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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP**  
**Operational Genius or Lucky Amateur?**

by

Charles W. Alsup

Lieutenant Colonel, US Army

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction  
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily  
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 UNDERSTANDING OPERATIONAL ART IS A CRITICAL SKILL FOR CONTEMPORARY MILITARY OFFICERS. GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP IS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF OPERATIONAL ART AT THE LOW END OF THE CONFLICT SPECTRUM. GENERAL GIAP LED AN ILL-EQUIPPED INSURGENT ARMY AGAINST TWO WESTERN ARMIES OVER THE COURSE OF 30 YEARS, AND WON. HIS SUCCESS WAS NOT LUCK. IT WAS PATIENT APPLICATION OF BASIC MILITARY PRINCIPLES IN A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT. IN TEACHING HIMSELF OPERATIONAL ART, GIAP MADE PROFOUND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MILITARY PROFESSION. HE APPLIED MAO TSE TUNG'S INSURGENT WARFARE THEORIES IN A PRAGMATIC, SUCCESSFUL MANNER. CONCEIVED A UNIQUE "PEOPLE'S WAR" CONCEPT WHICH CAPTURES THE ESSENCE OF THE CLAUSEWITZIAN TRINITY --- MILITARY, GOVERNMENT, PEOPLE --- AND PRECIPITATED AN ERA OF INNOVATIVE OPERATIONAL THINKING, ESPECIALLY AS IT APPLIES TO INSURGENT WARFARE. HIS CAMPAIGNS DURING THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR PROVIDE WORTHWHILE EXAMPLES, GOOD AND BAD, OF OPERATIONAL ART IN PROTRACTED WAR.

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## ABSTRACT OF

### GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP: OPERATIONAL GENIUS OR LUCKY AMATEUR?

Over the course of 30 years, from 1945-1975, an ill-equipped insurgent army (Vietminh) in Vietnam led by Vo Nguyen Giap defeated two well-trained, well-equipped western armies. This accomplishment has perplexed students of warfare and has led some to suggest poorly applied military art by the French and, later, the U.S. was responsible, rather than superior soldiering and generalship by General Giap.

The facts do not bear this out. A careful study of the First Indochina War reveals a remarkable evolution on the part of General Giap and the Vietminh. General Giap adapted Mao Tse Tung's theories of insurgent warfare to Vietnam and through trial and error, taught himself and his Army how to coordinate tactical military operations in order to achieve national objectives. His campaigns are exceptional examples of operational art in the slow-paced unconventional environment of low intensity conflict. A careful review of the lessons learned by the French might have helped the U.S. avoid some of the same problems, and is still a worthwhile endeavor.

Giap's military success was not luck. It was patient application of military principles in a unique environment. His success at the expense of the French and U.S. touched off a period of introspection which has caused a renaissance in U.S. military doctrine. This renewed interest in doctrine has focused on the operational level of war and how to synergistically sequence military operations to achieve strategic objectives across the spectrum of conflict. Giap's success precipitated this important evolution of military doctrine and his campaigns remain one of the most worthwhile examples, good and bad, of operational art at the low end of the conflict spectrum.

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## PREFACE

In 1945, the disintegrating Japanese Empire and its occupying armies left a power vacuum in southeastern Asia which the reborn French government sought to fill by reestablishing its pre-war colonial presence in French Indochina. While there was moderate resistance to the return of colonial rule in the south of Vietnam (Cochinchina) and in Laos, the paternalistic French were confronted with a powerful political/military movement in the north of Vietnam (Tonkin) which had seized control of the governmental structure during the anarchy associated with the Japanese collapse before allied occupation forces arrived. This movement, the Vietminh, refused to let go. They were led by the Vietnamese nationalist and known Communist, Ho Chi Minh. The irony of this confrontation was that Ho Chi Minh, at an earlier age and under a different name, had appealed to the French and to the American President, Woodrow Wilson, at the Paris Peace Conference of 1918, to extend to the Vietnamese the right of self-determination that the western powers were advocating so eloquently as they established the League of Nations. Rebuffed by the colonial French and ignored by Woodrow Wilson, Ho Chi Minh came away embittered by what he perceived as hypocrisy and racism exhibited toward him personally and Vietnam, as a nation. His resolution to remove the French by force and his suspicions of America may have been solidified at this juncture.

Ho Chi Minh did not act alone when he seized power. During the war years, he had assembled a cadre of individuals, dedicated to him and to communism, who fought against the occupying Japanese and collaborating French. One of the most important members of this inner cadre was Ho's military leader, Vo Nguyen Giap. They hoped the allies would reward them with independence at the end of the war, and further fighting would not be necessary. The Potsdam

agreements which failed to concede Vietnamese sovereignty were a second rebuff which Ho and Giap were determined to resist. When negotiations between the French and Vietminh broke down in December 1946, Giap retreated to the Viet Bac and renewed his insurgent style warfare, now against the French. France was aware of Vietnamese hopes for independence and ultimately aimed to grant independence. They felt Vietnam was not ready, however, and they had near total disdain for the ability of this Vietminh organization to stand up to a western army. French military planners, anxious to remove the embarrassment of World War II boasted they would defeat the Vietminh within a matter of weeks. Shortly thereafter, French forces engaged Vietminh forces on the battlefield and were introduced to the protracted war tactics and operational art of General Giap. His abilities enraged, perplexed, and ultimately defeated the French in the First Indochina War. Did the French lose this war by incompetence and overconfidence, or did General Giap win it with superior generalship?

The campaigns of the First Indochina War reveal the answer to that question. Because Giap was a communist, a callous leader who had little regard for human life, and because he defeated two western armies, there has been a tendency to undervalue his abilities and contributions to military operational art. He did make significant mistakes in the First Indochina War, but he also learned from these mistakes. The military leader who emerged victorious in 1954 was a hardened professional who had learned the complicated art of campaigning in a protracted, insurgency war environment. Within those campaigns are tremendous lessons in conducting revolutionary warfare against a superior foe. Also within those campaigns are some equally tremendous lessons in how to defeat a competent insurgency. Both of these perspectives are worth capturing in operational doctrine for the low intensity conflicts in which we will continue to find ourselves involved.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Many published and emerging doctrinal publications of the U.S. Armed Forces are devoting considerable space and effort to defining the operational level of war and codifying operational art, including campaign planning. Introspection and recrimination following the Vietnam War led many strategists and students of the military profession to focus on the shortcomings in the existing doctrine which allowed tactical successes on the battlefield to be little more than demonstrations of superior technology and brute strength which did not contribute, in a meaningful way, to an overall strategic victory. Campaign planning had been a strong suit of American flag officers during World War II and was somewhat evident in the Korean Conflict. The U.S. had reasonably clear national goals and objectives in Vietnam. It also had a military establishment with competence and capability equal or better than any other in the world. The U.S. did underestimate the enemy --- the North Vietnamese. The U.S. military appeared unable to comprehend and articulate what military conditions would have to be established to achieve national objectives. American operational art lacked cohesiveness and doggedly pursued an ill-fated attrition strategy which relatively simple math suggested would never work. Public impatience finally brought an end to the military inconclusiveness.

The years immediately following Vietnam represented a low ebb for the nation and the U.S. Armed Forces. Like Spring follows Winter with a rebirth however, this forlorn period led to a rejuvenation of innovative military thinking. The results, starting in 1982 with the Army's air-land battle doctrine, have been spectacular: refined air-land battle doctrine, aerospace battle doctrine, Marine campaigning, Naval littoral warfare, and meaningful joint campaign planning doctrine. Concurrent with this military introspection, civilian policymakers relooked conditions



under which the U.S. would become involved militarily in potential conflicts. Secretary of Defense Weinberger articulated the conditions whereby U.S. forces could be used, and these principles have more recently been reconfirmed by Secretary of State Christopher. Principles of this doctrine include: 1) clearly defined objectives; 2) reasonable chance of success; 3) exploitation of technical advantages and use of overwhelming force; 4) a war termination plan; and 5) consent of the American people. Implicit in this doctrine is the notion that wars involving U.S. forces should be short, decisive affairs, recognizing that public will can be very fleeting in democratic societies. This "American way of war" causes U.S. military planners to think of campaigns in terms of days or weeks. Campaigns that last months or years push the envelope of national policy.

Therein lies the key to understanding the operational level of war in protracted, guerilla-type warfare and the operational art as practiced by the North Vietnamese military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap. The Vietnamese, given their 1000 year tradition of resisting foreign dominance and well-educated by their successful Chinese communist neighbors, think in terms of years and decades for military campaigns to work. The Vietminh and Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) campaigned for four years against the Japanese, eight years against the French, ten years against the U.S., and two final years against the South Vietnamese to achieve success.

Vo Nguyen Giap was a central figure in all these campaigns. He created the VPA, learned the military profession under fire, and made many mistakes, but ultimately triumphed over the French in the First Indochina War and the Americans in the Second Indochina War. Many of his detractors emphasize his battlefield defeats and conclude the two wars were lost in Paris and Washington, respectively, not won by Giap. His supporters often talked of his brilliance and dogmatically beat their drums about the decline of the U.S. and the inevitable victory of socialism. The ideological rhetoric associated with his victories detracted from the actual military art. As

usual, the truth is probably somewhere in between. It is clear, however, that Giap's formative years as an operational commander were against the French, in the First Indochina War from 1946-1954. By trial and error, he refined his concept of revolutionary people's war, adding important new dimensions to Mao Tse Tung's initial, simplistic theories.

It is the thesis of this paper that despite his lack of formal military training, General Giap was able to mold a unique operational style, especially well-suited for protracted warfare. Many aspects of the Indochina conflicts are unique to the local culture and geography, but Giap has given the military art insights which transcend parochial regional considerations. Most importantly as a campaigner, he knew where his own center of gravity was --- the people of Vietnam --- and developed mechanisms for parrying away any significant threats to this center of gravity. Conversely, he identified the French center of gravity early on --- the will of the French colonial army and the support of the French people --- and adapted his campaigns to slowly, methodically, and patiently wear away French will.

Unlike most western nations where politics and military matters are clearly separated, the Vietminh viewed these as inextricably intertwined. Giap was a soldier and a politician. Ho Chi Minh was a politician and a military strategist. The campaigns of the First Indochina War were developed, approved and supervised at the highest political levels of the Vietminh. Such a concept runs counter to western military thought, but was especially effective in the protracted war scenario where continuity of purpose gave significant advantage. Following a brief look at the origins of the First Indochina War and a look at the background that led Vo Nguyen Giap to the head of the Vietnamese People's Army, we will see if there are any worthwhile lessons to be learned by studying the competing national objectives and campaign plans of the First Indochina War.

