptive to be programmed into his analysis." Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 288. In contrast, Fredrik Logevall notes that McNamara was already exhibiting signs of concern in 1964 that

If Hanoi believed that U.S. escalation, which was already under way (the number of military advisers was increasing), was soon to intensify, then what did it see as the purpose of continued attacks against U.S. targets? If the attacks were intended to deter U.S. escalation, North Vietnamese leaders would have had to believe that the United States could be deterred. Based on the *Van Kien Dang* records, it appears that opinion on this point was divided by the end of 1963. By 7 August 1964, after Tonkin, Politburo members evidently concluded that the United States intended to escalate. Deterrence therefore would not be effective if the decision to escalate had already been made. Nevertheless, VC attacks continued after Tonkin. On 1 November, VC forces attacked the Bein Hoa airbase, killing four U.S. airmen, wounding 72 others, and destroying five B-57 bombers. On 24 December, VC units attacked the Brinks Hotel in Saigon, where U.S. military personnel were housed. The assault resulted in the deaths of two U.S. soldiers and 100 wounded. The attack on the Pleiku airbase on 6 February 1965 at last produced a robust U.S. response. All of these attacks occurred after Le Duan's carefully selected general, Nguyen Chi Thanh, arrived in the South to take command of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN).

If Hanoi had hoped to avoid provoking the United States after Tonkin, it should have tried to restrict attacks on U.S. bases. U.S. personnel had long been considered legitimate targets by COSVN units. On 20 July 1956, a three-member commando team had thrown hand grenades into the U.S. Information Agency's office in Saigon. On 7 July 1959, as U.S. servicemen were enjoying an evening film, a six-member VC team brazenly fired their way into the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group headquarters in Bien Hoa, killing two U.S. soldiers and wounding one officer.<sup>15</sup> VC units employed terrorist methods as well. In March 1963, a covert VC operative working as an air controller at the Tan Son Nhat airfield met with his Vietnamese lover, chatting in the boarding area while roughly one hundred U.S. military personnel waited for their flight. The woman, however, was not his lover but an operative who carried a bomb in a tourist bag. The "couple" switched their bag with that of a U.S. soldier, who unsuspectingly carried it aboard. The timing mechanism malfunctioned, however, and the bomb exploded only after the plane had safely landed in San Francisco, injuring two mail distribution

the war was unwise. Logevall sees McNamara's "slavish" loyalty to the president as the reason for his continued support of the policy. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 127.

15. Nguyen Quoc Minh, Vu Doan Thanh, Pham Gia Khanh, and Nguyen Thanh Xuan, *History of the Sapper Forces [Lich Su Bo Doi Dac Cong, Tap Moi]* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1987), Vol. 1, pp. 83–85.

clerks.<sup>16</sup> The most provocative act was the failed assassination attempt on Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on 2 May 1964, when Nguyen Van Troi planted a mine below a bridge over which the defense secretary was slated to travel. The mine was discovered in time, and Nguyen Van Troi was captured and executed by a firing squad of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In commemoration of this assassination attempt, roads in Saigon and most other major Vietnamese cities still bear Nguyen Van Troi's name. For COSVN forces to attack U.S. personnel or their bases was not unique. The question is what Hanoi hoped to gain by continuing those attacks after Tonkin, given that provoking the United States risked expanding the war. The most provocative of those attacks culminated at Pleiku and gave President Johnson the pretext he needed to escalate the war.

When, decades later, McNamara took part in a conference of former adversaries in June 1997 to reflect on the war, General Dang Vu Hiep claimed that the attacks at Pleiku had occurred solely at the local commanders' initiative. They were not, the elderly general asserted, directed by Hanoi, nor were they connected to Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin's visit.<sup>17</sup> After the conference, General Hiep published his reaction to the exchanges he had with McNamara. Hiep reported that at the conference he had said he viewed Pleiku as an utterly ordinary attack, of lesser significance than others his side had mounted against U.S. targets. He believed the Pleiku assault had been intentionally blown out of proportion to serve as an excuse for expanding the war. In his view, the U.S. air strikes, supposedly in response to Pleiku but occurring on the following day, must have been planned months in advance.<sup>18</sup>

But then Hiep added a curious note. He noted that another participant at the conference, the historian George Herring, asked him who had planned the Pleiku attacks. The general insisted that they had not been directed from Hanoi. Herring asked whether anyone had been reprimanded for launching

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16. Nguyen Quoc Minh, *History of the Sapper Branch Technical Service: People's Army of Vietnam (Internal Distribution)* [*Lịch Su Ngành Kỹ Thuật Đạc Công: Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam (Luu Hành Nội Bộ)*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1997), p. 91. See also Ho Son Dai and Tran Phan Chan, *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh (1945–1975)* [*Lịch Su Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh Kháng Chiến (1945–1975)*] (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1994), p. 4.

