WE HAD TO SAVE IT IN ORDER NOT TO FORGET IT: PERCEPTIONS OF TET ’68 IN VIETNAM NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The insurgent Tet Offensive of 1968 (Lunar New Year, January-February) became one of the pivotal events of the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War. The psychological blow received by the American forces in Asia and the public opinion in the United States prompted the Johnson Administration to reverse the military deployment in the area. This article intends to discuss the way a number of novels and memoirs of the war have portrayed that episode.

We gotta get out of this place
if it is the last thing we ever do.
– The Animals

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was one of the most important events of the Vietnam War –if not the crucial episode throughout the American intervention. I have picked up a number of narratives that deal with that event in order to understand the different interpretations it has received since then. As secondary documents for an understanding of the war, the narratives provide a good amount of feelings, perceptions, moods, etc., in the soldiers in the Asian front as well as in the general public in the home front. Such emotional layers do not appear so insistently in other kinds of documents, such as the elite press or the writings of most dissident intellectuals.

In a general sense the novels and memoirs that reconstruct the Tet Offensive share a scathing criticism of the way President Johnson had led the nation to a war of attrition in Vietnam. As a result of those policies, an eventual disaster as that of Tet ’68 could not have been prevented. Inevitable comparisons with President Kennedy appear in a considerable number of them. We can appreciate that in these narratives a contrast between the deceitfulness of the Johnson administration and the naiveté of a promising and frustrated Camelot is established. In this respect a quotation from Eastlake’s *The Bamboo Bed* is worth remembering:

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> Everyone was lost since that asshole Johnson took over. This is no way to think about the President of the United States of America. The Commander in Chief. Hail to the Chief. Johnson became President of the United States of America because a lunatic shot Kennedy. So the destiny of the great planet Earth was decided by the moon. Of such chance stuff is life on this world.[1]

Anyway, the conviction of the radicals that Johnson had become a sick joke of fate was not new in 1968. Earlier works, like William Wilson's *The LBJ Brigade* (1966) already depict Johnson as the usurper of Pennsylvania Avenue. But the contrast between Johnson and Kennedy is sharper in the works written immediately after Tet. They express a suspicion that Johnson's mismanagement of the war would not have happened had Kennedy lived –a meaningful interpretation in works written in a time when an iconic Kennedy was being built. The narratives express the dissimilarity by means of characters who distinguish between the President who turned them into cannon fodder for the communists and the one whose promise was being obliterated. The clearest example can be found in Chalice, a hero in Robert Roth's *Sand in the Wind* (1973). This character is bound to declare himself a conscientious objector. Although he understands that the American presence in Vietnam is the genuine product of Kennedy's foreign policy, he refuses to eschew the myth –otherwise his war experience would be too "existential" to stand:

> He felt he understood why the radicals could deride things Kennedy had done and everything he represented, yet still squirm to avoid the mention of his name. They too had believed. No curses or tirades could cleanse them of the guilt they felt for having had faith in him, the product of a system they now detested, who had seemingly risen above it. All their actions strived to retain the belief he gave them while discarding him and his myth –not refusing to be lied to, but insisting on being given different lies, still living with the myth, calling it by different names, refusing not to believe [...] knowing without admitting, that if he failed, no one can succeed.[2]

But the truth is that the events in Indochina forced Johnson to make a decision that Kennedy did not have the time or the pressure to make. When the situation deteriorated to the point of requiring the direct intervention of the American forces, President Johnson would not allow himself to be the first president to accept an American defeat ever. The framing of Johnson as the man responsible for the debacle that took place in February 1968 is intensified if his former positions about the war are recalled. Firstly, as leader of the Senate, he opposed the plans for intervention in Asia laid out by the Eisenhower administration. As Vice President he had logically reversed his position; by then he used to recognize the imperatives of "responsibility," "duty," "recognition of mutual objectives," etc. Finally, his presidential address at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965, rife with allusions to the role of the United States as saviour of the Third World against communism, gauged the importance of Southeast Asia in his foreign policy.

The LBJ portrayed in these narratives has lost most of the support he would have enjoyed in the months previous to the American escalation. The President becomes a character invariably troubled by the credibility gap that affected his relations with the public since 1967, but most especially from Tet onwards. The narrators imply that the

support that Johnson cherished from the liberals during the Tonkin Crisis in 1964 had completely diminished to naught. The increasing number of American casualties had eroded dramatically that support and turned trite his redemptive words at Johns Hopkins. The novels and memoirs generally show a President convinced of the need to destroy the Vietnamese peoples in order to save the Republic of Vietnam from communism –if the countryside was being flattened it was Ho Chi Minh's fault. They underscore the fact that from 1966 a rendition of Woodrow Wilson's "save the world for democracy" discourse was not primordial in the development of American foreign policy. All rhetorical cloak was being stripped away and what remained was the cold-war style of frowning on Communism: "If we allow the communists to win in Vietnam, it will become easier and more appetizing for them to take over other countries in other parts of the world. [...] That is why it is vitally important to every American family that we stop the Communists in South Vietnam."[3]

The initial purpose had been to show to the public concerned that the war was under control and that no substantial change of policy had been adopted. Johnson's decisions to start the buildup and keep escalating had not reached any significant and long-standing success by 1967; and the failure of achievement was made up in elaborate official parlance. Eventually a mutual distrust between the White House and the citizenry rose, provoked by the Presidency's resort to deceit the public about the war.

