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The Tet Offensive and Invasion of Cambodia: The History of the Vietnam War's Most Important Campaigns

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes accounts of the fighting *Includes a bibliography for further reading The Vietnam War could have been called a comedy of errors if the consequences weren't so deadly and tragic. In 1951, while war was raging in Korea, the United States began signing defense pacts with nations in the Pacific, intending to create alliances that would contain the spread of Communism. As the Korean War was winding down, America joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, pledging to defend several nations in the region from Communist aggression. One of those nations was South Vietnam. Before the Vietnam War, most Americans would have been hard pressed to locate Vietnam on a map. South Vietnamese President Diem's regime was extremely unpopular, and war broke out between Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam around the end of the 1950s. Kennedy's administration tried to prop up the South Vietnamese with training and assistance, but the South Vietnamese military was feeble. A month before his death, Kennedy signed a presidential directive withdrawing 1,000 American personnel, and shortly after Kennedy's assassination, new President Lyndon B. Johnson reversed course, instead opting to expand American assistance to South Vietnam. By the end of 1967, with nearly half a million troops deployed, more than 19,000 deaths, and a war that cost $2 billion a month and seemed to grow bloodier by the day, the Johnson administration faced an increasingly impatient and skeptical nation. Early in 1968, a massive coordinated Viet Cong operation - the Tet Offensive - briefly paralyzed American and South Vietnamese forces across the country, threatening even the American embassy compound in Saigon. With this, the smiling mask slipped even further, inflaming the burgeoning antiwar movement. Although American soldiers didn't lose a battle strategically during the campaign, the Tet Offensive made President Johnson non-credible and historically unpopular, to the extent that he did not run for reelection in 1968. By then, Vietnam had already fueled the hippie counterculture, and anti-war protests spread across the country. On campuses and in the streets, some protesters spread peace and love, but others rioted. In August 1968, riots broke out in the streets of Chicago, as the National Guard and police took on 10,000 anti-war rioters during the Democratic National Convention. By the end of the decade, Vietnam had left tens of thousands of Americans dead, spawned a counterculture with millions of protesters, and destroyed a presidency, and more was still yet to come. As the results of the Tet Offensive made clear, American forces were hamstrung by political constraints and a wide range of self-imposed limitations, and the United States struggled to deal with the greater strategic nimbleness of the North Vietnamese during the late 1960s. The tremendous power of the American military, blending technological strength and professional skill, gave the Americans the advantage in many, though of course not all, tactical encounters. On the strategic and operational level, however, the North Vietnamese held many of the trump cards. Constrained by a heavily defensive strategy, the U.S. found itself mostly forced to respond to the North's initiatives, and a reactive strategy placed even an extremely potent combatant at a severe disadvantage. This strategic situation changed briefly, however, during the 1970 Cambodian Campaign, when American and South Vietnamese forces crossed the border into Cambodia and brought the battle to the previously immune enemy there. The Tet Offensive and Invasion of Cambodia: The History of the Vietnam War's Most Important Campaigns chronicles the most influential campaigns of the war and the effects it had on both sides.

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