17. Robert S. McNamara, *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. xix. Earlier scholarship speculated that the Viet Cong commanders acted on their own initiative to garner Soviet support for their cause. Premier Aleksei Kosygin happened to be visiting Hanoi at the time of the attacks. This view was later discredited by evidence that the Soviet Union had already pledged its support.

18. Colonel General Dang Vu Hiep, in cooperation with Senior Colonel Le Hai Trieu and Colonel Ngo Vinh Binh, *Highland Memories*, part 4 (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2000), p. 13.

the attacks. Hiep replied that not only was no one criticized, but his superiors commended them.<sup>19</sup> Commendations can help foster a fighting spirit, but if the goal genuinely was to avoid U.S. escalation, then such measures were ill timed at best. Of course, the comments of Vietnamese officials must still be taken with great skepticism. We cannot know for sure the extent of Hanoi's involvement in the attacks at Pleiku and elsewhere. Nonetheless, the more important question is not whether Hanoi directed the attacks but why it did not seek to prevent them at such a crucial juncture.

Frederick Logevall has advanced the standard interpretation that, whether the attacks were directed by Hanoi or not, they were intended to destabilize the South Vietnamese government and were not designed to trigger U.S. retaliation.<sup>20</sup> In Logevall's view, Pleiku offered Washington the pretext for escalation it had been seeking. The Johnson administration immediately responded with air attacks against the North. Operation Flaming Dart deployed 132 U.S. and 22 South Vietnamese aircraft to strike four targets in the southern part of North Vietnam. Direct U.S. combat against North Vietnam had begun.

This standard explanation, which we can call the "failed deterrence hypothesis," stems primarily from Le Duan's writings to COSVN in February 1965. Yet these letters do not tell the whole story. They show that Le Duan hoped to weaken the Saigon regime before the United States could escalate the war. In February 1965, he wrote to the southern Communists to elaborate on points from the most recent party resolution. It is unclear whether he wrote this letter before or after the Pleiku attacks. He told them they must "all but eliminate" the possibility of U.S. escalation.<sup>21</sup> Destroying the ARVN forces so that the United States could no longer rely on them had become a race against time. "They [the U.S. forces] will accept defeat only when that source of support no longer exists."<sup>22</sup> Yet, based on the Politburo directive of 7 August, Le Duan seems to have already concluded that U.S. escalation could not be prevented. Why, then, would he have told the southern Communists that in weakening ARVN forces they could deter the United States?

Le Duan's next points bear close scrutiny. He argued that the United States would not be willing to expand the war because it understood that it could not afford to become bogged down in a protracted conflict, especially

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19. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–14.

20. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 325.

21. Letter by Le Duan, February 1965, quoted in Le Duan, *Letters to the South* [Tho Vao Nam], (Hanoi: Su That Publishing House, 1985), p. 73.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

in light of its other global commitments. Destruction of the ARVN would lead the United States into a quagmire in Vietnam, forced to deploy ever more troops. Because the United States was the world's leading imperialist power, it had interests and commitments around the globe, and becoming over-committed and bogged down in Vietnam would limit its ability to act elsewhere. This had been Le Duan's line of reasoning for years. He possessed a firm grasp of geostrategic realities, always cognizant of his enemies' global advantages as well as their constraints. Yet we cannot rely solely on his letters to the southern Communists as a Rosetta Stone for decrypting his beliefs. He was likely convinced that the United States would be defeated in a protracted war, but, in contrast to what he told the southern Communists, he probably did not think that the United States would soon back down.

Crippling ARVN forces was one thing; attacking U.S. troops at so sensitive a time was quite another. If the standard interpretation for Pleiku and related attacks were correct—that the Communists miscalculated—it would mean that Hanoi's strategic empathy for the United States (specifically for President Johnson and his top advisers) proved inadequate at one of the war's most critical turning points. The failed deterrence hypothesis would mean that Le Duan, and presumably other party leaders, believed that attacks on U.S. forces after Tonkin would not be used by President Johnson as justification for escalation. Furthermore, it would mean that Hanoi believed the relatively minor gains it could win by attacking U.S. bases would not be offset by the tremendous costs of a large-scale U.S. military invasion. In short, it would mean Hanoi had badly misread its enemy's motives.

The real problem with this interpretation is that the Politburo directive of 7 August 1964 shows that Le Duan expected the United States to intensify its commitment to the South—the opposite of backing down. It seems unlikely that he believed the United States could be deterred by some relatively modest strikes, such as those at Bien Hoa and the Brinks Hotel. Those attacks were too small to deter U.S. forces, yet too large to be ignored. We must therefore consider other possible explanations for the post-Tonkin attacks.