William Eastlake recreates in *The Bamboo Bed* one of Westmoreland's news releases where reporters are reassured of progress in the war. In the following excerpt the narrator glosses the content of an issue of *Stars and Stripes*:

> Another [newspaper], and this was a recent *Stars and Stripes*, showed General Westmoreland demonstrating in front of the same map and the same intrepid newspaper correspondents, the boy correspondents, how the planned withdrawal of American troops would soon begin. Because the turning point was being reached. We have reached the beginning of the end. There were now fresh signs that the Unfriendlies were cracking. After all how much longer could the enemy sustain such losses? That was the good part.

In other words, Westmoreland saw the light at the end of the tunnel. But in this narration deceit is not one-way only; it can also be played both ways. The reporters see through the military spokesmen, and follow the rules of the game set at the MACV:

> The bad part was that none of the boy correspondents had the heart to tell General Westmoreland that the Unfriendlies could sustain such losses from now till Kingdom Come.[...] The intrepid boy correspondents did not tell the American general this because they did not want to upset him. Why bring up the obvious?
>
> (*The Bamboo Bed*, p. 259)

Gustav Hasford's *The Short Timers* (1979) echoes this overpowering relation between the managers of the war and the public opinion in a similar way. One of its main characters introduces himself to the reader as a journalist of *Stars and Stripes* who distributes optimistic, cheerful news to Western correspondents in Danang.

The narratives infer that Vietnam is no longer a place to "save" from Communism when they prove that the doctrine of Hearts and Minds failed. In theory winning

over the people of Vietnam had been the right defense against the guerrilla strategy; but it was clear by 1968 that this was not that simple in Vietnam any more. As Loren Baritz had it, Hearts and Minds had become a superfluous humanistic dressing for the military's determination to win a guerrilla war with old and conventional strategies.[4] We are quite far away from the poetic descriptions of the Southeast Asian society that Lederer and Burdick had contrived in *The Ugly American* (1958):

> In his eight months in Sarkhan Colvin came to love the people of this strange country. They were small, delicate people, their skins a lovely shade of brown, all of their motions graceful and restrained. Even people of the meanest caste had a dignity and charm which impressed Colvin enormously. They were very generous. They had given him food, and information, and help. They had run great risks on his behalf, and the openly request they made was that he discuss philosophy with them.[5]

In Tet '68, the most fitting translation of the Ugly Americans who advised the Vietnamese were General Westmoreland and his career-seeking officers. There was no longer a country to support, a civilization to defend, real estate to hold, or physical objectives to size. It was the bodies of enemy fighters that counted, because victory in a non conventional war could be measured only in terms of the number of enemies eliminated. So goes the criticism in *The Traitors* (1969):

> What do you think we're bombing? Military targets? Sure, if a fishing boat supplies fish for the Army, it's a military target. If a harvester has a gun, he –or she– is an armed combatant. They all get shot at.[6]

The narratives of the offensive show that the confidence on technology allowed the American soldier to dispose of the ethical scale of values he had been raised in at home. Thus the *carte blanche* the soldiers apparently received in the so-called "free fire zones" is a clear example. In *The Short Timers* Joker is sent to Hue by helicopter in order to take photographs of the effects of the communist onslaught in the city. The door gunner of the helicopter, encouraged by the influence of drugs, kills a peasant who was seemingly plowing his land with no apparent signs of hostility towards the Americans:

> The hamlet beneath us is in a free fire zone –anybody can shoot at it at any time and for any reason. We watch the farmer run in the shallow water. The farmer knows that his family needs some rice to eat. The farmer knows only that the bullets are tearing him apart.
> He falls, and the door gunner giggles.[7]

As Noam Chomsky pointed out, the absolute reliance on the power of technology implied an innovation in imperialist rhetoric, as benevolence (the diplomatic reason that led Americans to Vietnam) was discarded as sentimental innovation, improper to an Army that aimed to win a less than "regular" war.[8] The American teenagers fighting in Vietnam, Chomsky seemed to say in 1969, became used to construct the image of the Vietnamese (all the Vietnamese) as individuals reified into figures for the weekly reports.

