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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**

**NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**DIEN BIEN PHU 1954, TET OFFENSIVE 1968, & CLAUSEWITZ:**

**AN ANALYSIS**

**CORE COURSE TWO ESSAY**

**LTC JOHN R. COMBS/CLASS OF 95  
COURSE 2: FOUNDATIONS IN MILITARY  
THOUGHT AND STRATEGY**

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COLONEL BRUCE A. HARRIS  
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# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE <b>1995</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1995 to 00-00-1995</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Dien Bien Phu 1954, TET Offensive 1968, &amp; Clausewitz: An Analysis</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>12</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

THE WHITE HOUSE

Washington

1 March 1968

NATIONAL SECURITY ACTION MEMORANDUM NO. XX

TO: PRESIDENT, NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

SUBJECT: Analysis of Dien Bien Phu and TET Offensive of 1968

1. Enclosed is a typed transcript of the president's memorandum to the NSC. Request you assign as you deem appropriate. Suspense back to this office is NLT 3 March 1968.
2. Full Text of President Johnson's handwritten note to National Security Advisor:

"I am getting more and more heat over this TET Counter-Offensive that the VC [Vietnamese Communists] launched against our boys earlier this year. The press is referring to it as 'our Dien Bien Phu.' What I remember about Dien Bien Phu is that the French got their tail kicked and gave up North Vietnam to the Communists. In TET we took some losses, but we surely didn't leave with our tail between our legs. And we are still there. What am I missing?

Also the press keeps referring to and quoting Clausewitz. Hell, I even got a copy of his book - hard as hell to read, much less understand.

BOTTOM LINE - I need an honest, close hold, assessment of any linkage between DBP [Dien Bien Phu] and TET. Also need some info on what this Clausewitz is trying to say.

Couple of points - Don't send me in some highfalutin doctoral thesis from one of the whiz kids. Likewise, don't try to distill it down to one of those half page executive summaries I hate to get. Get one of those faculty at the NWC to do it - hell, better yet get a student to do it. I'm liable to: (1) get it sooner and (2) get what I asked for, not what you all think I want to read."

(signed)

LBJ

3. Point of contact - Executive Secretary, National Security Council.

**INTRODUCTION:** In response to the President Johnson's request, enclosed is a comparative analysis between the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the recently concluded TET Offensive of 1968, hereafter referred to as "TET 68," in South Vietnam. On the tactical level of war the two operations could not be more dissimilar. The former was an outright tactical defeat of a French strong point by the Vietminh, while the latter was a defeat of a large number of South Vietnamese Communists by the U.S. Forces. However, it is on the strategic level of war, in support of strategic national policy formulation and execution, that the lessons of Dien Bien Phu and TET 68 merge.

**BACKGROUND:** This section will provide a brief historical background on the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the recent TET 68 Counter-Offensive and an overview of Clausewitz.

The French had been embroiled in Indochina since the end of the Second World War. In March of 1945, Vietnam, the largest and most traditionally independent territory in French Indochina, declared its independence.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of 1953, the French Commanding General in Indochina began a fateful operational mission to force the Vietminh to come to a classic decisive battle. Known as the Navarre Plan, the French established *moles d'amarrages* or "mooring points," from which they could fight the

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<sup>1</sup>Melaine Billings-Yun. Decision Against the War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954. (New York: Columbia Press, 1988) 2.

Vietminh in what is now North Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> One of the mooring points was located at Dien Bien Phu. The French, hoping to lure the Vietminh into a classic set piece, large-unit battle, believed that Dien Bien Phu would be the linchpin.

Dien Bien Phu, located in a broad valley, offered the French both strategic central position and proximity to two airfields that would support armor and airforce reinforcements in its defense. The location of Dien Bien Phu was approximately ten to twelve kilometers from the crests of surrounding mountains. The key French assessment was that for the enemy to employ artillery, it would have to be on the front slopes and, therefore, quickly silenced by the superior French artillery counterfires and/or airstrikes.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the French believed that the Vietminh could not move a sufficient enough force, much less keep it logistically supplied, into the area to threaten Dien Bien Phu.

The Vietminh, under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap, moved more than thirty-three battalions (49,500 combatants) and 55,000 support troops into the area surrounding Dien Bien Phu. Also, over 100,000 transport workers provided the logistical brawn to support the attack. The contributions of these

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<sup>2</sup>Stanley K. Karnow. Vietnam - A History (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 205.

<sup>3</sup>William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981) 158.

transport workers cannot be overemphasized; they transported hundreds of artillery pieces, over two hundred miles on the Ho Chi Minh trail, literally piece by piece. On 13 March 1954, Giap attacked.

The devastating effects of the Giap's artillery destroyed both the airfields at Dien Bien Phu and the French artillery. Giap's soldiers dug miles of extensive trenches to cover their approach and to protect them from the superior French firepower during the attacks on the French defenses. The French attempted to reinforce Dien Bien Phu by air with both soldiers and supplies. However, the combined effects of the weather and Vietminh anti-aircraft fire made the effort futile. In spite of 56 days of incredibly heroic actions by her defenders, on 7 May the French outpost at Dien Bien Phu fell. The French loss included 1,500 killed, 4,000 wounded and over 10,000 captured. The Vietminh lost an estimated 10,000 killed and 15,000 wounded.<sup>4</sup>

At the tactical level, the recently concluded TET 68 offensive bears little resemblance to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The South Vietnamese Communists suffered overwhelming losses in their attacks without achieving any significant tactical advantage or victory. Our abilities to mass and to reinforce, where necessary, turned the initial surprise and local gains secured by the South Vietnamese Communists into defeat.

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<sup>4</sup>Duiker 161-162.