## II. VIETNAM

The ethnic Viets, remotely related to the Chinese, have inhabited the coastal lowlands of the eastern Indochina Peninsula since before the time of Jesus. The sketchy history known in the western world is of a land frequently tormented by Chinese invaders and internal strife. The Viets had little to do with indigenous tribes in the interior highlands regions, busying themselves with agriculture and trade in the coastal regions. The northern and southern regions of Vietnam frequently feuded, gaining a semblance of unity only when threatened with foreign domination, usually from China.

Europeans "discovered" Vietnam in 1535 when the Portuguese founded a mission at Faifo, near present day Da Nang, but they never turned Faifo or Vietnam into an important element of their trading system. French missionaries supplanted the Portuguese in the 1600's. These missionaries converted more people, proportionately, to Christianity (Catholicism) than in any other Asian nation, except the Phillipines.<sup>1</sup> French influence continued to grow in southern Vietnam until a backlash of Vietnamese ethnocentrism began objecting to the further spread of "European religion and culture." The French intervened militarily in the 1860's to protect missionaries and converts, but also began demanding trading spheres. Over the next quarter century, the French feuded with the Viets, Chinese and Khmers. Although the Vietnamese had a sophisticated administration system, anarchy and conflict caused by civil strife and Chinese interference, along with French imperial designs, compelled the French to formally colonize Cochinchina, Annam (central Vietnam) and Tonkin, along with Cambodia as the French Indochinese Union in 1887. Laos was added six years later.<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1).

## INDOCHINA

French Indochina (the Indochinese Union of 1886) consisted of the protectorates of Laos, Cambodia, Tonkin and Annam, and the colony of Cochinchina. In 1949 the three *kys* of Vietnam (Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina) were united, and the new State of Vietnam, together with Laos and Cambodia, became Associated States of the French Union. As a result of the Geneva Agreement of 1954 Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia became independent, but Vietnam was divided at the seventeenth parallel into a Communist North and a non-Communist South. This state of affairs pertains in 1975, although many parts of South Vietnam are now under Communist control.

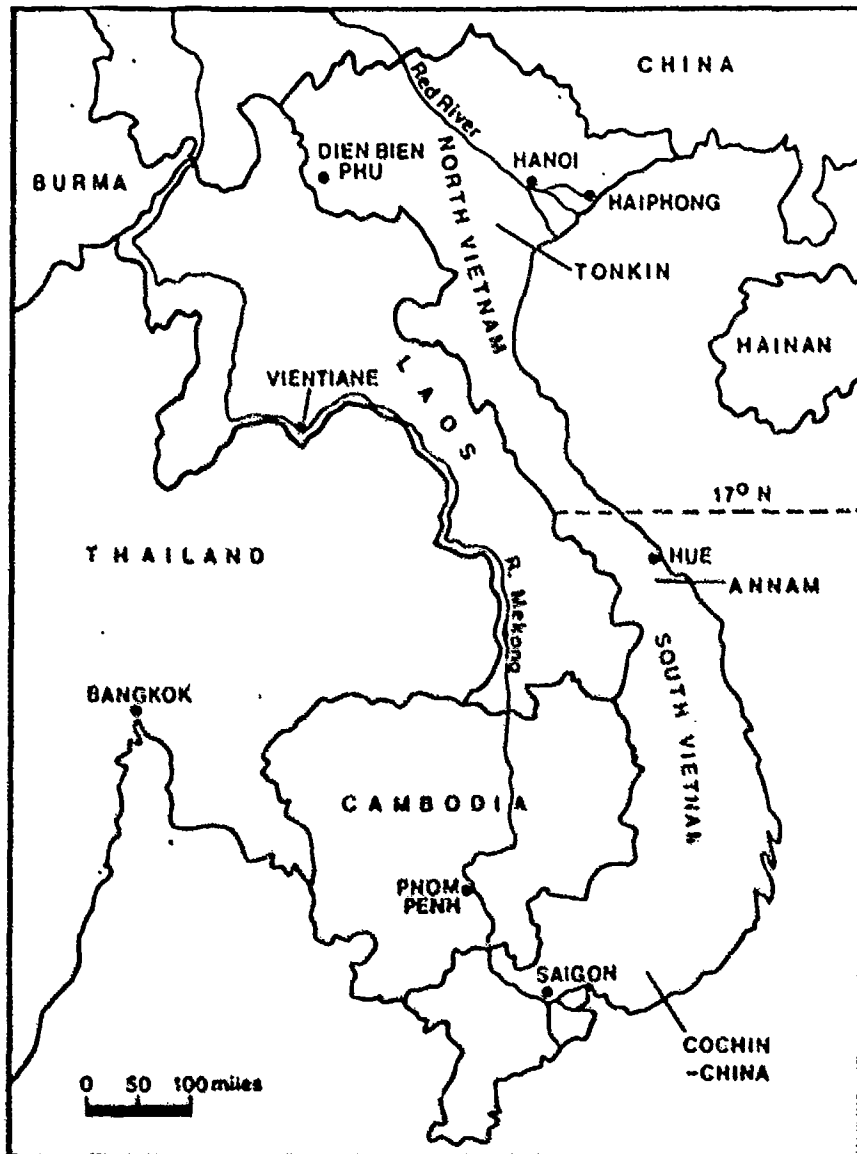


Figure 1

The French legacy to Indochina was good education, introduction to western ideas, access to the west, Catholicism for a significant minority, especially in the south, language, good administrative structures, significant infrastructure (roads, bridges, ports), along with a fairly heavy dose of heavy-handed brutality and western racism called pacification to quell any potential dissent. The result was the development of a competent intellectual class, but also development of anticolonialism in the form of Vietnamese nationalism. Concurrently, Vietnam went from economic millstone around France's neck to resource rich colony as rubber and rice began to command significant roles in the world marketplace. Though plagued by chronic dissent, Vietnam became a treasured colony of France and the French people which they did not relish losing.

As we have seen repeatedly around the world, colonialism, no matter how benign and well-intended, is seldom embraced by the subject nation. Most of the sovereign nations in the Americas were born of revolutions to overthrow colonial domination. Vietnam was no different. The French did some remarkable and inspired things in Vietnam, but they also exploited, repressed, and blunted the self-determination and expression of the nation, its people, and its culture. Not surprisingly, dissident movements and protests began to develop, asserting Vietnamese nationalism. These movements attracted many of the well-educated and frustrated Vietnamese intelligentsia.

One of these intelligent, nationalistic Vietnamese radicals, named Nguyen Sinh Cung, later changed to Ho Chi Minh (he who brings light), benefited by French education and the culture of Paris in the early 1900's. He developed a real affinity for French philosophy, language, and freedoms. He was also exposed to the ideas of socialism and Marxism while in France --- ideas which appealed to him, as he thought of his nation as oppressed. After having some of his moderate ideas for reform in Vietnam rebuffed by the French, he went to Russia, and later, China where he received moral support and became an avowed communist. Without returning to

Vietnam personally, he called a meeting of radical Vietnamese factions in Hong Kong in 1929 and succeeded in forming the Indochinese Communist Party. Even then, Vietnamese communist designs on the rest of Indochina were apparent.<sup>3</sup> The clear objective was an independent Vietnam (all of Vietnam) with a communist government.

The communists were not welcome in colonial Vietnam and, like all other dissidents, were brutally repressed by the colonial police. These dissident elements were very fragmented and ineffective. Ho Chi Minh spent much of this same time in the 1930's traveling and learning about revolution, especially with the communists in China. One thing he learned in Russia and confirmed in China was that a revolution must be launched under favorable conditions. The conditions were not yet right in Vietnam.

Japanese imperialism replaced French colonialism in 1940 as the Japanese sought precious resources for their war machine. Unlike most nationalists in Asia who supported Japan, Ho had the foresight to predict an ultimate U.S./British victory. He aligned himself with the Allies, hoping for support for Vietnamese independence after the war.<sup>4</sup> Conditions for revolution were improving in 1941 and Ho returned to Vietnam for the first time in 30 years to begin organizing in earnest. He chose the rural highlands along the northern frontier with China as a redoubt and organized his supporters into the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh --- The Vietnam Independence League --- or Vietminh, for short. The purpose of this organization was to resist the Japanese occupiers and French collaborators. Of all those who were attracted to Ho's charismatic leadership, Ho selected Vo Nguyen Giap, a young strident communist, nationalist to form and lead the Vietminh military.

Little is known about Vietminh activity from 1941 to late 1944 other than to say they were recruiting, organizing, and training themselves, with assistance from the Chinese and American OSS, who were helping anyone willing to oppose the Japanese. Ho's vision was to overthrow the

Japanese and assume power himself. Small guerilla bands harassed French and Japanese patrols, assassinated Vietnamese collaborators, and "propagandized" the population with the positive Vietnamese nationalist message.<sup>5</sup> In the overall scheme of World War II, these were relatively inconsequential events. In the evolution of a revolutionary guerilla movement, they were monumentally important times. By December 1944, Giap had completed a fairly comprehensive self-development program in the military art and had formed his first "regular" military unit --- a "Propaganda and Liberation Brigade" --- consisting of 34 men and started the Vietnamese tradition of combining military and political force in one unit. On December 22, 1944, this unit successfully attacked a small French outpost in what is now officially recognized as the birthdate of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA).

By August 1945, when the Japanese capitulated, Giap's VPA had grown to over 10,000 men, not including the countless thousands who supported him as porters or guerilla fighters.<sup>6</sup> The unexpected collapse of Japan left Vietnam in a state of virtual anarchy with a notable power vacuum. Into this vacuum stepped Ho, backed by Giap and the VPA; by far the most organized political force in Vietnam. On September 2, 1945 they marched out of the jungles, into Hanoi, and, using the exact words of the American Declaration of Independence, proclaimed the independence of Vietnam. Ho, hoping for U.S. support confided in an OSS agent that he would welcome a million U.S. soldiers, ... but no French soldiers.<sup>7</sup> The powerless French, however, were not pleased and were determined to re-establish colonial rule. The Vietminh established a modicum of control in the north, but anarchy reigned in the south, exacerbated by the terrorist tactics of the semi-autonomous Vietminh movement there. Under the terms of the Potsdam agreements, Britain introduced occupation troops to establish control in the south and then turned over control to France. Now credibly reinstated in Indochina, the French served notice on Ho of

their intent to return to pre-war colonial rule. He sent a pleading, prophetic note to General de Gaulle:

You would understand better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel this yearning for independence that is in everyone's heart, and which no human force can any longer restrain. Should you re-establish a French administration here, it will not be obeyed. Every village will be a nest of resistance, each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and colonists will themselves seek to leave this atmosphere, which will choke them.<sup>8</sup>

With no outside support and no compromise from the French, Ho and his interior minister, Giap tried the best they could to solidify control. They were only partially successful and Ho issued a remarkable statement in December 1945:

Though five months have passed since we declared independence, no foreign countries have recognized us. Though our soldiers have fought gloriously, we are still far from victory. Though our administration is honest and efficient, corruption has not been eliminated. Though we have introduced reforms, disorder disturbs several areas. We could ascribe these setbacks to the fact that our regime is young, or make other excuses. But no. Our successes are due to the efforts of our citizens, and our shortcomings are our own fault.<sup>9</sup>

An attempt to negotiate a political settlement with the French was made, but faltered. An uneasy peace existed until talks broke down in December 1946. On December 19, 1946 in the face of a French ultimatum to disarm his soldiers, Giap and the Vietminh attacked French citizens and military targets in Hanoi. A fierce, bloody battle raged for several weeks. Giap, sensing temporary defeat, issued a virtual declaration of war on behalf of the Vietminh as they retreated out of Hanoi, back to the Viet Bac: "I order all soldiers and militia in the center, south, and north to stand together, go into battle, destroy the invaders, and save the nation.... The resistance will be long and arduous, but our cause is just and we will surely triumph."<sup>10</sup> The First Indochina War, between France and the Vietminh, had begun.



