

David F. Schmitz. *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xvii + 183 pp. \$20.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7425-4486-4.



Reviewed by Erik B. Villard

Published on H-War (February, 2006)

Prof. David F. Schmitz, who currently holds the Robert Allen Skotheim Chair of History at Whitman College, has produced a compact and readable history of what is arguably the most important chapter in the American war in Vietnam. The book appears to be written primarily for two audiences: those with a general interest in the political dimension of the Tet Offensive and for college undergraduates who require a concise overview of this subject. Its greatest strength is its ability to explain in clear terms how the offensive proved to be "the decisive moment in the war" by convincing President Lyndon B. Johnson and many of his top advisors that the conflict could not be won in an acceptable period of time for an acceptable expenditure of American blood and treasure. Schmitz is on less sure footing regarding the military aspects of the campaign, and at various points throughout the book he appears to gloss over some of the complexity and nuance of the story for the sake of brevity and narrative flow. While this is not a major defect, especially for an audience who is looking for the main points without getting bogged down in excessive detail, readers who want a deeper examination of

the Tet Offensive and its impact on U.S. policy in Vietnam will want to supplement this book with more specialized studies.

Written in an easily digestible style, the work is divided into five chapters plus a short introduction and a bibliographic essay. The first chapter, "The Road to Vietnam," charts the U. S. path from being a largely detached observer of Southeast Asian affairs in 1945 to becoming a deeply involved regional player over the next twenty years as a result of the Cold War policy of containment. Schwartz ends the chapter by examining the U.S. rationale for deploying a large, conventional expeditionary force to Vietnam in the spring of 1965, the critical decision that changed the heretofore limited advisory effort into a major war for the United States. Chapter 2, "Light at the End of the Tunnel," offers a snapshot view of the political and military problems facing Johnson's administration near the end of 1967. While the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had shown tremendous resilience over the previous two and one half years of the war, frustrating the United States in its search for a decisive blow against the Commu-

nists and fueling the anti-war movement at home, the author explains that President Johnson, the principal U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, and other top officials (including most of the so-called Wise Men, a highly distinguished group of current and former government officials from both parties that advised the president) had found enough signs of optimism to conclude that the United States had turned the corner against the enemy and was now winning the war. At the advice of the Wise Men and others, Johnson's administration embarked on a public relations blitz at the end of 1967 to convince the American public that an end to the war was at last in sight. That ill-timed public relations effort sets the stage for Chapter 3, "The Tet Offensive," which briefly describes the Communist offensive that took place against the cities of South Vietnam in January and February 1968 and the resulting political fallout as the devastating and mostly unexpected attacks sent shock waves through the United States. The fourth chapter, "Capping Escalation," describes the high-level deliberations that took place in Washington in February and March, especially among the now-pessimistic Wise Men. These discussions ultimately led to Johnson's 31 March, 1968 speech in which he announced that the United States would not expand the war and that he would not seek re-election. The fifth and concluding chapter, "The Meaning of Tet," examines what Schmitz calls the "two central debates" about the offensive. First is the claim that the media's coverage of Tet turned public opinion against the war. A second and interrelated claim is that while Tet represented an overwhelming military victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese, it quickly morphed into a profound political and psychological defeat as a result of the distorted media coverage.

Taking the view shared by most Vietnam War historians, Schmitz concludes that the Tet Offensive "represented a defeat for the United States and its policy in Vietnam" (pp. xiv-xv). His related assertion "that the media coverage of Tet did not

sway American opinion or cause the Johnson administration to change its policy" echoes the findings of other scholars such as George Donelson Moss, Chester Pach, William Hammond, and Daniel Hallin, although it puts him at odds with many on the right who continue to believe that the media played an instrumental role in weakening our national resolve to stay the course in Vietnam (p. xv). Rather than blaming biased or poor media coverage for the change in U.S. policy after Tet, Schmitz argues that the nationwide attacks offered irrefutable proof to Johnson, the Wise Men, and other officials that the war had become "an unwinnable stalemate and that a change of policy was necessary to extract the United States from the political and economic crisis the Vietnam War had created at home" (p. xv).

