



A man and a woman watch film footage of the Tet Offensive, a military campaign during the Vietnam War that began on January 31, 1968, on a television in their living room, Feb. 13, 1968. Broadcast journalism unintentionally increased the offensive's operational reach into nearly every American household, profoundly affecting the nation's psyche despite the South Vietnamese people being the intended audience (Photo by Warren K. Leffler, retrieved from the Library of Congress)

Operational Design During the Tet Offensive

The Three-Pronged Approach

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The Vietnam War was a contentious conflict between North and South Vietnam and their allies. By late 1967, U.S. Army Gen. William Westmoreland believed he had gained the initiative and was winning against North Vietnam (Black, 2004).

However, on January 30, 1968, North Vietnamese

General Vo Nguyen Giap attacked thirty-six provincial capitals, five cities, twenty-three airfields, and several other targets in what is known today as the Tet Offensive (Black, 2004). Despite being a tactical defeat for communist forces, the Tet Offensive marked a decisive turning point in the Vietnam War (Wirtz, 1991).

Understanding how this tactical defeat resulted in a strategic victory for the North requires a thorough analysis. This article analyzes how Giap used ways, means, and ends during the Tet Offensive, giving NCOs valuable insights for future military planning.

Operational Design

The Tet Offensive's massive effort required radical shifts in strategy. Giap's operational design revolutionized the North Vietnamese ways of war (Wirtz, 1991). *Operational design* is an analytical method of planning that helps commanders and planners organize and understand the operational environment and develop feasible courses of action based on ways, means, and ends (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020). It helps leaders assess and adjust courses of action to achieve objectives (JCS, 2020).

Giap's operational design led to an integrated three-pronged approach using military, diplomatic, and political objectives to accomplish strategic goals (Arnold, 1990). This integrated approach transformed North Vietnamese strategy, giving them advantages over their adversaries. Developing an operation's ways, means, and ends starts with understanding how operational design informs the planning process.

Examining the Ways

Giap used his creativity to develop ways to conduct the offensive. According to the JCS (2020), ways describe how to accomplish objectives. Determining how to achieve victory requires understanding forces' capabilities and integrating operational design elements. Giap determined how to conduct his offensive using three elements: lines of operation, lines of effort, and operational reach.

Lines of Operation

Establishing the offensive's lines of operation by arranging actions was critical for its success. *Lines of operation* are the interconnected actions, arranged in time and space, that forces take to achieve military objectives (JCS, 2020). Arranging and connecting operational-level tasks to orient forces against enemies is critical.

For example, Giap integrated the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) forces under a unified command. The VC were guerrilla forces fighting South Vietnam and U.S. forces. He then sequenced logistical operations to cache war materiel in South Vietnam and moved units to shape the operational environment (Wirtz, 1991).

By taking these steps, Giap successfully created lines of operation that placed his forces in positions of relative advantage. Giap then implemented diplomatic and political lines of effort to achieve his goals.



Viet Cong Women's Special Forces Division 6 studies maps of District 7, Saigon, during the Tet Offensive, 1968. By integrating VC and NVA forces, who normally fought separately, the North Vietnamese general assembled the 70,000 troops needed for the 1968 Tet Offensive. (Public Domain)

Lines of Effort

The North Vietnamese used two strategic-level lines of effort: diplomatic and political (Wirtz, 1991). The JCS (2020) defines *lines of effort* as using logic to link multiple tasks together, creating strategic or operational conditions in a cause-and-effect way.

On the diplomacy front, North Vietnamese diplomats met with American counterparts, deceiving them into believing they were leaning toward negotiations instead of continuing the conflict (Wirtz, 1991). Meanwhile, political teams infiltrated urban centers, inciting civil unrest and hostility toward the South Vietnamese government to achieve political objectives (Kriegel, 1968).

The takeaway from this analysis is how Giap effectively combined lines of operation and lines of effort to leverage national power against North Vietnam's enemies to achieve strategic goals. By creating multiple dilemmas on such large scales, the North Vietnamese expanded their operational reach far beyond battlefields.

Operational Reach

North Vietnam's operational reach affected the American public so much that it amounted to the most significant aspect of the Tet Offensive (Arnold, 1990). *Operational reach* is the distance and duration forces can employ their capabilities or achieve effects beyond operational areas (JCS, 2020). Their strategy appeared to be a never-ending series of attacks signaling their resolve, a narrative the American press corps picked up on (Wirtz, 1991).