### III. GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP

Vo Nguyen Giap was born in 1912 in the village of An Xa, Quang Binh Province in the central part of Vietnam known as Annam. Ironically, this area was just north of the 17th parallel, which would assume special significance as a result of Giap's military exploits in 1954. Giap's father was considered a scholar locally, an avowed anti-colonialist, and of very limited material means. Excelling as a student in his early years, Giap gained admission to the Lycee Quoi-Hoc at Hue. While at school in Hue, Giap fell under the influence of Phan Boi Chau, an ardent nationalist sometimes referred to as the Sun Yat Sen of Vietnam. These influences and his own thoughts led Giap to join and become an activist in the Tan Viet Menh Dang (Revolutionary Party for a Great Victory) at the age of 14. Also, in the general timeframes, Giap probably read Ho Chi Minh's book, "Colonialism on Trial."

The next few years of Giap's life are not well recorded. He was expelled from school for disciplinary reasons, joined a more radical element of the Tan Viet and participated in demonstrations against French rule. He was arrested and jailed. He met his wife-to-be while in French jail, and upon release returned to school as a much more dedicated student.<sup>11</sup> His excellence as a student earned him admissions to the university at Hanoi where he continued to excel, earning a degree in law and a reputation as an insatiable student of history. He continued his studies, taught history, remained active in dissident politics and wrote scholarly treatises on the plight of the Vietnamese peasants. He married Minh Thai, a declared communist and became more active in Communist Party activities. His historical studies included extensive study of warfare and great generals, including Napoleon and T. E. Lawrence. His students prophetically called him "the general" because of his ability to discuss and draw Napoleon's campaigns and battle

plans in minute detail.<sup>12</sup> Giap came to know Pham Van Dong, a future Premier of North Vietnam, during this time. It was Dong who subsequently introduced Giap to Ho Chi Minh.

The French colonialists had grown increasingly tolerant of political dissent in the late 1930's, largely because similar liberalism prevailed at home. In 1939, however, the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact was signed, Hitler invaded Poland, and communism was outlawed in France and Vietnam. Giap and his wife went into hiding in Annam, but she was later arrested for subversive activity. She was sentenced to life in prison, but died in captivity. French authorities insisted she had died of natural causes, but Giap was convinced that his wife was mistreated.

The exact mechanics of Vietminh and splinter group communications and decisionmaking is unclear, but sometime in 1941, Giap was nominated or identified by Ho Chi Minh as best qualified to form and lead a military arm of the Vietminh. Shortly thereafter, he fled to China with Dong and probably laid the groundwork for a close association with Ho during meetings in May 1941. This was Giap's first meeting with Ho, but his reputation as a competent, loyal communist had preceded him. It was during these meetings in southern China that a military strategy for gaining independence from the French and the Japanese was formulated.

Sometime in 1942, Giap returned to Vietnam to lead guerilla activities against the Japanese and, ultimately, form the VPA to "liberate" Vietnam. He recognized the need for a safe haven wherein he could organize and train. Hence, he located in the northern mountains of Vietnam where the Japanese and French seldom ventured due to the hostility of the terrain and tribal groups who lived there. This area afforded secure lines of supply and additional safe haven in China, if necessary. This proved to be a propitious decision with immediate and long term benefits. As discussed earlier, Giap's military activities were limited to guerilla ambushes and some minor small

unit operations against isolated outposts. He did build a credible army, however, and was able to provide Ho with the strength he needed to assume power after World War II.

When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed on September 2, 1945 a coalition government of competing political parties was formed with Ho Chi Minh as head. Giap was appointed as Minister of the Interior. He was the acting head of state during Ho's tenure at the Paris peace negotiations in 1946, earning a reputation as an efficient, but ruthless administrator. When negotiations broke down, Giap went back to the task of building a disciplined, well-trained army to liberate Vietnam. The process of organizing a resistance, developing an infrastructure, establishing a doctrine for fighting the superior colonial power, and conducting successful campaigns, culminating in the decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 represent Giap's principal contribution to operational art and thought. His experiences as a general are an interesting path of trial and error, sprinkled with some devastating losses. He was very resilient, however, and learned from his mistakes.

#### **IV. NATIONAL OBJECTIVES & GRAND STRATEGIES**

Before studying the campaigns of General Giap, it is important to understand the objectives each side felt they were fighting for. For France, World War II was a humiliating experience. Defeated by Germany, the free French in exile and resisting had to watch the Vichy French government prostitute itself repeatedly in the face of German and Axis demands. Though supported by England, France received little help or encouragement from the U.S. to resist the Japanese in Indochina, and were excluded, in large measure, from post-war conferences on the future of Indochina. The allies did formally agree to a modest French proposal to parachute assessment teams into Vietnam in August 1945. Because officials of the Vichy French colonial administration could not be trusted, the Free French wanted objective assessments of conditions on the ground and what would be required to restore order.

Seven teams did enter Vietnam, but almost all were captured by the surging Vietminh.<sup>13</sup> Their loss froze the French into inaction in a period of widespread anarchy, leading to the initial takeover by Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh in September 1945. When the French pleaded with the Americans for assistance, the Americans, following the anti-colonial, anti-French tone established by Roosevelt earlier, rejected their pleas and struck up a surprisingly harmonious relationship with the Vietminh. Only later, and then too late, did many Americans realize that the Vietminh were not a pro-western, nationalistic movement, but a Russian and Chinese related communist movement. Fidel Castro managed a similar ruse in 1958. Though American support for the Vietminh quickly faded, this show of U.S. support in 1945 was critical in solidifying the Vietminh credibility and establishing the conditions for a violent confrontation with France.

That de Gaulle and Roosevelt did not get along is well known. Both had huge egos and could be most uncompromising. Despite French humiliations, however, de Gaulle was insistent, for the health of the nation, that France emerge from World War II with suitable dignity. This meant not stripped of its pride, colonies, or positions of prestige in world associations. England knew a strong France was critical to stability in post-war Europe and the U.S. grudgingly came to the same realization. De Gaulle probably had no delusions about making Indochina a full, directly controlled colony again, but he did feel that French people should be involved in establishing the conditions of independence and in determining the nature of future French relations with its former colonies. One of the initial negotiating positions of the French was for relative autonomy in Tonkin and Annam, within an overall French Indochinese Union, similar to the British Commonwealth. In a paternalistic sort of way, many French felt their job of bringing civilization to Vietnam was not yet complete and they needed a few more years to fully and properly prepare their "children" for full independence.

The Vietminh managed to establish a degree of control in Tonkin and Annam, but were unable to establish order in Cochinchina before the occupying British arrived. The British, as mandated by the Potsdam agreements, sent military occupation troops and administrators to Saigon and the south. They were opposed vehemently by the renegade southern Vietminh movement, leading to substantial combat over the course of late 1945 and most of 1946 in what the British refer to as the First Vietnam War. The British ran the Vietminh out of Saigon and, with the help of captured Japanese troops and freed French soldiers, re-established order in Saigon. They turned over to the French a Vietnam, south of Hue, in relatively orderly shape. With a secure base in Saigon, the French sought to re-establish their colonial control over all of Indochina, including the Tonkin region.

Conflict between the French and Vietminh became increasingly inevitable. French military officers, anxious to regain credibility lost in World War II, did not want to back down from this fight. Even with manpower and equipment shortages, they assumed the Vietnamese peasant soldiers would be no match for western military thought and a "real" army. This institutional conceit and racism blinded French planners from the fact that they were fighting a dedicated, tenacious, competent, disciplined, well-trained, and well-led foe.

Initially, French national objectives were clear: re-establish French order in Vietnam; continue to prepare Vietnam for eventual independence; allow France the opportunity to help determine Vietnam's eventual destiny. A more thorough analysis, however, leads one to ask what French vital interests were at stake? The answer is, of course, none. Except for the rather superficial concerns for national pride and honor, French soldiers found it increasingly difficult to articulate exactly what they were fighting for.

The brutal conduct of the Vietminh in the south including terrorism, murder, and abject criminal behavior finally convinced the U.S. and others that this was not a benign, democratic movement. As hostilities between the French and Vietminh deepened, the communist nature of the insurgency became more apparent. Events in Eastern Europe, Greece, and Korea generated the U.S. policy of containing international communism and, despite earlier misgivings about the French, the U.S. came around to actively encouraging and supporting French military operations to contain communism in Vietnam. French policy was clear, albeit shallow, early on, but lost focus as the potential for regaining the lost empire lessened. Mounting casualties sapped the morale of the French soldiers and the will of the citizens back home, as the "easy victory" turned into a painful stalemate. French objectives became less French and more U.S. — contain communism — but few could articulate French national interests in Vietnam after 1950, French

grand strategy assumed the Vietminh would collapse after one or two decisive defeats. Giap avoided becoming decisively engaged until he was ready, but the French never fundamentally revised their overall strategy, instead ending up in a war of wills and attrition which lacked focus and which they were destined to lose as they waited for their decisive big battle.

Vietnamese interests and grand strategies were simpler and more straightforward.

Although there were several political movements, the Vietminh were, by far, the best organized and most credible. They had gained great credibility with the people because they brought order to the areas they controlled, they had introduced many needed reforms, and they always seemed to win their military engagements (mostly small guerilla operations to this point). Their assumption of national power in 1945 gave them the legitimacy to articulate Vietnam's national goals. The Vietminh were, first and foremost, an anti-colonial, nationalistic movement. After 1000 years of foreign domination, civil and regional anarchy, Vietnamese nationalism was ready to blossom. The conditions favoring revolution seemed to be at hand. The objectives articulated by the Vietminh included: an independent, united Vietnam, free of foreign domination; a partnership with France; and, establishment of a socialist/communist government.