While the book offers a good overview of how the Tet Offensive affected Johnson's policy on Vietnam, there are few details of the military side of the story. As the subtitle of his book suggests, the author focuses on the political ramifications of the offensive and the way in which it shaped U.S. public opinion. Consequently, Prof. Schmitz has gathered much of his primary research from the documents held at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, which provide a wealth of information about the deliberations of senior U.S. officials during Tet. Less interested in the actual fighting at Tet, the author apparently did not travel to Washington, D.C., to examine the voluminous military records held at the College Park branch of the National Archives and Records Administration, or to the Military History Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which contains another rich collection of documents about the war. Even keeping in mind the author's desire to focus on the political angle of Tet, I believe a deeper search through the available military sources would have sharpened his analysis and added greater authority to the book.

To give one example, his description of the Communist war strategy prior to Tet as "guerilla

war tactics" is somewhat misleading because it ignores the very active main force war, fought by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regiments and divisions, which greatly complicated the allied effort to pacify the countryside and to a large extent dictated how Westmoreland had to fight the war (p. 84). To give a second example, the author's statement that the "fall attacks in the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien" were designed to conceal the movement of enemy troops elsewhere in the country and to draw American troops into the hinterlands seems partly inaccurate or at least incomplete (p. 90). Schmitz is probably referring to the siege of Con Thien in Quang Tri Province, but as for Thua Thien Province I am unaware of any major diversionary effort mounted there in the autumn on behalf of Tet. At the same time, the fall battles of Loc Ninh and Song Be that took place north of Saigon near Cambodia as well as Dak To in the Central Highlands go unmentioned even though most historians ascribe those attacks as part of the enemy's deception prior to Tet. While such criticisms might sound like esoteric quibbling, coming as they do from an army historian who cares more for such details than your average reader, the author could have profited from a deeper search of the records to firm up his footing on the military aspects of Tet.

The concision of the book is both its strength and weakness. While Schmitz does an admirable job covering this very complicated topic in less than two hundred pages, he sometimes glosses over or ignores nuances that could lend more depth and color to the story. While many American commanders were surprised at the scope and ferocity of the attacks, it is perhaps overstating the case to say that the offensive was "completely unexpected" because a fair number of commanders all around the country had intelligence as well as gut premonitions that the enemy was going to mount significant attacks around the Tet holiday (and not just near the DMZ). In fact, some, like the commander of the 4th Infantry Division in the Central Highlands, Major General Charles P.

Stone, visited his units several days before the offensive and accurately predicted where and how the enemy was likely to attack. A second example of smoothing over details is the fact that the Communist offensive actually started one day prematurely in areas of central and northern South Vietnam, giving the allies a vital warning that something big was afoot, while the author simply states that the offensive began on 30 January without noting the enemy's critical misstep (p. 83).

The editing is good with one glaring exception. The one map included in the book, showing the territorial boundary of South Vietnam as well as the location of some two dozen of its cities, is marred by several unfortunate errors. Quang Tri City, for example, is rendered as "Quang Tre," Tuy Hoa as "Tyu Hoa," and Ben Tre as "Ben Tro." Furthermore, the locations of several cities are out of place—the port city of Qui Nhon on the central coast is placed too far south, while both Tay Ninh, Gia Dinh, Dien Hoa, and Can Tho in the lower half of the country are noticeably misaligned. Other problems include listing Quang Tri as a military installation but not as a provincial capital (which it was). A more carefully drawn and edited map with additional details such as military corps boundaries would have been a welcome companion to the narrative.

In short, those readers seeking an overview of the political consequences in the United States of the Tet Offensive ought to be pleased with this book, while those looking for information about the military campaign itself will be disappointed. While a full treatment of the subject using all available political, military, diplomatic, and economic sources has yet to appear, Prof. Schmitz's compact book fills a useful niche for a general and undergraduate audience in the meantime.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originat-

ing list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Erik B. Villard. Review of Schmitz, David F. *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11419>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.