A second possible explanation could be dubbed the “lost control hypothesis.” This scenario assumes that the attacks on U.S. forces from Tonkin through to Pleiku were simply ill conceived, undirected, and divorced from any larger strategy. Poor communication between Hanoi and COSVN could have been at play. Hanoi might have been unable to restrain the southern attacks and subsequently felt it had to commend COSVN units on their heroic actions. But in 1962 Le Duan was working to restrain COSVN by advocating caution. As head of the VWP and having deep, intimate ties to the southern Communist movement, and having installed his colleague General Nguyen

Chi Thanh to oversee COSVN, Le Duan was exceedingly well-positioned to curb southern Communist attacks. With his own man in charge, Le Duan should have had even greater influence over military actions in the South. To accept the lost control hypothesis one must believe that on a subject of tremendous importance to the DRV—the introduction of U.S. ground troops—Hanoi’s oversight of COSVN actions was lacking.

A third interpretation rests on a guess about Hanoi’s internecine leadership struggles. In the “internal politics hypothesis,” we could imagine that Le Duan, battling for primacy within the party and pressing for a more aggressive stance against the United States, actually hoped to provoke the Johnson administration into escalating its commitment. The evidence for this line of argument is tenuous. By all indications, most of Hanoi’s leaders did not desire the massive deployment of U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam. This was surely true of the VC fighters as well. One prominent VC leader recounted in his postwar memoir that he and his comrades viewed U.S. escalation as a “living nightmare,” one that filled them with “sick anticipation of a prolonged and vastly more brutal war.”<sup>23</sup>

Although scholars believe that Hanoi’s leaders were divided into various factions, we have no direct evidence that Le Duan chose to provoke the United States as a means to solidify his hold on power. He had been party leader since September 1960 and presided over a police state. He had powerful supporters such as Le Duc Tho. Why Le Duan would have needed to take such an enormous gamble for his country and his own political future simply to maintain his primacy is therefore unclear. Although he may have been a gambler, and although some might view him as occasionally reckless, it is unclear why he could not have found a more sensible, less risky means of securing his leadership. Nor is it clear how provoking the United States into a full-scale ground war would have strengthened his position. Le Duan’s principal aim was to unify Vietnam under Communism, and he fully grasped that this goal would become vastly more difficult if the United States sharply escalated its involvement. Although the internal politics hypothesis cannot be completely ruled out, at least one other explanation is more plausible and compelling.

This other explanation could be called the “inevitable benefits hypothesis.” If Le Duan had already concluded that the United States intended to escalate, there was little North Vietnam could do to prevent it. In that case, attacking U.S. bases would confer certain benefits. If successful, the attacks could provide

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23. Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), p. 58.

a substantial boost to morale and the southern Communists' fighting spirit. Because the war to come was likely to be protracted, the southern Communists would need to know that they had the ability to inflict real damage on U.S. forces, even against the invaders' own military bases.

One way of thinking about this pre-escalation period is as a time of undeclared war. Many overt wars are often preceded by such a period. This was true of the United States and Germany prior to Hitler's declaration of war against the United States, which merely acknowledged the reality that had existed between the two powers. The United States had been providing financial support to Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and other allies via the Lend-Lease program, and German U-boats were firing on U.S. vessels in the Atlantic in an effort to disrupt the transfer of supplies. Similarly, the United States and Japan were in a state of undeclared war prior to Pearl Harbor, as the United States had cut off oil supplies to Japan under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's quarantine policy.<sup>24</sup> During such times of undeclared war, each side often has an incentive to make the other launch the first strike. This enables the side being attacked to rally its people around the government as it portrays itself as the nation's defender. This was true even of Hitler, who went to the trouble of casting Germany as a victim of Polish aggression on the eve of World War II. In the Gleiwitz incident, Hitler fabricated an attack on a German radio station by dressing up German soldiers in Polish uniforms. That drama enabled him to justify an invasion of Poland in September 1939.

Given Hanoi's frequent wish to present itself as the victim of U.S. aggression, and given that it expected imminent U.S. escalation, could Le Duan have encouraged the attacks on U.S. forces (or at least failed to restrain them) in order to boost morale? Could he and others in Hanoi have reasoned that the time of undeclared war would soon be over, that the time of a large-scale U.S. invasion had come? This would not mean that Le Duan desired an invasion. Instead it would mean that despite what he wrote to COSVN, he actually believed that deterrence had already failed, that U.S. escalation was inevitable, and that the North's best option was to strike U.S. forces hard in order to frame the party as Vietnam's defenders. Viewed in this light, his written assurance to COSVN in February 1965 that they could still prevent U.S. escalation likely stemmed from a desire to embolden the Communist forces. If, instead, he had informed them that the strongest, most technologically advanced military in

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24. See William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940–1941* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1968). For a penetrating analysis of Franklin Roosevelt's policy toward Japan during the prelude to Pearl Harbor, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), ch. 4.

the world was about to commit hundreds of thousands of combat forces to attack a relatively small band of revolutionary fighters in South Vietnam, the effect could have been highly dispiriting. Wiser, from Le Duan's perspective, would have been to urge the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam onward and persuade its members that history was ultimately on their side. In the face of a large-scale war with the United States, morale would surely be at a premium.