Giap and Ho do not appear to have had any delusions about their military capabilities vis a vis the capabilities the French could bring to bear. They also appreciated what American aid would add to that equation. Giap has joked about Vietnam as not just an underdeveloped nation, but a totally undeveloped country.<sup>14</sup> He knew his limitations versus a well-trained, well-armed foe. He also believed in his cause and was willing to use any means at his disposal to gain independence and power. He is quoted frequently as saying the French never had a chance because Vietnam had the time and the people to win a protracted war.<sup>15</sup> The grand strategy was a patient form of warfare that sought to undermine the superiority of the French by attacking only when local

superiority could be achieved, declining decisive battle, and slowly taking away the will of the French to fight. As French enthusiasm for combat waned, the strengthening Vietminh could increase the tempo of battle until the French commander admitted he could no longer hope to win. Tactically, the center of gravity was the French Army, concentrated in the area near Hanoi. Strategically, the center of gravity was the will of the French people and government to fight a war that appeared to have no end. Initially, Giap focused on the strategic objective and avoided their strength.

Over time, Vietnam took on a significance far beyond anyone's initial expectations. What started out as an anti-colonial insurgency became a superpower clash of ideologies. As the dogmatic communist side of Ho Chi Minh and his followers, including Giap, was revealed, alliances became polarized and skewed. Russia, communism's missionary, saw the opportunity to spread the revolution and oppose U.S. policy. China, the inspiration for peasant revolution, offered sanctuary, limited supplies, and moral support, but was preoccupied with her own internal problems and the Korean War. Vietnam was able to effectively play its "China card" because France and the U.S. did not fully understand the mistrust between China and Vietnam. The U.S., stung by communist deceit, imperialism, and ruthlessness around the world, became obsessed with containing communism. After some initial blunders with France, the U.S. became a major supplier of arms, equipment, money, covert support, and moral support in an effort to keep France in the First Indochina War, despite the waning will of the French people and the inability of the French or Americans to devise a successful strategy.



## V. THE CAMPAIGNS

Students of the military profession have long recognized the synergistic value of properly sequenced battles and engagements. As Clausewitz wrote, "By looking on each engagement as part of a series, at least insofar as events are predictable, the commander is always on the high road to his goal."<sup>16</sup> While some soldiers and many romanticists look for the single decisive victory, the simple truth is that military victory is virtually always the result of a series of hard-fought battles, some successful and some not, that finally cause one side or the other to capitulate and submit to the other sides will. The term campaigning has been frequently used to describe this military art. More recently, motivated in large part by the stinging defeat in the Second Indochina War, the U.S. military has reinvented the German concept of operational art to describe the ability to construct successful campaigns. The value of campaigning was learned the hard way in the trenches of World War I, where tactical engagements flared up continuously, but had no unifying operational purpose. The allied flag officers of World War II demonstrated a remarkable grasp of campaigning as the allies wages successful campaigns in Africa, Italy, the Pacific, and finally, Operation Overlord. The biggest lesson learned in these campaigns was the need to be flexible, responsive, and patient concerning unanticipated contingencies on the battlefield when directing military activities at this operational level.

Insurgent warfare or protracted warfare is obviously different than conventional military operations. Senior French and, later, American field commanders had a difficult time making the transition from their successful conventional war wisdom recognizing how to effectively sequence operations into meaningful campaign plan in a slow-paced conflict with an elusive enemy. The need to integrate political and humanitarian operations into overall campaign planning concurrent

with military operations was a totally alien concept. General Giap, a neophyte at actual warfare in 1945, had no conventional experience which inhibited his thinking in terms of conducting insurgent/guerilla warfare. He was an avid student of military history, as mentioned earlier, plus he learned the basics of protracted war firsthand in China from Mao Tse Tung. It was this "clean slate" of little experience that probably enabled Giap to truly learn from his mistakes, effectively learn to sequence the slow steps of insurgent warfare, and apply the lessons of history to this new form of warfare. Although he has written little, Giap has made major contributions to the operational art just by virtue of the fact we have his campaigns to study. His overall campaign plan was to use "People's War" to fight a three stage war — contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive — closely integrating military and political goals to achieve the defeat of the French Colonial Army. We shall look at each of these components and examine his campaign.

Whether Giap coined the term People's War or not is immaterial. He uses it frequently in his writings. Rejecting the notion of Lenin that an urban-based, minority-supported revolution could work in Vietnam, Giap espoused the need for the bulk of the rural populace to be actively engaged in supporting military operations, not just with soldier manpower, but with food, shelter, portage, and active moral support. Giap also realized the need to not only pay lip service to popular support, but also to develop means of articulating resistance objectives to the populace and making tangible reforms reflecting these promises in areas they controlled. Consequently, the Vietminh operated local governments in areas they controlled in the Viet Bac, provided necessary services, attempted some land reform programs, and tried to reform landlord and interest rate procedures. Many of these attempts were crude and unsuccessful, but the Vietminh became reputed as reformists who offered the possibility of positive change. In conjunction with this, the

Vietminh undertook massive educational programs to promote communism as the savior of Vietnam, both in the military forces and with the local population.

While Giap's rhetoric showed a concern for the welfare of the people, his actions indicated a callousness for individual human life. His actions and words demonstrated a repeated willingness to sacrifice thousands of lives to obtain one more victory on the way to independence. He also knew the value of people in supporting rear area logistical operations. His actions and writings demonstrate a unique understanding of the role of logistics and secure rear areas in the successful prosecution of a campaign. The methods he used, as discussed above, worked and it provided Giap with a sanctuary from which to wage his war against a more powerful, better equipped foe. To wage such a war he needed an area where he could recover from setbacks, organize with little fear of being caught or decisively defeated, and venture out of it to deliver minor defeats to a powerful enemy which, over time, would alter the balance of power between the two. The French use of airborne forces to invade this sanctuary was a nuisance, because the force always quickly withdrew due to lack of secure lines of supply. Giap's people provided the equalizer to French power and technology.

Also of note in the "People's War" concept is the integration of tiers of forces. Resistance was provided by guerilla fighters in villages, regional militias, and the regular VPA. Guerillas who fought well were promoted to the militia, and if worthy, finally selected for the VPA. Those who made it to the VPA considered it an honor. Additionally, those who made it were already well-trained, battle-hardened veterans. The notion of the VPA as an undisciplined, poorly trained, bungling organization was pure fiction. By 1954, they were one of the best armies in the world. These tiers of forces were mutually supporting and could be called upon to secure rear areas, conduct diversionary attacks, and augment regular forces. This concept solidified Vietminh

control as they occupied more and more area. The Vietminh approach to pacification and counterinsurgency was much more successful than the French.

Associated with this concept of "People's War" is the second of General Giap's unique perspectives on operational art. This was his concept of integrating military and political goals through the "People's Army." He described the basic elements of the "People's Army" thusly:

- 1) A national army with patriots from all revolutionary classes and all nationalities, including minority ones.
- 2) It is a democratic army wherein soldiers are given a voice in their leadership and direction.
- 3) It is a people's army because it defends the fundamental interests of the people.
- 4) It is under the leadership of the Party which alone has made it into a revolutionary army, a true people's army.
- 5) Political indoctrination and work within the army is of paramount importance. It is the soul of the army.
- 6) The army must maintain good relations with the people by always respecting the people, helping the people, and defending the people.<sup>17</sup>

Much of this was pure rhetoric, from the halls of Hanoi's propaganda ministry, aimed at ears that wanted to listen to it. But, it also seems clear that Giap, himself, very much believed in the basic tenets of this concept and the VPA did, in large measure, aspire to these goals. The VPA did make conscientious efforts to integrate ethnic minorities, leaders rose from within the ranks and stayed in touch with their soldiers, and the army readily followed the political goals of the Party. Of great importance was the time allotted for political indoctrination of soldiers. Fully 50% of training time was devoted to political education. Excessive by western standards, these soldiers clearly had ideological sense of purpose which Giap cited as key to many of his victories. The presence of the Party in the military structure and the power of the commissar to make final military decisions attested to the importance of unity of purpose of the people, party, and military. By repetition it was assured these goals were identical from area to area, and mutually understood.

While this may be another instance of a concept not being originally Giap's, it was he who learned it, adapted it to a uniquely Vietnamese situation, and made it work to his and the Vietminh's ends better than it had ever been done before.

Because he was a communist and because he used unsavory and unethical techniques to achieve his ends, many western analysts prefer to think of Giap as a war criminal rather than an innovative operational artist. How original he was is debatable. What he certainly did was take Mao's theories of guerilla warfare and masterfully apply them to Vietnam's unique situation. In his words, he saw protracted warfare as a gradual altering of the balance of power by a long series of small tactical victories, each of which had been assured by achieving overwhelming local superiority, or declining battle. He saw protracted war occurring in three distinct phases:

- 1) Stage of Contention (predominantly organization and guerilla warfare)
- 2) Period of Equilibrium (complex mix of guerilla and mobile warfare)
- 3) Stage of Counteroffensive (mobile warfare with conventional forces including some positional warfare in late stages)<sup>18</sup>

This model is similar to Mao's three phased guerilla/protracted warfare which called for:

- 1) organization/terrorism phase; 2) guerilla warfare phase; 3) mobile conventional warfare phase.

The principal difference is Giap's reliance on regular forces much earlier in order to gain and hold new areas. Giap saw organization and limited guerilla activity and minor successes against an oppressor as integral to overall organization success. It gave the movement credibility and helped speed up the organization phase. Because of this reasoning, some analysts feel Giap's operational concepts more closely resemble those of Che Guevarra, wherein one can "create" or at least accelerate the conditions for revolution. Of equal note, Giap insisted that this phase targeted enemy morale and attrition, not the occupation of new territory. Actions were taken only when

success was certain. Gaining popular support and wearing down the enemy were paramount at this stage.

The second stage, equilibrium, has two aspects. Because of the guerilla activity, the balance of military power was slowly being altered, putting the rebel and government forces on a more equal footing. This was predicated on the assumption that a colonial foe would begin to lose the will to fight and would become reluctant to repeatedly reinforce losing engagements. Equilibrium also implied the emerging importance of conventional units to exploit the gains of the guerillas and begin making deliberate attacks aimed at gaining and holding geographic positions.

