

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2
1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Vietnamese Perspective on Tet
From the North Vietnamese, Communist perspective

Cable News Network interview with Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/11/interviews/giap/>

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap is perhaps the most important figure in the early history of communist Vietnam -- with the exception of Ho Chi Minh. At the end of World War II, Ho named Giap commander in chief of the Viet Minh forces fighting French colonial rule. Giap orchestrated the defeat of the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1953 and remained minister of defense of the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He was the chief North Vietnamese military leader in the subsequent war against U.S. forces. This interview, which was conducted in May 1996, has been translated from Vietnamese.

On the battle of Dien Bien Phu:

The Dien Bien Phu campaign is a great and first victory of a feudal colonial nation, whose agricultural economy is backward, against the great imperialist capitalist which has a modern industry and a great army. Thus, it means a lot to us, to people all over the world, and to other countries. This is also how Ho Chi Minh saw it.

We see the Dien Bien Phu victory as the victory [over] the French army and [over] the intervention of the Americans --because in the Dien Bien Phu campaign, 80 percent of the war expenditures were spent by the Americans. The Americans had their hands in it. So the Dien Bien Phu defeat was a defeat for both the French and the Americans. But whether the Americans had drawn the lessons from that, I don't think so. That's why the Americans continued in South Vietnam. ...

When we received news of the Dien Bien Phu victory, everyone practically jumped up in the air, they were so happy about it. But Ho Chi Minh said that this is only victory of the first step: we have yet to fight the Americans. It was very clear then.

On the United States' involvement in Vietnam:

In 1945, some Americans parachuted into our war zone [for a] meeting [with] our late President Ho Chi Minh. ... Back then, President Roosevelt's attitude was that the U.S. did not want to see events like the war with France coming back to Indochina, but later this



attitude was changed. After the August Revolution in 1945, the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. could have been good, and we wished that it had been good.

Then only the intelligent people or those with vision and wisdom, such as Eisenhower, ... saw the impracticality of the [domino] theory. And any mistakes were due to following the domino theory. They thought that if the theory was put into practice here, it would become the pivotal location for [preventing] the spread of communism to the whole Southeast Asia. So Vietnam was made the central location to check the expansion of communism, and this was what President Kennedy believed, and it was mistake. ...

The Americans sent advisers to each and every division in the South Vietnamese [army] before 1965. In 1965, they started to commit big forces. We discussed among ourselves in the Politburo whether at that point it was ... a limited war. We decided that it was already a limited war. We discussed it in the Politburo that with America bringing in gigantic forces was to carry out a new campaign, with the American forces committed, it was not good for America but it would be very hard for us to fight. The struggle would be very fierce but we already concluded that we would win the war. ...

On fighting technologically superior U.S. forces:

When American combat forces were committed, it was a myth that we could not fight and win because they were so powerful. ... [We survived] because of our courage and determination, together with wisdom, tactics and intelligence. During the attacks of B-52s, we shot down a few B-52s and captured documents. One of them was a order by the [U.S.] air command about the targets to be bombed in and around Hanoi and the positions of [our] forces. Some [of the figures] were correct, [but] some were wrong because of our deception [measures]. And our conclusion was that with such anti-air-power measures, the B-52 is not an effective way to fight. ...

We had to resort to different measures, some of which are quite simple, like hiding in man-holes and evacuating to the countryside. And we fought back with all our forces and with every kind of weapon. We fought with anti-aircraft artilleries and with small guns, even though [it was] sometimes solely with the strength of our local force. An 18-year-old girl once said that she followed routes every day and studied the patterns of American flights and when they would attack. I told her that she is a philosopher to understand that, because only philosophers talk about principles. Later she used small gun to shoot down an aircraft from a mountainside. That is an example of the military force of the common people. ... We had ingenuity and the determination to fight to the end.