Encouraging or at least permitting attacks on U.S. forces served another useful function. The southern Communist fighters were not all of one mind regarding strategy. Many favored guerilla warfare over Le Duan's preferred method of large, conventional attacks.<sup>25</sup> Although General Thanh imposed Le Duan's policies on COSVN soldiers, Le Duan's letters show the First Secretary's keen sense of his position. Unable to inflict his Ministry of Public Security apparatus upon southerners who rejected his plans, and recognizing that General Thanh's efforts would need help to overcome southern resistance, Le Duan tried to rally COSVN units behind large-scale attacks against ARVN forces. He tried to persuade them that his methods were the best way of defeating the United States. Furthermore, permitting COSVN units to attack U.S. soldiers directly, culminating in the brazen Pleiku assault, was a clever move by a leader sensitive to southern needs. These strikes helped to unify a diverse collection of divided forces.

Beyond the benefits to morale and unity, Le Duan also recognized that escalation provided tangible advantages to the party. Le Duan and other party leaders expected a general uprising to occur in the South, which would overthrow the U.S.-backed government and pave the way for a socialist revolution. This uprising had been long awaited but thus far unrealized. U.S. escalation, invasion, and bombing of the North could prove perversely helpful by enabling the VWP to frame itself even more clearly as the Vietnamese peoples' savior, heroically fighting against outside invaders. U.S. escalation would further the conditions needed to attract average Vietnamese (from both the North and the South) to the party's cause. Le Duan bluntly articulated this cold-hearted line of reasoning in December 1965:

In fact, the more troops the Americans send into our country, the more bases they build in our country, and the more they employ the most vicious and barbaric methods to bomb, shoot, and kill our people, the more intense the

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25. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen cites the postwar writings of General Tran Van Tra as evidence of the southern Communists' resistance to Le Duan's push for conventional warfare. See Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), ch. 2.

contradictions between them and all classes of the population will become; the deeper the contradictions between them and the leaders of the puppet army and the puppet government will become; the more powerful will be the awakening of the spirit of nationalism among the majority of puppet army soldiers and puppet government officials will become; and the more difficult the lives of the residents of the cities and the areas under enemy control will become. This situation creates possibilities for us to further expand our political struggle movement and attract new forces to join the front. For that reason, our policy must be to strive to assemble a broad-based mass force from every class of the population and persuade members of the puppet army and the puppet government to join a truly broad-based resistance front to fight the Americans and save our nation.<sup>26</sup>

Le Duan saw the U.S. escalation as offering two benefits for Hanoi's cause. First, it would allow the party to frame itself as the nation's true defenders against outside invaders—foreign forces who could be portrayed as cruel. This would attract more Vietnamese (from both North and South) to join the party and support its aims. The propagandistic phrase he chose, “the resistance struggle against the Americans to save the nation,” underscored this aim. The second benefit escalation would provide was a greater opportunity to inflict casualties. The body count was seen as an essential component to Hanoi's overall strategy of protracted war. The higher the casualties, Le Duan reasoned, the more soldiers the United States would be forced to deploy. As the U.S. military became more and more overstretched, U.S. domestic support for the war would sink ever lower.

In November 1965, with the U.S. escalation well under way, Le Duan again wrote to the southern Communists regarding the latest party resolution. Following the massive influx of U.S. ground troops and Hanoi's failure to prevent the United States from expanding the war, Le Duan reaffirmed the North's commitment to a protracted war strategy. He maintained that despite the U.S. escalation, the enemy's objectives remained consistent. He cited Secretary of Defense McNamara's own words to a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate's Armed Services Committee: “Even though our tactics have changed, our goals remain the same.” Although Le Duan did not directly admit that the efforts to prevent escalation had failed, he did offer a new objective for Hanoi: to prevent the U.S. forces from expanding the war to the North.

Hanoi had determined that in contrast to the pre-escalation phase when ARVN forces alone constituted the primary targets, the post-escalation phase meant that both U.S. soldiers and ARVN forces now stood squarely in

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26. Le Duan, speech, December 1965, quoted in *Van Kien Dang*, 1965 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), p. 599.

Communist sights. “The dialectical relationship in this matter is that we attack U.S. troops in order to create conditions that will enable us to annihilate puppet troops, and, conversely, we annihilate puppet troops in order to create conditions that will enable us to attack and annihilate American troops.”<sup>27</sup> Le Duan cautioned the southern Communists to continue to avoid attacks on U.S. forces where they were strong and to focus on attacking their weaknesses, but then he added a new caveat, namely, that this instruction was not absolute; it was not cast in stone. The calculus had changed. Striking U.S. forces where they were strong was now permissible.