Finally, Giap's protracted war entered its last stage, the general counteroffensive where mobile warfare by large conventional forces predominates. The military balance, as confirmed by intelligence had been altered significantly to assure the insurgents overwhelming military superiority, if properly maneuvered. Logistics and support functions became much more important in this phase. Additionally, planning and preparation were much more detailed and difficult. The goal in this phase was to convince the enemy commander he could no longer win and further combat was futile. To Giap's credit, he acknowledged this was an oversimplified approach and that protracted warfare is a complex mix of guerilla and mobile warfare that can occur simultaneously throughout the country for an extended period of time. Such was the case in Tonkin in the early 1950's.

In analyzing Giap as an operational artist, it is useful to look briefly at three of his campaigns, the ouster of the French from their border fortresses, the ill-fated Red River Delta offensive, and Dien Bien Phu. As international intrigue and diplomacy swirled from 1946-50, with France stubbornly attempting to rebuild an anachronistic empire while the rest of Asia and the world polarized between communism and the west, General Giap was engaged in Phase I, Stage of

Contention, of his "People's War." In what Ho called a conflict between the elephant and the grasshopper, the Vietminh relied almost entirely on classic hit and run guerilla tactics to ambush road-bound French columns, gain time, build confidence, gain credibility with the people, and wear down the French.<sup>19</sup> Concurrently, they expanded their safe haven areas in the northern parts of Vietnam (Viet Bac) where the French seldom ventured. If the French had challenged them with a concerted effort, they would have had a difficult time holding on to their territorial gains. The French did not, and the Vietminh were able to extend and solidify their hold on the Viet Bac. When the French did foray out from their secure area in the Red River Delta and coastal areas of Annam, they would chase the Vietminh, never gaining decisive battle, punishing the villagers who seemed to be supporting the Vietminh, and then would withdraw --- seldom staying or trying to pacify and improve conditions outside a few key urban areas. This pattern filled the ranks of the Vietminh with volunteers and severely undermined the French.

By 1950, despite repeated warnings from their recently victorious Chinese advisers about "premature" offensive operations, Giap felt he was ready to move to Phase II, Period of Equilibrium, using his rapidly growing VPA to engage the French in carefully selected, isolated engagements with conventional forces. Guerilla warfare continued, of course, on a widespread basis throughout Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Giap felt this was a relatively low risk move to gain experience for his conventional forces and necessary to keep them focused on their ultimate goal of fighting and defeating the French in a conventional campaign.

For this first offensive campaign, Giap selected the area of French border fortresses along the northern frontier (Figure 2). Part of this area, Route 3 from Cao Bang to Lang Son, had been dubbed "the street without joy" by French soldiers because of the constant ambushes and harrassment they received from the Vietminh along this route. This choice was strategically



FIGURE 2



sound.<sup>20</sup> Eliminating French presence in these areas would fully secure the Viet Bac as a safe haven and also insure secure lines of supply from China. Unknown to the French, Giap was prepared to move to division-level operations, having organized his regular forces, now almost 100,000 strong, into five divisions of four regiments each. By western standards, these were still primitive units, with little engineering, artillery, communications, or other combat support assets. This was offset by the extensive service support he received from the population.

To test this new organization, Giap made limited objective attacks on French outposts around Lao Cai (Figure 3) in 1949. His only intent was to train his units and measure French reaction.<sup>21</sup> The French responded with both ground reinforcements by truck and highly mobile paratroopers, allowing Giap to develop countermeasures to minimize these threats.

Now ready to engage in sustained operations, Giap developed a campaign plan to defeat the well-protected border fortresses. Giap's sequencing of this campaign was very sound. In September 1950, he surrounded Cao Bang and That Khe to divert attention and then decisively engaged Dong Khe.<sup>22</sup> Anticipating French reactions, Giap had plans to deal with evacuation attempts, air resupply, or ground reinforcement. To freeze French reinforcements, Giap had a major offensive launched by guerilla forces throughout the country.

The overall result of this well-thought out, well-sequenced, well-resourced campaign was stunning. The Dong Khe assault was successful and the French reactions were very poorly thought out. Giap had brought together, mass, maneuver, and surprise focused on a well-defined objective and was able to maintain effective security for his forces before, during and after the assaults. Though he probably did not anticipate all of the French reactions and mistakes, he was in a position to take advantage of them. Much of his advantage was due to the isolation of the French garrisons, the benefits of operating logistically with interior lines, and the poor weather

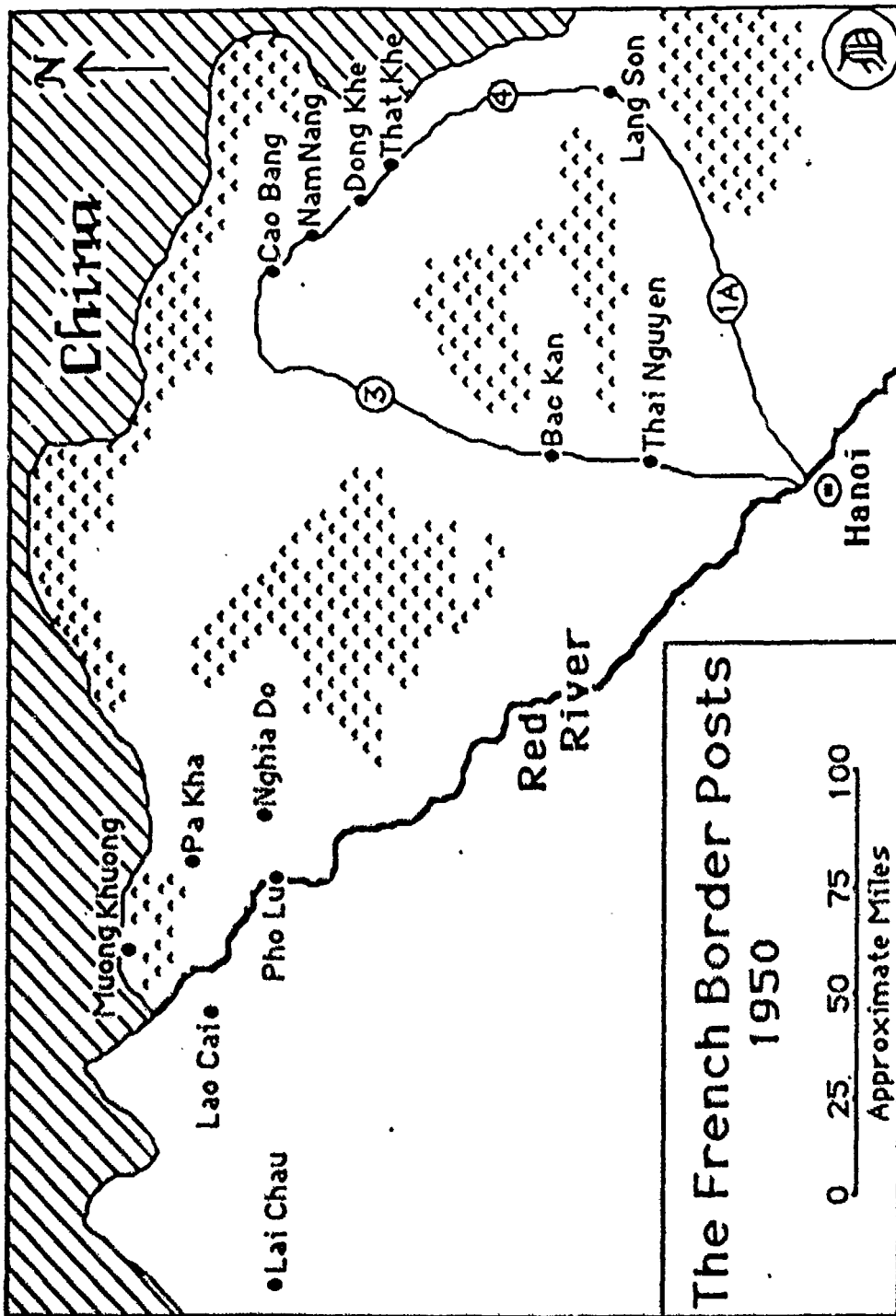


FIGURE 3

which negated French air superiority. It clearly was not happenstance that Giap chose this time and this place in order to secure these advantages.

The magnitude of the French defeat was not all Giap's design. Once defeat was certain, the panicked French forces stumbled into planned ambushes all along the "street without joy" and were cut to pieces. Whole units were wiped out and the few survivors who emerged from the jungles in mid-October were subhuman from the deprivation and terror they experienced.<sup>23</sup> Of the 10,000 men manning border outposts, 6,000 perished or were captured. The French high command was so shaken, it evacuated Lang Son long before it was even threatened and, in their haste, left Giap and the VPA with immense amounts of food, clothing, and medical supplies, plus tons of ammunition, 13 howitzers, 940 machine guns, 4,000 new submachine guns, over 8,000 rifles, 450 vehicles and thousands of gallons of gasoline.<sup>24</sup> Prior to this, the Vietminh were very poor in weapons and ammunition, often making their own crude weapons and ammunition in primitive factories in the Viet Bac. The stores of Lang Son and secure lines to China changed that part of the equation significantly. The French had turned Giap's tactical victory into a strategic victory by their actions, and lost the initiative in this war.

Emboldened by the great victory, Giap moved his forces towards Hanoi and the Red River Delta (Figure 4) to stage an offensive to force the French out of the Tonkin region of Vietnam. French colonial officials, so depressed by the Border Campaign, drew up plans to evacuate below the 18th parallel.<sup>25</sup> Giap's success had echoed all the way to Paris. The French government probably realized after the border debacle that victory was impossible without massive effort, i.e., money and manpower, which they were politically unwilling to make. A compromise to buy time was to assign their best field commander, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to replace the defeated and demoralized General Carpentier.