According to North Vietnamese Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang, "Every military clash, every demonstration, every propaganda appeal ... had consequences far beyond its immediately apparent results" (Tang et al., 1986, p. 87).

Broadcast journalism unintentionally increased the

offensive's operational reach into nearly every American household, profoundly affecting their psyche despite the South Vietnamese people being the intended audience (Wirtz, 1991).

To illustrate this point, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson and Westmoreland blamed the press for the war's outcome (Arnold, 1990). Given the interdependence of ways and means, it is necessary to examine Giap's available means to understand how he designed the Tet Offensive's ways.

Analyzing the Means

Giap's resourcefulness helped him turn limited available means into force multipliers. *Means* refers to who or what will be actioning capabilities, forces, and resources available (JCS, 2020).

Giap had to amass many troops to conduct such a large operation. By integrating VC and NVA forces, who normally fought separately, Giap assembled the 70,000 troops needed for the Tet Offensive (Dougan & Weiss, 1988). After task organizing their troops appropriately, the North Vietnamese faced restricted means to transport personnel, weapons, and equipment.

Although infiltrating troops into South Vietnam proved difficult, moving resources into position was no easy task either. The North Vietnamese smuggled weapons and munitions in oxcarts or false-bottomed vehicles (Dougan & Weiss, 1988).

Analyzing Giap's solution to his constraints is a testament to operational art's creative influence on the operational design process. Once everything was in place, the North Vietnamese initiated the attack and implemented their force employment mechanisms (Kriegel, 1968).

Defeat Mechanisms

Force employment mechanisms are essential for

directing how to engage or respond to enemies within the commander's intent. Defeat mechanisms are tasks against forces to attain strategic or operational victories (JCS, 2020). Giap used several defeat mechanisms to structure the operation: destroy, isolate, and disintegrate. His goal was to destroy South Vietnamese army units and communications systems (Willbanks, 2007).

According to the JCS (2020), *destroy* is a defeat mechanism for eliminating enemy capabilities and forces. The strategic logic of destroying the South Vietnamese

military is easy to understand; what is intriguing is how and why Giap determined to employ different methods against American forces. Fearing his forces would be no match for American firepower, Giap's approach centered on isolation rather than destruction (Willbanks, 2007).

Giap believed isolating American troops would demoralize them (Willbanks, 2007). *Isolate* limits forces' operational effectiveness and segregates them from friendly units and capabilities (JCS, 2020). If successful, they

"would leave the American forces and bases isolated islands in a sea of hostile South Vietnamese people" (Willbanks, 2007, p. 12).

While North Vietnamese troops attacked coalition forces, communist operatives attempted to disintegrate the South Vietnamese government by instigating uprisings in provincial capitals and administrative centers (Wirtz, 1991).

Giap presumed a popular uprising would mobilize



Black smoke covers areas of the capital city of Saigon and fire trucks rush to the scenes of fires set during attacks by the Viet Cong during the festive Tet holiday period, 1968. The Tet Offensive was a military campaign during the Vietnam War that began Jan. 31, 1968. Regular and irregular forces of the People's Army of Vietnam, as well as Viet Cong resistance fighters, fought against the forces of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the U.S., and their allies. (Photo retrieved from the National Archives)

thousands of hostile civilians to help disintegrate the South Vietnamese government (Wirtz, 1991). *Disintegrate* takes advantage of destruction or dislocation effects and prevents enemies from maintaining coherence or integrity (JCS, 2020). Giap used political operatives to disintegrate the government by exploiting the chaos, causing revolt, and replacing government officials with communist operatives (Willbanks, 2007).

The distinct approaches demonstrated how Giap war-gamed multiple courses of action to determine the specific force employment mechanism with the best chance of success. After the attacks, the North Vietnamese immediately transitioned to restoring order through stabilization mechanisms.

Stabilization Mechanisms

The North Vietnamese needed to stabilize conditions to achieve power transitions from enemies and consolidate gains. *Stabilization mechanisms* are political actions promoting legitimacy within newly constituted governments, setting conditions to manage unstable situations effectively (JCS, 2020).

Giap managed the situation through two mechanisms. The first was implementing control, establishing law and order and serving the public's immediate needs (JCS, 2020). Political teams quickly moved in, took over governmental functions, and tried restoring order under new communist leadership (Black, 2004). North Vietnamese forces resorted to severe measures against South Vietnamese civilians who did not submit to communist control (Dougan & Weiss, 1988).

