



The Vietnam War's Great Lie

How the Communists and Pham Xuan An won the propaganda war.

By **Luke Hunt**

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In the years that followed the Tet Offensive, one of the Vietnam War's largest military campaigns, which saw its 50th anniversary commemorated in late January, Americans would torture themselves. How could they have got it so wrong? A Communist uprising across South Vietnam claimed thousands of lives, and their perceived success had turned public opinion against the war by the middle of 1968, an abject lesson in propaganda and its latter day manifestation, "fake news."

There were many key people involved in the planning. Among them was Pham Xuan An, the foreign correspondent who had joined the Communists during World War II and risen within its ranks to become one of Ho Chi Minh's greatest spies.

His track record – a secret that would remain hidden for decades to come – was already formidable. In 1962, while working for the British news agency *Reuters*, he mapped out information of a pending strike by U.S.-led South Vietnamese troops near a hamlet in the Mekong Delta, southwest of Saigon, called Ap Bac.

Hopes for victory were dashed as the Viet Cong were well armed, well entrenched, and fought back, culminating in one of the biggest U.S. defeats of the Vietnam War, and in hindsight a devastating case study of what was to come.

Ho Chi Minh awarded two Liberation Exploit medals, a high honor indeed, following that battle. One went to the Viet Cong battlefield commander, the other to An.

He would receive another three years later for his reports outlining the American landing of troops at Danang. At about the same time, he began working on his outline for a massive Communist offensive to be launched during the Vietnamese New Year.

Truces would be broken, and the Communists would hold the element of surprise by launching the offensive under the cover of the millions of firecrackers that are traditionally lit to welcome in the new year.

The idea of unleashing a sprawling campaign to achieve "decisive victory" by overwhelming the perpetually tottering government in Saigon was not new to planners in Hanoi. But the actual military plan, shepherded through the opposition of more cautious elements within the Politburo by Party General Secretary Le Duan and the military chief of staff, Van Tien Dung, was only finalized late in 1967.

Yet many in Hanoi feared overreach. Among the ambivalent, who were sidelined and ultimately overruled in the debate over strategy, were the ailing Ho Chi Minh and as well as General Vo Nguyen Giap, famed architect of the victory at Dien Bien Phu against the French in 1954.



South Vietnam's ARVN Rangers defend Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Image Credit: [Wikimedia Commons/ US military personnel](#)

Far from the intrigue roiling Hanoi, however, the southern Communists – the Viet Cong – were key players and charged with fine-tuning the operational details and leading the attacks, including leaders like General Tran Van Tra and the ruthless political commissar Tran Bach Dang.

While the southern guerrillas absorbed the brunt of the urban combat, they were backed by the military heft of the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and it was main force NVA units who would launch and maintain the four-month siege of the isolated U.S. Marine outpost at Khe Sanh, intended initially as a feint to pull U.S. resources away from South Vietnamese cities and towns.

But while ideologues like Dang believed that an overwhelming show of military force was necessary to shatter the U.S.-backed Saigon government and their “puppet army,” their primary objective was political: to create the conditions necessary to spark a spontaneous insurrection among the southern populace, an uprising against their government and in support of the revolution.

Measuring the overall success of what the Communists called their “general offensive-general uprising” strategy is a subject of endless debate. But as for the anticipated rebellion – the South Vietnamese every-person instinctively throwing off the shackles of U.S. neocolonialism – Dang and his compatriots were clearly very wrong.

The southern populace didn’t rise up, but still, it was quite a fight. When the Tet Offensive launched on January 30, more than 100 cities across South Vietnam – including Saigon – and military outposts came under attack. The worst of the fighting was in Hue, where 150 Marines died and around 5,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were killed, mainly in airstrikes.

During the brief occupation of the ancient capital, the Communists proved how nasty they could be.

The bodies of more than 2,800 people were discovered, and another 3,000 residents of Hue were missing. They also set about razing Hue’s treasured heritage; palaces, temples, and monuments from the distant past were leveled.

But the counteroffensives were as vicious as they were successful. As the attacks subsided, the U.S. intensified its Phoenix Program, designed by the CIA to neutralize the infrastructure of the Viet Cong and its political wing, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, through “infiltration, capture, **counterterrorism**, **interrogation**, and assassination.”

It proved highly successful, neutralizing 81,740 suspected Viet Cong operatives, informants, and supporters. Of them, somewhere between 26,000 and 41,000 were killed between 1965 and 1972, many after Tet.

The initial Tet attacks were followed by two other waves, in May and August, and because of this Communist forces stayed entrenched close to the cities during the interlude between these rolling campaigns.

This tactic, driven by decisionmaking in Hanoi, proved lethal for Viet Cong survivors because it allowed South Vietnamese and U.S. troops to leapfrog over Communist positions and attack their main forces that were dug in from the rear.

The Communist ranks were devastated, especially the southern fighters. 1969 and 1970 were dark years, during which resentment of Hanoi bumbled among southern leaders who felt they had been cannon fodder for Hanoi’s quixotic plans.

But public opinion in the United States of what the Tet Offensive meant reflected a different perspective of a complicated reality: the yawning gap between what their own leaders were saying about an enemy on the ropes and the waves of Communist attacks that rippled across South Vietnam, and across their TV screens. Far from impending defeat, there seemed to be a Communist soldier under every rock.

That’s where An, who had a college education and interned with U.S.-based newspapers a decade earlier, stepped in. He sought to reinforce an American public in its mistaken belief that the Viet Cong remained a strong, viable force capable of defeating the mighty U.S. military.

Working from his office, this time at *Time* magazine, he concocted stories that worked to that end. As a fixer, he organized bogus interviews in the dead of night along dark side alleys with Communist plants masquerading as authoritative leaders who spun fairy tales about Viet Cong strength.

This was important because Hanoi did not want to be seen as militarily weak in the South while negotiating with Washington in upcoming peace talks. An's absolute comprehension for how the media worked at a domestic and international level was key.

As one Saigon bureau chief for *Time* noted: "An understood the dependency between news organizations on each other and played this wonderfully well – like a Stradivarius."

An picked up another military citation for the Tet Offensive and carried on his secret work until the fall of Saigon in 1975. His double life was the subject of much speculation with details trickling out of Vietnam – sometimes officially – over the subsequent decades.

In the early years after the war, Hanoi would eventually concede how much it had lost because of the Tet Offensive and how precarious its true military capabilities were at that time, contradicting the story An had sold to the West. Yet when public opinion turned, U.S. politicians were forced to settle for a negotiated withdrawal, leading to the eventual collapse of South Vietnam.

As the Communists raised their glasses to toast the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive, An – who died a brigadier general in 2006 – no doubt deserves to be remembered as one of the great heroes of the state.

But opinions differ. Of the journalists and photographers who worked with An, some saw him a traitor and others as a nationalist who simply followed his heart.

For the students of propaganda and its deployment in warfare in the current era dominated by fake news, An, however, was much more than that; he was indeed a master of the art.

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