In a 2013 book on alleged U.S. atrocities in Vietnam, *Kill Anything That Moves*, the journalist Nick Turse asserts that the killing of Vietnamese civilians was far more widespread than previously believed and that it represented official U.S. military policy.<sup>28</sup> Two well-known historians, Peter Zinoman and Gary Kulik, have scrupulously picked apart Turse’s claims by closely examining his evidence. In a more than 16,000-word review, the two authors find that Turse’s four main arguments are either greatly exaggerated or unsubstantiated by the documentary record. No one denies that U.S. soldiers committed war crimes in this conflict. The cases are well-documented and often horrific. Yet Turse presents them as the rule, not the exception. By focusing almost exclusively on U.S. war crimes and then by claiming that these acts reflect the true nature of the war, Turse provides a startlingly one-sided, distorted account. Pointing to brutal acts on the part of Communist forces does not and cannot excuse U.S. war crimes, but it does help to balance our understanding of the conflict. Historians must explore all sides of an event if they hope to provide an accurate depiction. We therefore need to consider how casualties and body counts factored into North Vietnamese strategy. By doing so, we can gain further insight into Hanoi’s quest for victory.

Le Duan recognized that inflicting the greatest number of casualties on U.S. forces represented a crucial linchpin in the protracted war strategy. Although the escalation posed new challenges and incurred more exacting costs for Hanoi, it also provided more targets for Communist forces. He envisioned a clear causal chain of events that would flow from killing U.S. soldiers:

27. Le Duan to Muoi Cuc (Nguyen Van Linh) and the Cochinchina Party Committee [Xu Uy Nam Bo], November 1965, quoted in Le Duan, *Letters to the South*, p. 124.

28. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013). See also Deborah Nelson, *The War behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth about U.S. War Crimes* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). For a thoughtful, in-depth debunking of Turse’s argument, see Gary Kulik and Peter Zinoman, “Misrepresenting Atrocities: *Kill Anything That Moves* and the Continuing Distortions of the War in Vietnam,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, No. 12 (September 2014), pp. 162–198.

The more American troops that come to Vietnam, the more of them we will be able to kill. If large numbers of American troops are killed, the puppet army will disintegrate even faster, the U.S.'s hope of securing a victory through military means will collapse, and the American people's movement opposed to the U.S.'s dirty war in Vietnam will grow.<sup>29</sup>

Later in the same November 1965 missive, Le Duan set a specific kill quota. He advised the southern Communists to kill at least 10,000 U.S. troops in the coming spring-summer campaign.<sup>30</sup> Within the next few years he suggested, they should aim to kill 40,000–50,000 U.S. soldiers. The bulk of the November letter outlined the tactics that the southern Communists should employ to accomplish their mission. One of those tactics was to breed in all segments of the population a profound hatred toward the enemy.<sup>31</sup>

Le Duan had read his people well. By the spring of 1966, as U.S. attacks against the North increased, the People's Army had doubled its ranks.<sup>32</sup> For the time being, at least, Le Duan, the strategic empath, had bolstered support for his policies among northern and southern Communists alike. Now the task ahead required even finer appreciation of U.S. constraints.

## The Escalation Paradox

Le Duan repeatedly argued that the United States faced a dilemma. The more troops it deployed, the weaker it became. He articulated this and other assessments of U.S. constraints at the close of 1965, as the escalation was fully underway. In December 1965, when Le Duan addressed the Twelfth Plenum of the VWP Central Committee, he explained more fully the policy of protracted war. He began by observing that the war had developed precisely along the lines the party had laid out in the Ninth and Eleventh Plenums. (Those comments, however, were highly hedged, offering possibilities not definitive futures.) He then noted that the situation had developed more rapidly than expected. In mid-1965, he alleged that the “puppet army” of the South had been on the verge of disintegration but that the party did not have the means to force its collapse. Had the DRV been able to push the ARVN to the breaking point, he maintained, the United States might not have deployed massive ground

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29. Le Duan to Muoi Cuc (Nguyen Van Linh) and the Cochinchina Party Committee [Xu Uy Nam Bo], November 1965, quoted in Le Duan, *Letters to the South*, p. 145

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 161.

32. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, ch. 2.

troops. The lessons from this episode, he said, bore directly on the policy of protracted war.

The policy of protracted war, Le Duan explained, was to use weakness against strength. Even if the enemy deployed 400,000 troops to Vietnam (the United States ultimately sent more than 535,000), the Vietnamese would defeat them by bogging them down in a stalemate. That policy, however, did not entail an orderly, step-by-step advance. Instead, it required massing forces against the enemy under specific conditions. The Americans are warmongers by their nature, Le Duan frequently declared. That is why they continue to escalate and expand the war. These appear to be Le Duan's true beliefs: that U.S. forces would continue to expand the war if the resistance was insufficient to deter them; and that a protracted war would grind them down because it would increase U.S. casualties, which in turn would bolster opposition to the war both within the United States and abroad.