They implemented draconian actions to compel civilians to fall in line. The JCS (2020) describes *compelling* as using lethal and nonlethal force or their threat to change behaviors. In the Battle of Hue – the Tet Offensive's most prolonged battle – communists executed 2,000 people they labeled as enemy "collaborators" (Dougan & Weiss, 1988, p. 149).

Although Giap used these methods to control the situation, they had little impact on civilian populations, who generally did not cooperate (Wirtz, 1991). Acknowledging stabilization mechanisms' limitations is essential for future planners in similar operating environments. While examining an operation's ways and means is significant in and of itself, operational design studies suffer if they do not analyze desired ends.

Assessing the Ends

The most critical factor in planning operations is defining the ends, which involves specifying the operation's overarching purpose. Ends are the goals constituting



Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) rangers defend Saigon during the Tet Offensive, January-February 1968. Giap used several defeat mechanisms to structure the operation: destroy, isolate, and disintegrate. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese general's goal was to destroy South Vietnamese army units and communications systems. (DoD photo)

mission or strategic success (JCS, 2020).

The Tet Offensive's goal was the "withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam and to bring about negotiations" (Tang et al., 1986, p. 86). To achieve these ends after several years of fruitless operations and stalemate, Giap altered his strategy from attrition-based skirmishes to focusing on enemy centers of gravity (Willbanks, 2007).

Centers of gravity, or COGs, are military forces' main sources of strength to accomplish their goals (JCS, 2020). Analyzing the Tet Offensive reveals two main COGs the North Vietnamese targeted: the South Vietnamese people's political will and military infrastructure (Wirtz, 1991).

Attacking COGs can cause significant losses to enemies because of their corresponding critical vulnerabilities and capabilities (JCS, 2020). With the COGs properly identified, Giap directed his operations against specific objectives.

Giap's primary objective was to target the enemy's COGs by orchestrating attacks on political foes and military capabilities (Wirtz, 1991). Commanders direct an operation's efforts towards an objective or goal (JCS, 2020).

The Tet Offensive had several overarching objectives.

Giap explained, "There is no such thing as a single strategy. Ours is always a synthesis, simultaneously military, political, and diplomatic – which is why, quite clearly, the Tet Offensive had multiple objectives" (Willbanks, 2007, p. 11).

Combining multiple objectives demonstrated Giap's strategic-level approach to produce the greatest effect. However, the Tet Offensive did not produce Giap's anticipated effects. Effects are the resulting outcomes of actions (JCS, 2020).

It is important to identify the desired effects since

they often dictate the operation's character. The only desired effect he achieved was his diplomatic line of effort, which deceived Americans of his true intent.

For example, intelligence indicated a large operation was underway, but Americans believed North Vietnam wanted to negotiate ending the conflict (Dougan & Weiss, 1988). Ultimately, the military attacks failed to achieve their desired results since American fire superiority easily routed Giap's forces, resulting in a tactical defeat for the North Vietnamese (Willbanks, 2007).

Additionally, Giap overestimated the South Vietnamese citizens' willingness to revolt (Wirtz, 1991). Although the Tet Offensive failed to manifest the planned effects, strategic effects produced different results.

Giap did not achieve tactical-level effects because he overestimated what his forces could do. However, the Tet Offensive's overarching effect was enormously successful, resulting in Johnson announcing U.S. intervention de-escalation and ending his re-election campaign two months after the Tet Offensive began (Lawrence, 2008).

The three-pronged approach created psychological effects "the Americans seemed never to appreciate fully"

(Tang et al., 1986, p. 87). A thorough Tet Offensive operational design analysis showcases how Giap's three-pronged approach created conditions producing strategic victories despite coalition forces winning on the battlefield.

Conclusion

This article analyzed operational design elements through Giap's employment of ways, means, and ends during the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive reversed the Vietnam War's trajectory by using untested, integrated, and creative techniques to develop Giap's three-pronged approach during the planning process.

Commanders and planners can use operational art creatively in operational design. Investigating the Tet Offensive's ways, means, and ends provides insight into a general's planning considerations, and Giap's strategic genius lends itself to using operational design to achieve strategic victory effectively. While no one can predict the next conflict in which the U.S. will participate, operational art and design will play a significant role in future operations. ■

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