I appreciated the fact that they had sophisticated weapon systems but I must say that it was the people who made the difference, not the weapons. There was also a human factor involved. [As to] whether they were tempted to use nuclear weapons during the war: there was a time during the Dien Bien Phu campaign in which the Americans were going to use nuclear weapons, and this is back in 1954 during the Eisenhower era. We were also



aware of possible use of nuclear weapons and we were prepared for it. But whether the Americans could really use nuclear weapons was a question of international politics, and it also depended on the American allies. But looking at the intertwined forces, as the situation was, the result [of a nuclear blast] would not be good, and the Americans had to think hard. If nuclear weapons were used on locations where the Vietnamese troops were concentrated, it [would] also [affect] American troops.

On the Ho Chi Minh Trail:

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a very extensive system; it started with a trail but later became a road. Many roads, actually: the Western road system and the Eastern road systems, criss-crossing here and there. And also there were the extensive systems of gas pipelines and communications lines, and routes on rivers and across the sea. We did everything possible to keep the whole system going. I visited many important points which were subjected to many B-52 bombings 23 out of 24 hours a day; we had many teams working toward maintaining the operation, including a team made up of women who had to use iron rings to defuse the [unexploded] bombs. ...

We made big sacrifices. I visited a dozen girls who maintained the route in Dong Lap of Nghe An Province; they showed me how they invented camouflage to cover the lamps so that those in vehicles can see, but the planes could not see. They urged us to move fast; and they all died during the bombing. There was danger of the trail being cut off, but it never really was cut off. With a long procession of vehicles, and with the bombing from the B-52s, it was very difficult, but we had to use both courage and wisdom. There are some routes that the Americans did not know about, but if they had used a telescope they would have seen the routes quite clearly. But we did not use those routes. We used some secret smaller trails as a detour and we went during the day.

On the Tet Offensive:

The Tet Offensive is a long story. ... It was our policy, drawn up by Ho Chi Minh, to make the Americans quit. Not to exterminate all Americans in Vietnam, [but] to defeat them.

It could be said [Tet] was a surprise attack which brought us a big victory. For a big battle we always figured out the objectives, the targets, so it was the main objective to destroy the forces and to obstruct the Americans from making war. But what was more important was to de-escalate the war -- because at that time the Americans were escalating the war -- and to start negotiations. So that was the key goal of that campaign. But of course, if we had gained more than that it would be better.

And [after Tet] the Americans had to back down and come to the negotiating table, because the war was not only moving into the cities, to dozens of cities and towns in South Vietnam, but also to the living rooms of Americans back home for some time. And



that's why we could claim the achievement of the objective.

On the U.S. leadership during the war:

In general, I must say they were the most intelligent people, with certain talents such as military, political and diplomacy skills. They were intelligent people. That was the first point that I want to say. The second point I want to say is that they knew little about Vietnam and her people. They didn't understand our will to maintain independence and equality between nations even though these are stated in President Jefferson's manifestation. And so they made mistakes. They did not know the limits of power. ... No matter how powerful you are there are certain limits, and they did not understand it well. ...

The people in the White House believed that Americans would definitely win and there is not chance of defeat. There is a saying which goes, "If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you would win every single battle." However, the Americans fought the Vietnamese, but they did not know much about Vietnam or anything at all about the Vietnamese people. Vietnam is an old nation founded in a long history before the birth of Christ. ... The Americans knew nothing about our nation and her people. American generals knew little about our war theories, tactics and patterns of operation. ...

During the war everyone in the country would fight and they [would] do so following the Vietnamese war theory. We have a theory that is different from that of the Russians and that of the Americans. The Americans did not understand that. They did not know or understand our nation; they did not know our war strategies. They could not win. How could they win? As our president said, there was nothing more precious than independence and freedom. We had the spirit that we would govern our own nation; we would rather sacrifice than be slaves.

Now that the normalization between our two countries have been established, we hope for better relations, but it should be based on equality. Otherwise, if America is at advantage simply because she is richer, it will be unacceptable for us. Now we hope that American leaders can understand Vietnam and her people better.