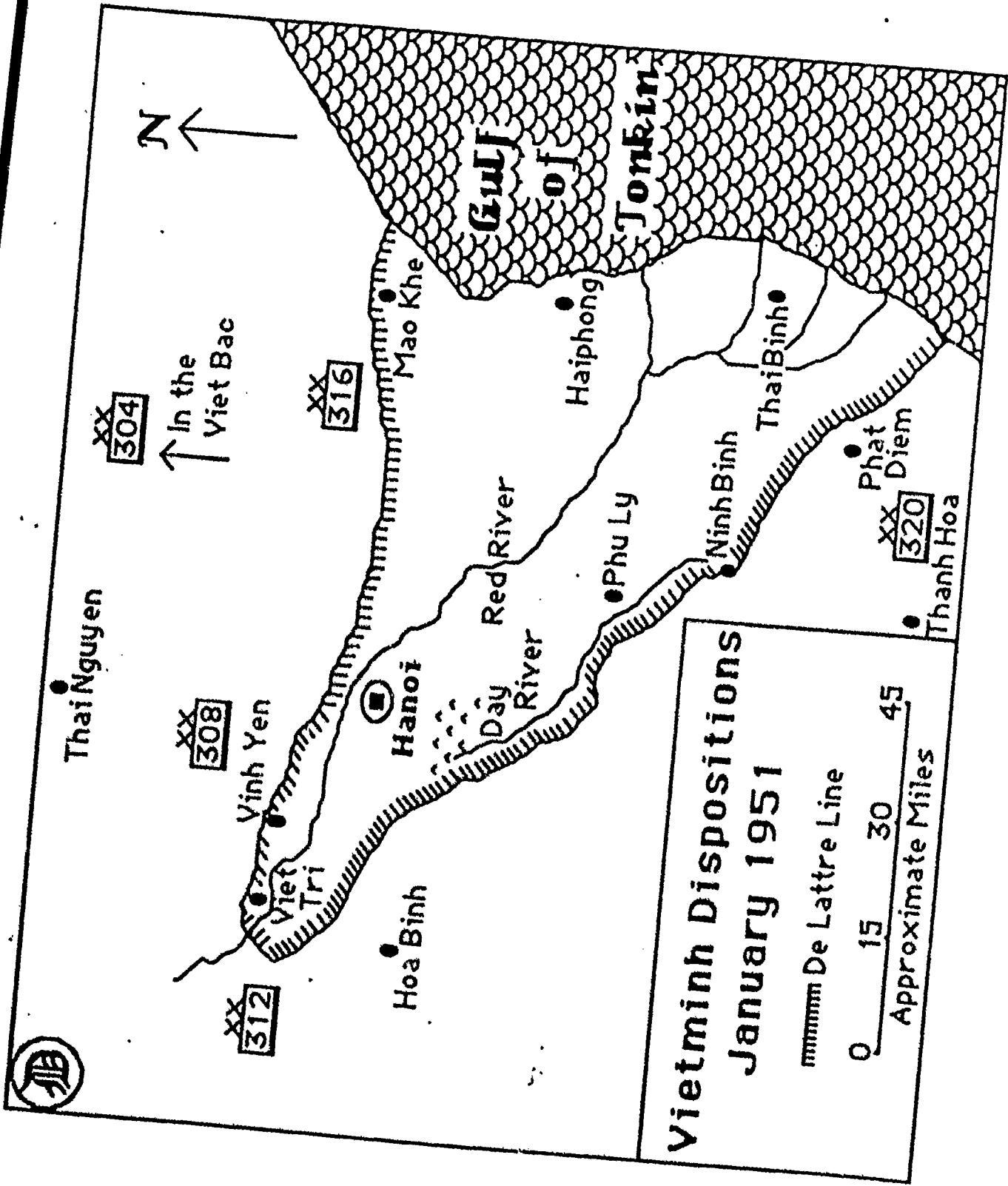


FIGURE 4

Some analysts question Giap's failure to press the initiative and attack the French immediately after his October 1950 successes. Perhaps he should have, but he had legitimate concerns. He had taken considerable losses at Dong Khe and needed to evaluate and rebuild his divisions. Also, the procurement of French equipment at Lang Son combined with receipt of new equipment from China had to be integrated, which required training. Despite false impressions to the contrary, Giap built a very disciplined, very well-trained force and did not embark on campaigns impulsively. He needed plans and preparation before proceeding. Each of Giap's five divisions required approximately 40,000 porters and a month of time to support it. The importance of the counteroffensive convinced him to go slowly and make sure he was ready. Finally, he had no prepared plans for an attack on the Delta area in late 1950. Planning took time and plans had to be approved by the Politburo. It was not until early 1951 that Giap was ready, and many say even this was too soon.

There were a series of three major battles around the Delta region over the next six months, and Giap was soundly defeated. General de Lattre developed a series of mutually supporting outposts which formed a "semi-permeable" triangular barrier around Hanoi, Haiphong and the principal rice growing area of the Tonkin region. General de Lattre had all the advantages of prepared positions, interior lines of supply and reinforcement, and combined arms, i.e., air, naval and ground assets. Despite these advantages and despite their caution, Ho and Giap knew that in order to sustain their movement and ultimately win, they would have to control the population and food resources of this area.

Inexplicably, Giap piecemealed his effort on an extended front, using uncoordinated attacks on exterior lines. Perhaps a slave to his own doctrine that said the enemy would defend and retreat in this stage, he apparently expected the undermanned French to quit and leave. They did not.

Giap may have committed the cardinal sin of underestimating his enemy. Attacking first at Vinh Yen, Giap hoped to overrun the town, trapping the French against a natural barrier and then precipitating evacuations of other outposts. He almost succeeded, but French reinforcements not fixed in place by supporting attacks, plus the air forces, using newly acquired napalm, finally drove the Vietminh back, after massive human wave assaults. Three days of battle decimated two of Giap's divisions, with up to 6,000 killed and over 8,000 wounded.<sup>26</sup> Assaults at Mao Khe and Day River in March and May met similar fates. Most surprisingly, Giap never used all of his assets simultaneously in a coordinated campaign, thus detracting from their potential effect.

This was not a well-conceived campaign. His objective was to break through the fortress line and eventually seize Hanoi. To do this, he had to defeat the French colonial army. None of these attacks was designed to do this. A coordinated effort might have achieved this. The most often cited reason for commencing the counteroffensive without coordinated attacks is the length of time needed to build up supplies for each division. Estimates suggest he could have been ready for a five division assault in late April or early May 1951. This was the beginning of monsoon season and considered unacceptable for military operations in the lowland areas. He took a risk, assuming time favored the French in this case, and lost. Even so, in spite of rough parity in ground forces, attacking prepared positions, and having to contend with air and naval assets, Giap's forces almost won in the Delta. Tenacity of the troops was a high point for both sides, but clearly Giap was "outcoached" in this confrontation. He underestimated the enemy, he failed to plan a coherent campaign, he failed to mass sufficient strength simultaneously, and he made some very bad decisions when things went wrong. It was a disaster for the neophyte general, but one from which he learned a great deal.

## VI. DIEN BIEN PHU

The defeats in the Red River Delta forced Giap to withdraw, rest, and refit. Additionally, he had to take stock of his overall strategy. Each early success had made the Vietminh underestimate the French and incorrectly assess the overall equilibrium. It was not a mistake Giap would make again. All of his success had occurred when he could draw French forces out on extended lines, isolate them and then bring overwhelming force to bear. While this strategy took a lot of time, Giap had been reminded that patience was a virtue in protracted war. He had plenty of time. The French did not.

In a series of battles in 1952, Giap attacked French outposts well away from the Delta region in western Vietnam, isolated them, and forced the French to give them up. He regained confidence and frustrated the French, but was unable to lure the French out of their power base in the Delta in significant numbers. It was increasingly obvious that he needed to do something more to lure the French out. Analysts still debate whether Giap's Laos campaign of April 1953 was intended to draw the French to Dien Bien Phu or not. Despite his intent, it did draw them there. It is clear that Giap threatened Laos to evoke a French response. He could not have known exactly where they would respond to protect Laos, but he obviously wanted it to be in an unsecure, isolated area at the far end of their air support capability. The French chose Dien Bien Phu, a small town in a highland valley that controlled the overland approaches to Laos.

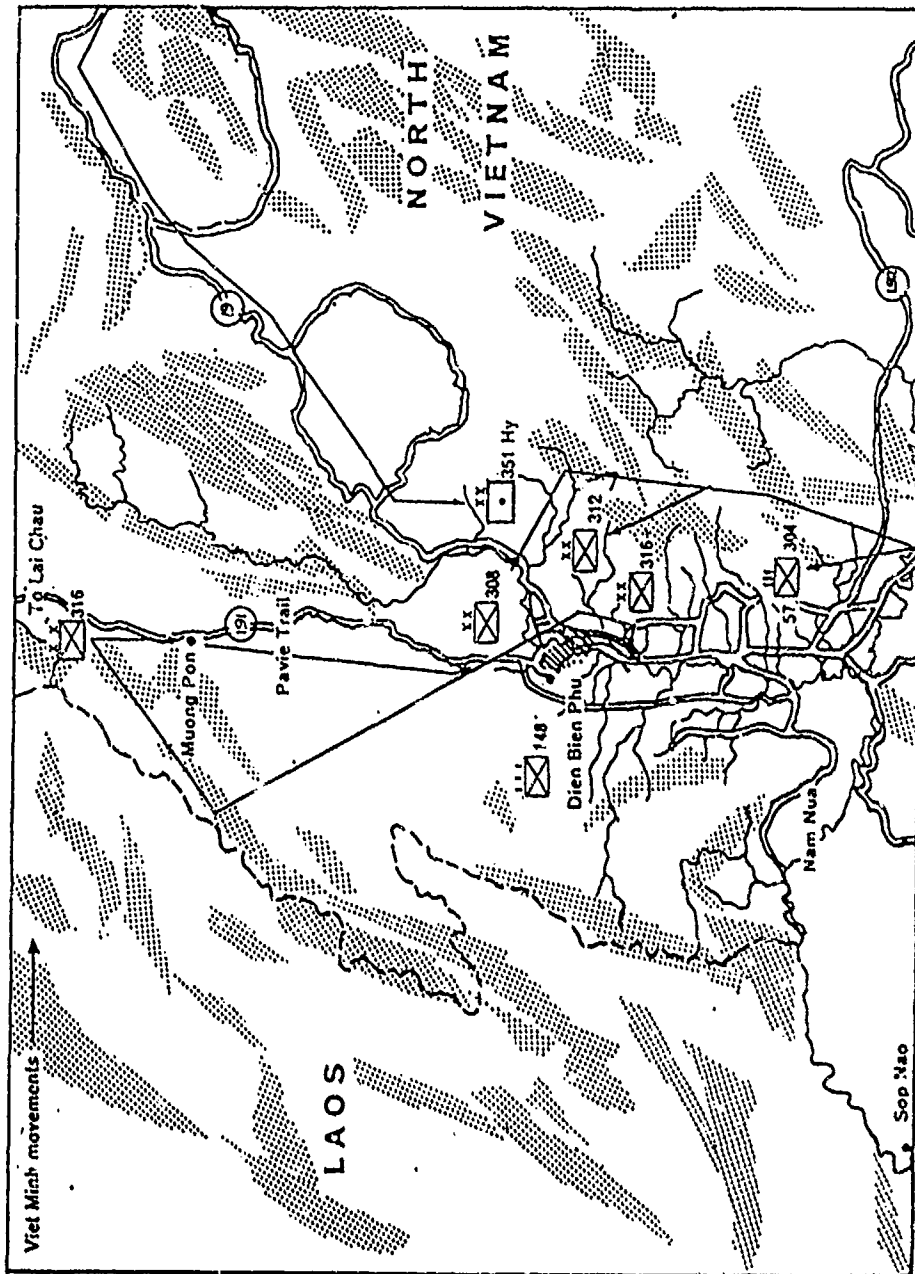
Volumes have been written about what happened to the French at Dien Bien Phu. It was such a stunning, decisive defeat that Dien Bien Phu has become a separate vocabulary word synonymous with catastrophe. Surprisingly, much is written about what the French did wrong, with less emphasis on what Giap and the VPA did right. Suffice to say, he did a great deal right,

displayed a great deal of flexibility (not seen in the Delta campaign) and handed the French the crushing, catastrophic defeat they had hoped to pin on him.