The repeated references to "Clausewitz" by the press refers to Carl von Clausewitz, 1780-1832, a Prussian-born, military theorist. Clausewitz wrote the frequently quoted, and less fully understood, On War, between 1816-1832. One of the key aspects of Clausewitz's work lies in his attempt to outline the fundamental nature of war. He, moreover, is one of the first military theorists to articulate that "War, therefore, is an act of policy . . . . The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation for their purpose."<sup>5</sup>

**ANALYSIS:** The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, while tactically disastrous, transcended to a strategic failure of the French national strategy policy in Indo-China. The French government, or more accurately governments, never clearly articulated to the military or to the French people the end-state of their political or military efforts in Vietnam. Clausewitz reminds us time and again that war is:

a remarkable trinity - composed of primordial violence hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.<sup>6</sup>

Although the trinity can be focused through military operations as the French and the United States did, the critical

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<sup>5</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 87.

<sup>6</sup>Clausewitz 89.

aspect is the will of the people and/or the government within the trinity to continue with a military strategy in the execution of national policy. That will failed in both the French Government and in the French people.

The French Government's failure was due to its inability to articulate a clear national policy with an attainable end for the military to execute. The French military, in part due to the vacillating, inconsistent or simply non-existent political policy, carried on a military strategy of attrition with little substance in the form of strategic goals.

Failing to articulate the French national interest at stake in Indo-China, the French government could not sustain the will of the French people. The French did attempt to garner popular support through the institution of a national draft to support the war. However, as the war losses mounted, compounded by the extended duration of the war, the French populous grew weary of supporting a colonial military entanglement that consistently took a toll on its most precious treasure - its male youth. Interestingly, the French losses at Dien Bien Phu amounted to less than four per cent of their total force in all of Vietnam, yet it was a stunning strategic defeat.

The United States appears to be on the same road of ambiguity with respect to national policy goals. Articulating



the rationale for fighting in Vietnam is becoming increasingly difficult. The press continue to report our losses and our apparent inability to bring stability to the South Vietnamese government and/or to control the counter-insurgency operations going on in South Vietnam. While we have likewise been supporting the war with the draft, we have failed to stiffen our resolve by mobilizing National Guard or Reserve Forces to support our operations in South Vietnam. We, as the French before us, are resolved to suffer the slow bleeding of a nation. But, unlike the French, our bleeding will be portrayed in the media each day in seemingly more graphic detail.

Whether or not the North Vietnamese Communists are aware of it, the press will wittingly (or unwittingly) be the gateway to our Nation's will. Like the French, our will, or the lack thereof, has become our *center of gravity*. Clausewitz defines the center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."<sup>7</sup> The support of the American people is critical to our mission in South Vietnam. Should we lose that support, and it appears that we are doing so, our fate in Vietnam will be compared to that of the French in 1954. Our center of gravity is weakened by our inability to extricate ourselves, militarily or politically, from this quagmire. Whatever the moral impetus, it may be that, as General George C. Marshall reflected at the end of World War II, "a democracy cannot fight a

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<sup>7</sup>Clausewitz 595-596.

Seven Years War."<sup>8</sup>

We, like the French, are enamored with the sophistication of technology over the moral aspects of war. While not discounting the technological advantage we possess over our adversary, we are embroiled in an counter-insurgency war and are hoping that high technology will overcome the moral aspects of the battle. Clausewitz states that "will is a moral quantity . . . and cannot be classified or counted."<sup>9</sup> He further believes that "critics usually exclude all moral qualities from strategic theory, and only examine material factors."<sup>10</sup> Without the will to use our technological advantage in Vietnam, specifically in North Vietnam, that advantage alone will not prevail. Quantitatively, there is no doubt that we should be winning the war in South Vietnam - so why aren't we?

**CONCLUSION:** The comparison between Dien Bien Phu and TET 68 is at the strategic level. The French experience in Vietnam and, specifically, in the battle of Dien Bien Phu underlines the basics of Clausewitz's military theory. The French military attempted a military solution without a coherent national policy

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<sup>8</sup>Maurice Matloff, "Allied Strategy in Europe, 1939-1945," Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to Nuclear Age ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 681.

<sup>9</sup>Clausewitz 184.

<sup>10</sup>Clausewitz 178.

as a foundation. In doing so, they failed to grasp that the will of the French people and government was vital to their mission. The Vietminh took advantage of the opportunity created by the tactical defeat of Dien Bien Phu and turned it into a French strategic defeat. The Vietminh struck the French center of gravity - the French national will. Like the French, the United States finds itself in a long-term commitment to which waning national interest will impact on our national will.

The United States has embarked on the same course set by the French over 20 years ago. Clausewitz said that "war is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force".<sup>11</sup> The act of force must be toward a goal, otherwise it is merely action for action's sake. However, Clausewitz warns us that in some instances "the political objective will not provide a suitable military objective. In that event, another military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose and symbolize it in the peace negotiations".<sup>12</sup> Without strategic goals or a clear idea of the political end-state, militaries throughout the ages have always defaulted to the destruction of the enemy forces as the military end-state. While often successful, history is replete with the military's ability to win the war tactically, coupled with the nation's ability to lose the peace strategically. For if the United States continues on its

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<sup>11</sup>Clausewitz 77.

<sup>12</sup>Clausewitz 81.

current course of a war of attrition, we run the risk of failing to link the means (military) effectively with our goal (national policy) to create an end in Vietnam. Clausewitz's writings, while over 130 years old, still ring true today.

" . . . the less intense the motives, the less the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result, war will be driven further from its natural course, the political object will be more and more at variance with the aim of ideal war, and the conflict will seem increasingly *political* in character."<sup>13</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION:** We must articulate an attainable political policy objective in South Vietnam. We must translate that political policy objective into a strategic military policy in Vietnam.

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<sup>13</sup>Clausewitz 88.

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