The VWP Politburo members were not in complete agreement on these matters. In a rare admission of internal party disagreement, Le Duan commented that differences of opinion still remained despite lengthy, ongoing discussion. He stressed that the Politburo was unanimous in its view that no matter how many troops the United States might send, the Vietnamese would defeat them. Further, all the members agreed that the Politburo "must firmly maintain and study and digest even further our formula of fighting the enemy using both military and political means."<sup>33</sup> Le Duan insisted that unanimous agreement was crucial to the success of the movement. But then he hinted that dissent had arisen:

However, in a limited period of time we have not been able to carefully and thoroughly discuss every aspect of each individual issue, and therefore we may have some slight difference on one aspect or another, such as on our assessment of the American imperialists, on the nature and the form of the war, on the formula of a protracted war and striving to defeat the enemy within a relatively short period of time, about the effort to win the sympathy and help of our camp and of the international community, etc.<sup>34</sup>

Though couched in understated tones, these "slight disagreements" involved major issues. We can surmise that at this critical juncture in the war the Politburo had not achieved a consensus view on either the U.S. position or Hanoi's strategy. Le Duan, however, seems to have had strong opinions of his

33. Speech given by Party First Secretary Le Duan to the 12th Plenum of the Party Central Committee, December 1965, quoted in *Van Kien Dang*, 1965, p. 568.

34. *Ibid.*, 568.

own, and he sought to push them through the party bureaucracy in order to translate them into policy.

Following his admission of internal disputes, Le Duan launched into a new section of the speech entitled, "Assessment of the American Imperialists." He asserted that in devising Hanoi's war strategies, the most important question was to determine the balance of forces between the United States and Vietnam. This was a question, he stated, "of knowing the enemy and knowing ourselves." The lessons of Sun Tzu would not be lost on Le Duan.

Many party speeches included a section of historical analysis that, heavily shaped by Marxism-Leninism, illustrated both the enemy's waning fortunes and the party's inevitable ascent. Le Duan thus laid out the U.S. global position at the close of World War II, when the country's strength was unmatched. Under these conditions, he claimed, U.S. officials "hatched their plot to take over and dominate the world."<sup>35</sup> After attaining a zenith of global power at the war's close, he continued, the U.S. position had steadily eroded. The loss of a monopoly on nuclear weapons, the recovery of the Soviet Union, China's rise, U.S. defeats in Korea, Cuba, Laos, and beyond, as well as the declining U.S. economy, all combined to shift the balance of forces to the revolutionary camps around the world. He then cautioned that U.S. successes in "snuffing out" revolutionary movements in Greece and the Philippines could not be ignored. After recounting U.S. failures, from backing the French and paying 80 percent of their war costs only to be defeated at Dien Bien Phu, to now being bogged down in South Vietnam, Le Duan concluded that the United States could not escape a crucial strategic contradiction. Although the country possessed economic and military resources far greater than the DRV could muster, "the deeper they involve themselves in this war of aggression in the southern half of our country, the deeper they sink into a quagmire."<sup>36</sup> He observed that the U.S. military's greatest problem was that it was waging an offensive modern war against guerillas. Using large units to fight guerrillas in South Vietnam, he said, was "just like punching water—when you pull your fist out, the water just flows right back in."<sup>37</sup>

Le Duan described U.S. military constraints as hinging on the asymmetric nature of the conflict, noting that this required U.S. commanders to disperse their forces. He devoted roughly equal attention to U.S. political weaknesses, in the face of growing internal and global opposition. He also mentioned

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35. *Ibid.*, p. 569.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 579.

U.S. economic decline. Was this all pure propaganda aimed at rallying the party to the cause? Not quite. Although his speeches and directives contained heavy doses of propaganda, the assessments he presented in his December 1965 speech to the Politburo reflect sober analysis of the strategic situation facing the United States. That knowledge no doubt contributed to Hanoi's willingness to stick with a protracted war strategy despite the enormous toll it was taking on the Vietnamese people.

After presenting his analysis, Le Duan offered predictions. The underlying aim of developing strategic empathy, of knowing one's enemy, is to anticipate an opponent's actions. He proclaimed that the war would intensify, becoming more vicious in both the North and the South. The scale of fighting would increase as U.S. forces stepped up their artillery and air strikes. U.S. troops, he predicted, would use chemical warfare and poison gas on liberated zones, even those adjacent to urban centers. The enemy would increase its bombing of North Vietnam but would focus on disrupting the transportation and supply lines from North to South. U.S. forces would attack key economic zones, the dike system, and residential areas. Finally, they would use psychological warfare and espionage to shake the will of the Vietnamese people.<sup>38</sup> Although none of this may have been difficult to predict (much of it was already occurring), it was at least essentially accurate.