The French decision to seize Dien Bien Phu Airport, as the paratroopers called the battle, was a mistake which many recognized during the planning, but was ordered by the new French commander, General Navarre. The French wanted to protect Laos, but also thought this would lure Giap into a decisive set piece battle, a la Red River Delta, where they could defeat him in detail with barbed wire, artillery, and tanks. The French felt they could keep a large garrison resupplied by air from Hanoi, 300 kilometers away. The valley around Dien Bien Phu was ringed by lushly covered jungle mountains (Figure 5), but the area was so rugged and remote that few thought Giap could get significant amounts of artillery and ammunition to Dien Bien Phu, much less get it up on the heights and use it effectively. He did!

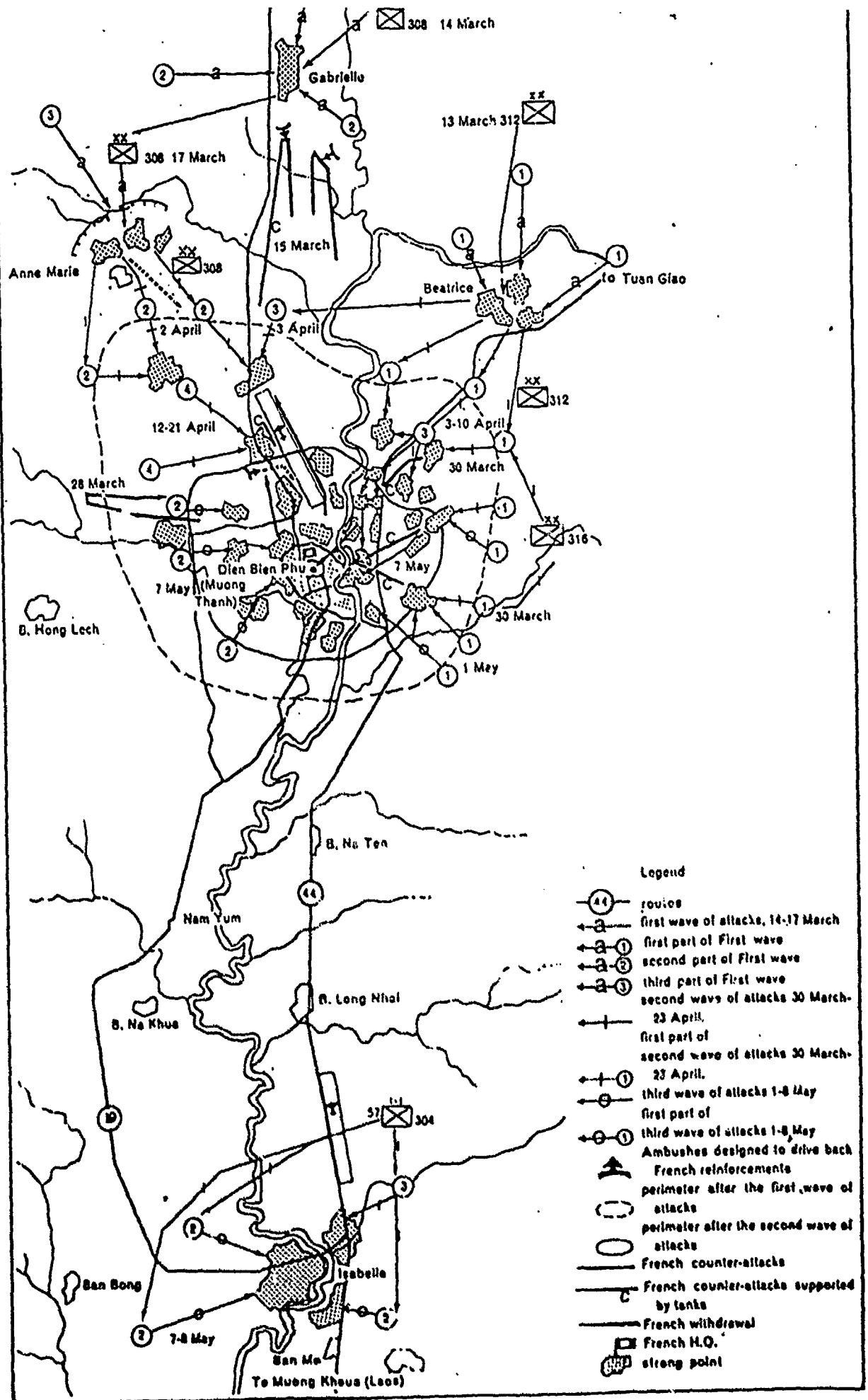
World events --- the end of the Korean Conflict, the death of Stalin, and the waning will of France --- led Ho and Giap to believe a decisive win would break the back of the French. To do this, Giap had to win the battle, but also annihilate or capture the entire garrison. His objectives and desired end state were well understood. The sequencing --- logistics buildup, artillery bombardment to eliminate the unprotected French artillery (the French artillery commander subsequently committed suicide) and render the airfield unusable, the siege, infantry assaults on successive fortified French positions (Figure 6), and, finally, trenching closer to small arms and mortar range was well-conceived. When human wave assaults failed to break through, he resorted to slower, but safer trenching and tunneling. Giap had learned the lessons from the Delta on how to use terrain and quick massing to minimize the advantage of air power and napalm. He got great intelligence on French positions early on from local agents, and he blinded the French commander as to his own intentions with a well-conceived counter-reconnaissance effort. Seeing this as a rare





Dien Bien Phu—Giap Concentrates his Forces, November 1953—January 1954

FIGURE 5



Dien Bien Phu—the Battle, 13 March—8 May 1954  
 FIGURE 6 - 29.2

opportunity, Giap spared no resources. He brought most of his Army to Dien Bien Phu and enjoyed a 5:1 advantage in manpower to assure victory. Simultaneously, he used guerilla forces throughout Vietnam to freeze potential French reinforcements in place.

The campaign plan did not work perfectly, but it worked. Despite the brutality and failure of human wave assaults at Vien Minh, Giap tried again. Without technology, it was one of his few combat options. They failed. This time, he changed tactics, as recounted by Colonel Bui Tin, a Vietminh veteran of Dien Bien Phu:

General Giap changed the entire plan. He stopped the attack and pulled back our artillery. Now the shovel became our most important weapon. Everyone dug tunnels and trenches under fire, sometimes hitting hard soil and advancing five or six yards a day. But, we gradually surrounded Dienbienphu with an underground network several hundred miles long, and we could tighten the noose around the French.<sup>27</sup>

This time, patience, overwhelming force, and the flexibility to modify tactics allowed this campaign to become a tremendous victory and the end of French will to fight in the Tonkin region of Vietnam. Over 13,000 French soldiers were killed or forced into captivity at Dien Bien Phu. French politicians gave up Tonkin and much of Annam to become North Vietnam during negotiations in Geneva a few weeks later. Many blamed General Navarre for the defeat and others blamed the Americans who refused to provide desperately needed air support at the eleventh hour. These decisions contributed to the defeat, but Giap clearly deserves credit for superior generalship in this campaign. The First Indochina War was over. Giap started this war as a novice, but finished as an accomplished general who had taught himself and many others the mysteries of operational art in revolutionary warfare.

## VII. LESSONS LEARNED

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, in particular, and the entire First Indochina War, in general, revealed a number of important truths about operational art, revolutionary war, and counterinsurgency. The lessons were there to be learned, but the fact that Giap and the Vietminh were "communists" who did not abide by commonly accepted rules of warfare made these lessons unworthy for study in the west. Furthermore, there was a tendency, especially in Washington, to blame the defeat on continuing French military incompetence. Few were willing to accept the possibility that underdeveloped Asians could teach the Allies, who won World War II, how to conduct warfare. A willingness to study the lessons of this war thoroughly might have helped forge a winning operational strategy in the Second Indochina War.

Clearly defined objectives that work against the enemy's center of gravity are essential. Giap's "People's War" strategy which slowly and patiently worked against French will was key. Small victories, increased confidence, and slowly expanding control worked because time favored Giap. Impatience and attacking objectives that did not directly support this overall strategy led to the debacle at the Red River Delta. The French never clearly defined their objectives and the Vietminh center of gravity. A strategic defensive that denied access to population centers and food while simultaneously providing real, people-oriented reform might have worked. People were looking for order, peace, and reform. The French supported the status quo and continued to look down their nose at the Vietnamese. The people were the Vietminh's center of gravity --- not the VPA. The Vietminh won the "hearts and minds" despite their often brutal, heavy handed approach, because the French never really tried.

Consistency became very important in this protracted war. The Vietminh were patient and knew, as long as the French refused to implement real, Vietnamese oriented reform, they had unlimited resources in terms of support from the people. Hence, they could maintain a consistent, operational style and objectives, and ultimately prevail. Ho Chi Minh had great confidence in General Giap and, despite the mistakes in 1951, maintained a steady course. The French obliged them and complicated their own problems by changing operational commanders with great frequency. Each had a better idea, and each came in fresh with little respect for the enemy he was fighting. There was no consistency in French operations.

By conventional wisdom, maneuver should have been a French strong suit. They had all the technological advantages with trucks, airplanes, helicopters, and paratroopers. The Vietminh took away these advantages with foot mobility, patience, and initiative. By attacking in multiple spots simultaneously, a mobile enemy could be frozen into temporary inaction. When he finally did reinforce, the Vietminh disengaged or ambushed the "would be" reinforcements in restrictive terrain, and then moved quickly to defeat the mobile forces or cut him off from his source of supply. Giap gave away this edge in the Delta, but relearned the lesson. Luring the French to Dien Bien Phu was a brilliant operational move of out-maneuvering his foe to bring him to a fight on unfavorable terms. Maneuver in this war was more patience, flexibility, initiative, tempo, and agility rather than speed and depth. Giap learned to disperse his forces, causing the enemy to disperse his forces, and then massed quickly at certain points to gain temporary advantage — then disappear. Over time, this greatly undermined French morale and gave the Vietminh an air of invincibility.

