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## The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War

Heath Twichell

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## 164 Naval War College Review

resources to the development of port defenses.

By the turn of the century and following the defeat of the Russian fleet at the Battle of Tsushima in 1904, Wellington's security perceptions had changed considerably in response to the need to protect the ever-precarious imperial interests. New Zealand's naval and military establishments were reformed during this period so that Wellington could deploy trained and relatively well-equipped forces abroad for imperial duty. The move to reform New Zealand's forces just prior to the First World War is well described by focusing on the visionary minister of defence, Colonel Sir James Allen, an important personality that clearly calls out for an extensive biography.

Overall, the scholarship of this work is excellent, as is its clear writing. However, as a government publication, though the book is well endowed with photographs (and even diagrams!), public penury is seen in the ever more common practice of employing endnotes, and incomplete ones at that. This reviewer is pained to make this point, since McGibbon's last work, *Blue-Water Rationale: The Naval Defence of New Zealand, 1914-1942* (1981), which was also published by the Government Printer, was of such quality and completeness as to recall a time when such craftsmanship was the norm in publishing. Alas, the exigencies of finite government finances have reached even the distant antipodes.

Notwithstanding this *cri de coeur*, *The Path to Gallipoli* should be required reading for those with even a cursory interest in New Zealand history, let alone those who wish to understand the basis for modern-day security policy in that country.

THOMAS-DURELL YOUNG  
U.S. Army War College

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Wirtz, James J. *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991. 290pp. \$34.95

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the decisive battle of the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, the offensive became the dividing line between the periods of U.S. escalation and withdrawal. At home, the surprise of its occurrence discredited the Johnson administration's conduct of the war, which resulted in the president's decision not to run for reelection. For many Americans, Tet '68 also marked the beginning of their disillusionment with overseas military intervention and ever-larger defense budgets justified in the name of anticommunism—a reaction commonly known as “the Vietnam syndrome.”

Yet at the battlefield level, the outcome of the Tet Offensive was a resounding U.S. victory. To compensate for and neutralize our side's superiority in firepower, mobility, communications, and logistics, the communists planned for the offensive's countrywide wave of surprise attacks to be the signal for a

vast popular uprising against the government of South Vietnam. When the general uprising fizzled, it was Hanoi's turn to be surprised. Without this added distraction to contend with, the United States and its allies quickly regained the upper hand, inflicting horrendous losses on the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in the process.

Hanoi's miscalculation was based on the overly optimistic assessment of the war weariness and political disaffection of the South Vietnamese people. That intelligence failure was a costly one. However, time would turn the communists' tactical defeat into a strategic victory. What laid the basis for this stunning reversal was another intelligence failure, of far greater magnitude and consequence: American inability to discern the center of gravity of the enemy's main attack in the impending offensive until it was too late. How and why nearly all of the diverse and sophisticated agencies of our intelligence community so mistook what Hanoi had in mind is the subject of this fascinating book. Combining the disciplines of history and political science with insights from psychological theory, James J. Wirtz has produced both a pathbreaking analysis and a cautionary tale.

Dr. Wirtz researched and wrote most of this book as a pre-doctoral fellow at Harvard's Center for International Affairs, where he made excellent use of its superb staff and resources. Sprinkled with names like Samuel P. Huntington, Walt Rostow, and

George Allen, his acknowledgements read like a "Who's Who" of the political and intellectual establishment. The author now teaches national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School.

*The Tet Offensive* is as thoroughly researched, tautly written, and relentlessly logical as a good intelligence report. Part I (the first third of the book) deals with the protracted debate in Hanoi over an appropriate strategy in response to the introduction of major U.S. ground forces in 1965 and the subsequent deterioration of the communists' battlefield situation. Using both U.S. and North Vietnamese sources, Dr. Wirtz traces the evolution of Hanoi's decision to "go for broke" in the winter of 1968. It was decided not to launch an all-out attack on U.S. bases and combat units but to use a combination of feints, deception, and secondary attacks that would draw our forces away from the population centers, and then to strike and capture those centers by either overwhelming or demoralizing their Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) defenders. In other words, Hanoi had decided to confront its American and South Vietnamese adversaries not at their strongest point, but at their weakest.

In Part II, Wirtz makes effective use of the concepts and terminology of the intelligence analyst to describe how and why we repeatedly "missed the signals" as to the main objective of the coming offensive. In essence, he argues, the majority of U.S. intelligence specialists, both military and

## 166 Naval War College Review

civilian, subscribed to a set of beliefs that hindered their ability to sort, categorize, and interpret objectively the vast quantity of information on enemy activity available to them. Among these beliefs was the certainty that Hanoi was growing desperate, having realized that it could no longer win a purely military victory. Given the firepower and mobility of U.S. ground forces, it was also a certainty that the communists considered American combat units their main, and most dangerous, foe. So far, so good; but in combination with the tendency of many American officials to predict enemy behavior by such historical "analogies" as the Battle of the Bulge (Hitler's desperate last offensive to stave off defeat) and Dien Bien Phu (symbol of France's humiliation at the hands of General Giap), such beliefs could lead to some dangerously blinkered conclusions.

As the evidence mounted that Giap was planning a major effort somewhere in South Vietnam in the early winter of 1968, the general consensus in Saigon and Washington was that something like a combination Battle of the Bulge and Dien Bien Phu was in the making, this time in the demilitarized zone (DMZ), at Khe Sanh—Ho Chi Minh's last desperate attempt to convince the Americans that winning the war was not worth the cost. That the NVA buildup around Khe Sanh (and elsewhere along the Laotian and Cambodian borders) might be a cover for a concurrent buildup near the cities was a possibility too lightly dismissed. It fit

no historical analogy and it challenged comfortable assumptions about who was winning the war.

In all fairness, bits and pieces of raw intelligence data gathered in combat tend to be both ambiguous and contradictory. It is a problem made worse when the bits and pieces become mountainous piles. Still, the evidence of what was to come was there in those piles, to be read by unblinkered eyes. Looking at all the evidence, CIA analyst Joseph Hovey accurately predicted what would happen during Tet. His warnings of the coming attacks on the cities and the attempted general uprising were met with smiles. Our intelligence was too good. We knew the communists did not have the manpower to be everywhere at once and would not be so foolish as to base the success of their plan on the chance of fomenting a simultaneous popular revolt. Yet that is just what they did. That our intelligence was better than theirs regarding the loyalties of the South Vietnamese only adds to the irony of the final outcome.

The flaws in this book are minor. Readers not familiar with the geography of Vietnam will wish for more than one skimpy map, and the author's use of the "four tasks" of the intelligence cycle in conjunction with the "six empirical issues" involved in intelligence processing creates a rather mechanistic and repetitious analytical matrix that only another intelligence wonk could love. However, as an Army veteran of Tet '68 and (briefly) an infantry division staff intelligence

officer (G-2) on the DMZ in 1971, I found this book to be both accurate and scrupulously fair. The only villain here is the weakness of human nature that causes men at war to let preconceived ideas rule their minds. Cen-

turies ago, Sun Tzu said it best: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."

HEATH TWICHELL  
Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts

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by Joseph Gerard Brennan

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