To counter the anticipated U.S. intensification of the war, Le Duan spelled out the nature of Hanoi's protracted war strategy while also seeking a quick victory—two ostensibly contradictory positions. This policy may have emerged as a compromise between divergent party factions. Le Duan tried to square the circle:

We have also clearly explained that these two things are not in contradiction to one another, because the basic condition for fighting a protracted war as well as for seeking victory within a relatively short period of time is to quickly develop our power and forces in all areas, and especially military forces, in order to change the balance of forces in our favor.<sup>39</sup>

The protracted war strategy was not, he explained, a policy of annihilating all U.S. forces. Instead, it was a plan to sap the enemy's will to fight. He added that the aim was also to force the enemy to accept defeat with certain conditions. This caveat indicates that Hanoi's "talking while fighting" tactic allowed for the possibility that at least a faction within Hanoi's leadership was willing to make certain concessions. Such a statement suggests that the more

38. *Ibid.*, p. 586.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 590.

compromising members of the Politburo, those who were open to negotiation with the United States, still held some sway over party pronouncements. Le Duan later silenced this faction through intimidation and arrest.

The tension between waging a protracted struggle and seeking a rapid victory is perhaps best played out in the predictions section of the speech. Le Duan explained that party leaders had a responsibility to understand the psychological state of the southern Vietnamese. Although the southern Communists had been fighting U.S. troops officially since 1960, the revolution had actually been fought for the past twenty years under savage conditions. Party leaders must therefore make the greatest effort to shorten the fighting as much as possible. Le Duan then struck a compromising note: "Naturally, our goal must be to win total, 100 percent victory, but if in a certain situation we are able to achieve a 90 percent victory, we can then bring the war to an end under conditions that are favorable to us."<sup>40</sup>

Le Duan demonstrated his strategic thinking when he distinguished Vietnam's past struggles against the French from the current war against the United States. Although he had frequently drawn comparisons between the two conflicts, he now identified the significant differences. First, the strength of Communist forces in both the North and the South was far greater in 1965 than it had been in the 1940s and 1950s. Second, the Communists in the North now possessed a solid rear area backed by the Soviet bloc. Third, the war against the United States and the South Vietnamese government began with offensive, rather than defensive, operations. He asserted that this time the party held the offensive initiative in its hands. Through the use of protracted war, Le Duan believed that Hanoi would eventually win. His ability to recognize what was new in the current conflict enabled him to adjust Hanoi's strategy to the enemy at hand, rather than applying a one-size approach to waging war. He was not fighting the last war with yesterday's methods. Instead, he had the mental agility to see what was unique about his own side's position as well as his enemy's, and adapt accordingly.

Shortly after Le Duan's address, the party convened a meeting of high-level cadres on 16 January 1966 for the purpose of studying the Twelfth Plenum's resolution. Although Ho Chi Minh's folksy style stood in sharp contrast to Le Duan's more formal speeches, Ho showed himself in agreement with Le Duan's assessment of the United States. Addressing the assembled cadres, Ho confronted the challenges of fighting the U.S. military. He observed that U.S. troops were well-fed and well-financed, receiving meat, cake, cigarettes, and chewing gum as typical rations. He claimed that support for a U.S. soldier

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 592.

was fifteen times greater than for a South Vietnamese soldier. Moreover, the United States had just introduced a mobile division transported by helicopter. Ho then outlined the enemy's weak points. First among these was their lack of mobility on the ground. Calling the U.S. forces "big, heavy-set people," weighed down with all imaginable equipment, he observed that once they are on the ground they cannot move as quickly as the Vietnamese. Ho argued that although Vietnamese soldiers were smaller, they were faster and more agile and were therefore not at a disadvantage in hand-to-hand combat. Beyond these tactical appraisals, Ho underscored that body counts mattered for political reasons.

The U.S. side's fundamental weaknesses, Ho asserted, centered on the growing domestic and global opposition to its intervention. He argued that young people in the United States were setting themselves on fire in protest. He pointed to the violent uprisings by black Americans. Underscoring the same theme that Le Duan had stressed many times before, Ho assured the cadres that increased U.S. casualties would only augment domestic opposition. He even cited U.S. Senator Wayne Morse as saying, "The more American troops we send to South Vietnam, the more caskets that will be sent back home to the United States." Because victory hinged on what happened in South Vietnam, "we must do whatever it takes," Ho concluded, "to destroy and shatter the puppet army [there] and to kill large numbers of American troops."<sup>41</sup>

These same notions of U.S. vulnerability continued for years, even after the general offensive. Following the multiple attacks that together constituted the 1968 Tet Offensive, the party's resolution of August 1968 revisited the current strategic balance, paying closest attention to the contradictions inherent in the U.S. position. First, the resolution asserted that the greatest contradiction facing the United States was that it needed to confront the enemy directly, but its current posture was defensive. The U.S. military could not win without substantially increasing its troop strength, but deploying more troops would guarantee a greater defeat. The next contradiction, as Le Duan saw it, involved de-Americanization, or what the Nixon administration later dubbed "Vietnamization" of the war: transferring primary fighting responsibility to the ARVN. Hanoi maintained that the ARVN's forces were becoming less effective as their morale deteriorated, but U.S. commanders needed to place them in the principal fighting role. In addition, U.S. commanders needed to mass their forces, though they were compelled to disperse them because they needed to

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41. Speech Given by Chairman Ho Chi Minh to a Conference of High-Level Cadres Held to Study the Resolution of the 12th Plenum of the Party Central Committee, 16 January 1966, in *Van Kien Dang*, 1966 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), pp. 4–17.

defend the cities while simultaneously controlling the countryside.<sup>42</sup> All of the weaknesses Hanoi had recognized years before were now exacerbated.