Intelligence in any military operation is critical. Protracted war is no exception and human intelligence takes on the most important role. Commanders become used to having reconnaissance

assets which gain and maintain contact so he has a picture of the battlefield. The French had very poor intelligence in operational areas because they never made an effort at pacification. The people in these areas were unreliable and often gave false information. Giap developed an extensive intelligence network. His biggest failures occurred in areas where tribal or religious loyalties were against the traditional Viet ethnic group. He was seldom surprised, and was able to consistently surprise the French, often moving massive amounts of supplies and people undetected. Giap reintroduced the idea of counter-reconnaissance to ground warfare, but the U.S. Army did not formally re-emphasize this concept in their doctrine until the mid-1980's. Giap stripped away the limited intelligence/reconnaissance assets the French had at Dien Bien Phu. This battle would never have been as decisive had Giap been unable to mask his movements and emplacement of artillery from the French.

Both Giap and the French experienced the tendency to underestimate their enemy. Initially Giap did not, realizing French forces were better trained and better equipped. Once the Americans began supplying the French, they were even more lethal. The French consistently underestimated the Vietminh. Stereotypes of a dull-witted, slow, ill-disciplined, poorly trained and equipped Vietnamese soldier persisted, even after some demoralizing defeats. Then the excuse became he fought unfairly. Field commanders realized they were fighting a discipline, well-trained, motivated army. The high command never seemed to get the message. Thinking he had gained the upper hand, Giap underestimated the French once --- in the Delta. He never did again and insured his subordinates were just as vigilant.

As stated earlier, the French never mounted a comprehensive counterinsurgency program. They went after the Vietminh and the VPA, but not their base of support. They should have included a comprehensive propaganda and interagency effort to discredit the Vietminh, initiate

reform and bring peace/order to the pacified areas --- and stay there. The French always left and the local politicians they supported were usually corrupt, disliked, and defenders of the status quo. They made only half-hearted efforts at developing alternative armies, police forces, and other instruments of order and reform. The Vietminh, the insurgents, did counterinsurgency better, bringing order and leadership, albeit sometimes coercive. Giap's "tiers of forces" concept proved effective not only on the battlefield, but in keeping peace and order in the Viet Bac. The fact that they brought order and consistently seemed to successfully harass and beat the French, even though not decisively, made the Vietminh credible and made the French look foolish and powerless. A broad-based, interagency counterinsurgency plan with a dependable pacification program must be part of an overall campaign plan in protracted war. It gives cohesion to an otherwise disjointed military operations plan.

Perhaps the most important lesson of this war was the role of logistics. It was the key to Giap's victory and the seeds of French defeat. Mobility is great, but it means nothing without secure lines of supply. Mobile forces cannot secure and hold objectives without sustainment. A superficial look at the Vietnamese way of war could lead one to the conclusion that the Vietminh conducted operations on a shoestring. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everyone of Giap's campaigns was predicated on a thorough, detailed logistical support plan. He delayed operations in the Delta because of logistics. His scheme for supporting 55,000 soldiers plus porters at Dien Bien Phu was very carefully thought out (Figure 7). The Vietminh did not have much, but they marshalled what they had very well. The French never effectively targeted their source of supply --- the people.

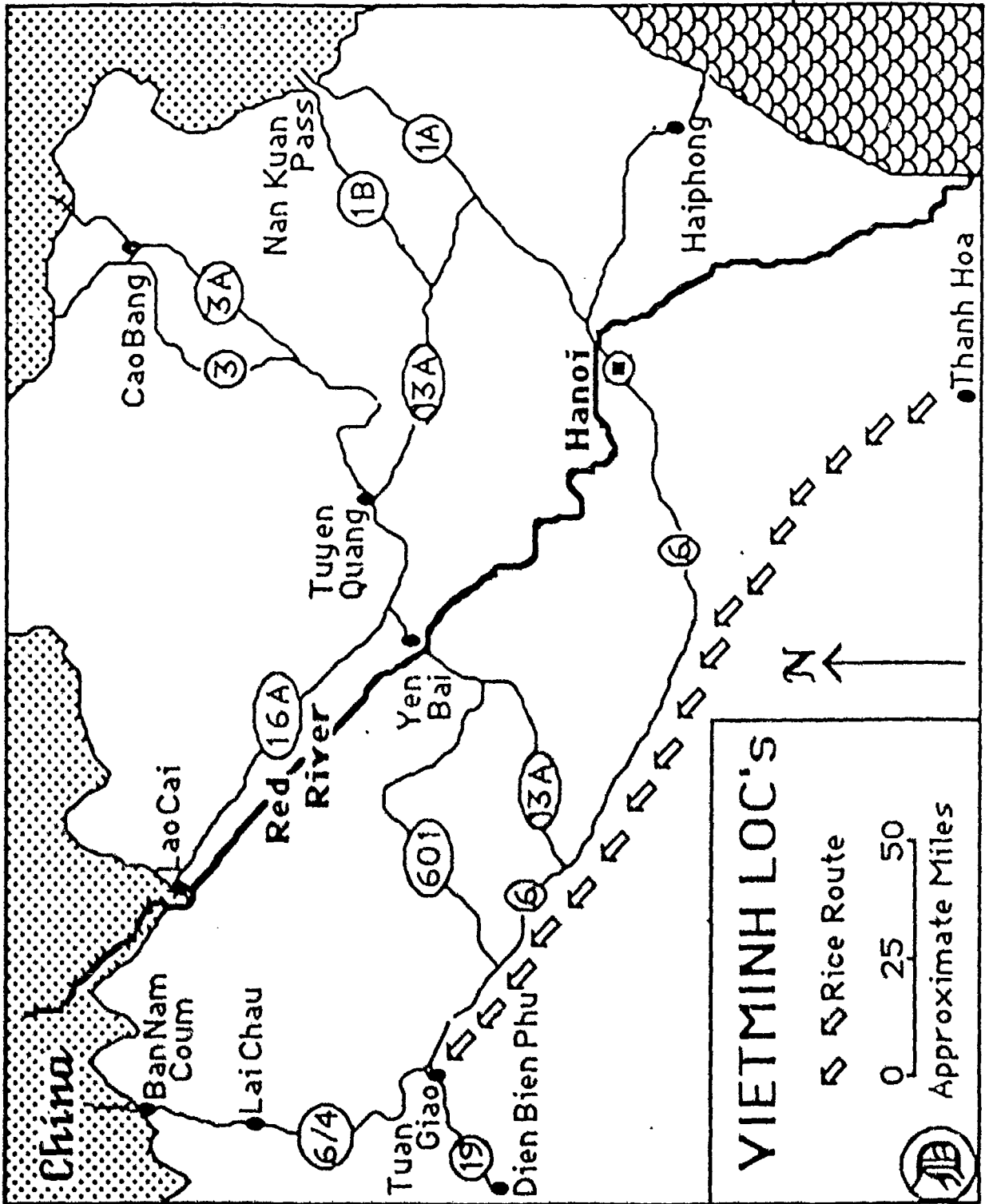


FIGURE 7



## VIII. GIAP'S LEGACY

As one reads through the history, the mistakes, and the lessons learned from the First Indochina War, the irony is clear. One could just as well be reading about the Second Indochina War --- the U.S. - North Vietnamese struggle from 1960-1973. The similarities are striking --- and depressing. The emphasis on military history in the U.S. Armed Forces since Vietnam is not coincidence.

Had the French won in Vietnam, Giap would probably have been tried as a war criminal. His human wave attacks, brutal treatment of prisoners, and coercive techniques amongst civilians are anathema to western value systems. His criminal disregard for human life will always diminish his stature. His name and reputation still evoke considerable emotion amongst Vietnam veterans. Giap was not interested in western stature, however. He was interested in independence for Vietnam and communism. Unfortunately, this has colored the seriousness with which his campaigns have been studied, and fomented bias which suggested that the French bungled victory away. Such is simply not the case. The bottom line is he conducted sound campaigns based on solid operational principles. He was human and made mistakes. He was smart and clever, and learned from his mistakes.

General Giap will be best remembered in history as a battlefield commander --- a tactician who won the battle of Dien Bien Phu. As we have discussed, he matured into a very capable campaigner. Evaluating him as a strategist is difficult because the line between military practitioner and policymaker was so blurred in the communist system. What he did do well was take the ideas of others and adapt them to the unique circumstances of Vietnam. He made Mao's theories come to life as pragmatic battle doctrine. He obviously understood the concept of campaigning from

having studied Napoleon and Lawrence. Reading his thoughts on "People's War" reveals his clear understanding of the Clausewitzian trinity --- people, military, government --- in the successful prosecution of war. Giap has sought to share his ideas through collections of papers published in Hanoi, but they are disjointed, dogmatic diatribes which camouflage and diminish his potential message to students of the operational art. An objective, self-critical analysis of his campaigns would be a meaningful contribution to military art.

While communism may be dead as an ideology, revolutionary warfare is not. Giap's adaptation of Mao's protracted warfare theories will long be studied and emulated by potential revolutionaries. The very name, "People's War" suggests its center of gravity is people, but France and the U.S. both failed to effectively fight the "hearts and minds" battle. In low intensity conflict, this battle is just as critical to the overall campaign plan. We would be well-served to periodically review Giap's campaigns as we fine tune our own low intensity conflict doctrine.

While Giap's contribution to operational art is considerable, most of it is indirect. His detractors lament the fact he has written little of military significance. Like many great practitioners, however, the operational value lies in studying his actions, not his words. His greatest contribution is in the introspection he caused in the U.S. Armed Forces. The decade after Vietnam led to an explosion of innovative military thinking focused on operational art and campaign planning. Principles of campaign planning are being codified:

- + Provides broad concepts of operations and sustainment to achieve strategic military objectives in a theater of war or theater of operations; serves as a basis for all other planning and clearly defines what constitutes success.
- + Provides an orderly schedule of strategic military decisions; displays the commander's vision and intent.
- + Orients on the enemy's center of gravity.
- + Phases a series of related major operations.
- + Composes subordinate forces and designates command relationships.
- + Provides operational direction and tasks to subordinates.
- + Synchronizes combined and joint arms into a cohesive and synergistic whole.<sup>28</sup>

Would Giap get high marks for his campaigns if evaluated according to these principles? Probably not. His operational success, however, was the catalyst for these principles --- the shove in the right direction. General Vo Nguyen Giap's legacy is the pragmatic revolutionary war doctrine he formulated and successfully executed, the insights he provided on campaigning in a slow-paced, low intensity conflict, and the revolution in operational thinking he precipitated.

## ENDNOTES

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