Hanoi's assessment of the U.S. international position reached similar conclusions. On 29 August 1968, a report to the VWP Central Committee observed that the war had hamstrung U.S. action in other hot spots. Referring to the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia eight days earlier, the report argued that the United States could not mount a serious response because it was tied down in Vietnam; that it could not go deeper into the Middle East despite the recent Arab-Israeli War; and that it could not go deeper into Laos following its defeat at Nam Bak.<sup>43</sup> Despite Hanoi's heavy military losses during the Tet Offensive, party leaders still maintained that underlying constraints on the United States left its future prospects grim.

By the start of 1969, Le Duan recognized that U.S. support for the war had reached a turning point. On 1 January, the VWP Politburo cabled Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy (two of the leading delegates to the Paris peace talks) to report on the discussions of U.S. intentions. Party leaders believed that key U.S. policymakers wanted to end the war by withdrawing troops but maintaining a strong regime in the South. President Richard Nixon, they presumed, was also compelled to follow this course, though he sought an "honorable" end to the war ("peace with honor"). In subsequent Politburo cables throughout January and February, the North Vietnamese reiterated their belief that U.S. politicians wanted to deescalate and de-Americanize the war, though Nixon hoped to negotiate from a position of strength. Consequently, the Politburo concluded that the struggle must continue on all three fronts—military, political, and diplomatic. To maintain the protracted war strategy, the North's diplomacy must not give the impression that Hanoi desired a quick conclusion to the conflict.<sup>44</sup> On each of these three fronts, Le Duan continued to pursue an effective grand strategy of wearing the United States down.

## Conclusion

Le Duan's strategic empathy for the United States—his ability to identify the country's underlying constraints—proved strong on the most crucial

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42. Resolution of the Politburo, August 1968, in *Van Kien Dang*, 1968 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), p. 409.

43. *Van Kien Dang*, 1968, p. 376.

44. Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Major Events: The Diplomatic Struggle and International Activities during the Resistance War against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954–1975* (Hanoi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1987). See cables for January and February 1969, esp. 1 January 1969, p. 202, and 1 February 1969, p. 211.

dimension. He grasped the enemy's sensitivity to casualties. He understood the U.S. government's vulnerability to being bogged down, fighting for years without demonstrable progress. He comprehended that U.S. global commitments could be hamstrung if overextended in Vietnam. Ultimately, this was the most important assessment to get right, and on this point he succeeded in knowing his enemy well.

Le Duan also saw the shelling of North Vietnamese islands and the Tonkin Gulf episode as provocative acts and a distinct break in the pattern of U.S. behavior. According to the Politburo directive of 7 August 1964, he expected the United States to intensify the war in the South and step up its measures against the North. Here, too, he correctly estimated his enemy's intentions.

Le Duan likely understood that President Johnson would retaliate against the post-Tonkin attacks that culminated at Pleiku. Rather than halting COSVN assaults in order to avoid provoking U.S. escalation, Le Duan seems to have reasoned that since escalation at that point was both likely and imminent, attacking U.S. forces would boost morale, giving southern Communists a resource that would be greatly needed throughout the protracted war to come. The fact that Le Duan permitted those attacks to continue after Tonkin strongly suggests that he recognized Tonkin as signaling inevitable escalation. Whether Le Duan ever comprehended why Johnson and his advisers decided to expand the war is unclear. The issue is perhaps moot, considering that historians themselves are still divided on the matter and have been debating the Johnson administration's motivations for decades. (No doubt they will continue the debate for decades more.) Given Le Duan's in-depth, reasoned efforts to understand his foes, we cannot attribute his predictions of U.S. actions to his Marxist-Leninist convictions alone. The often conflicted nature of Hanoi's assessments of the United States shows that ideology influenced but did not determine Hanoi's thinking. Instead, Le Duan's and Hanoi's strategic empathy derived from a complex interplay of pattern recognition, attention to pattern breaks, and an overlay of Marxist dogma.

Contingency and chance are always at play in every conflict. Rarely are any outcomes predetermined. The reasons for Hanoi's ultimate victory are many, primary among them being the support the DRV received from China and the Soviet Union, North Vietnam's ability to continue sending arms and materiel south via the Ho Chi Minh trail, and the VWP leaders' willingness to allow their people to endure extraordinary bloodshed and suffering. To that list we must add Hanoi's strategic empathy for the United States. The DRV regime's understanding of the U.S. system was not flawless, but it proved to be an important factor in the Vietnamese Communists' final triumph.