The prolegomena to Tet portrayed in the narratives point out a number of connections between the war in Vietnam and the wars at home: pacifists go to war and declare themselves conscientious objectors, and blacks stress their differences from whites, despite the fact that the army became the most desegregated institution in American society. The blacks who fight in these narratives no longer believe in the Project 100.000. By late 1967 McNamara's and Moynihan's plan for social mobility through the Army had proved scarcely else than a purveyor of soldiers from the working class and the lumpenproletariat, thus sparing the children of the middle class a military tour in Asia. As far as a strong majority of the individuals enlisted in these programs were black and inasmuch as the men in Vietnam during Tet had the uprisings of Harlem, Watts, Detroit or Newark, in their memories, racial violence also erupted in Vietnam. In *The Traitors* blacks reenlist not because of their love of abstract military values, but because it is the only escape they are allowed from their life in the ghettoes; In *Sand in the Wind* racial revolts take place; in *Dispatches* (1977), Michael Herr recurrently suggests a divorce between the races in such epiphanies as Jimi Hendrix's music not being played by the Armed Forces Radio Network, or in the blacks who disassemble weapons and aim to carry them to the ghetto. It is in this context that the narrators describe the behavior of the Americans during the Tet Offensive. The army is unravelling, albeit more demoralizing features had to arrive yet: since 1969 morale was disintegrating to the point that soldiers contended across racial lines and military ranks.

Late in 1967, an accumulation of US intelligence reports indicated that four North Vietnamese infantry divisions, supported by two artillery regiments and armored units –about 40.000 men– were converging on Khe Sanh, a military post near the Laotian border. Westmoreland's strategy was to move 6.000 marines into the garrison, supported by massive bombings around the area. He had reasons to be confident –he had recently managed to suppress the communist advance at Con Thien and Dak To, among other important posts. However, From mid January to early April 1968 Americans and North Vietnamese were locked into fierce battle at Khe Sanh. And as the days went by, the conviction that Westmoreland had fallen in a trap set by the communists was increasingly widespread. There were two factors that explained this feeling: the superfluidity of American technology in a battle that looked like a repetition of Dien Bien Phu, and the general communist attack all over Vietnam after January 31.

John Ketwig summarizes in his memoir *...And a Hard Rain Fell* (1985) the feelings of frustration he experienced during those days at the wastage of human lives and resources, unable to conquer the determination of the enemy:

> Our military training had urged us to have undying faith in America's ultra-modern war-fighting technologies. From the enormous computer rooms at Long Binh to the reconnaissance satellites in space, microchips had made every day's actions known and predictable. [...] We had waves of air power, helicopters, fighters, bombers. The awesome B-52. We had napalm and white phosphorous bombs. [...] Technology had become America's God, and Vietnam attracted the worshippers like a Deep South revival. [...] And all the electronic surveillance did little to warn us of the Tet bloodbath.[9]

The optimism that had supplied Americans with hopes of expedient victory in Southeast Asia had to rely more and more on the factuality of technology, after moral principles had fallen off and political alliances had been discarded. I am persuaded by

Baritz's conviction that American power was believed to be sufficient "to compensate for our ignorance, to make the detailed particularities of Vietnam's otherness beside the point."[10] Herr records the confidence that the use of superior weaponry gave to all Americans, in Vietnam as well as in the United States:

> It was a comfort, all of that power, and precision and exquisitely geared clout. It meant a lot to the thousands of Marines at Khe Sanh, to the Command, [...] to officials in the Pentagon. We could all sleep easier for it: lance corporals and General Westmoreland, me and the President, Navy medics and the parents of the boys inside the base.[11]

Khe Sahn became a record breaking event. Operation Niagara, as the air attacks around Khe Sanh were coded, became the heaviest air raid up to that moment of the war. For the writers who took down their remembrances of Vietnam, one of the conclusions of that operation was that American technology proved to alter the physique of the land: "The rocky terrain around Khe Sanh has been pounded with the greatest volume of explosives in the history of war," says the hero of *The Short Timers*. The deadly tons dropped "have pockmarked the deck with craters big enough to be graves for tanks" (p. 46).

On his part Michael Herr depicts the siege as follows:

> We used what was at hand, dropping the greatest volume of explosives in the history of warfare over all the terrain within the 30-mile sector which fanned out from Khe Sanh. Employing saturation-bombing techniques, we delivered more than 110.000 tons of bombs to those hills during the eleven-week commitment at Khe Sanh. [...] The bigger hills were left with scars and craters of such proportions than an observer from some remote culture might see in them the obsessiveness and ritual regularity of religious symbols, the blackness at the deep centre pouring rays of bright, overturned earth all the way to the circumference.
>
> (*Dispatches*, pp. 125)

However, despite its capability to alter the physical morphology of Vietnam, US technology was not persuasive enough to provoke a change in the willingness of the enemy. *In Sand in the Wind* several officers discuss Khe Sanh as either a renewed version of Dien Bien Phu or an operation devised to distract the American forces from other major objectives yet to be revealed:

> Nash cut Kramer off. "There's only two ways you can look at it: either it's Dien Bien Phu all over again, or it isn't. If they think it is, then they'll risk everything in one shot. I can't believe they will.They've kept fighting the same type of war for twenty tears. Why would they suddenly lose their patience? [...] I can only guess...They've done something,and we've reacted to it. They do more of the same, and so do we. We must be doing exactly what they want."
> "But what do they want?" Howell asked
> "I don't know. I just have the feeling that whatever we're doing is wrong, and we won't have to wait any longer than Tet to find out why."
>
> (*Sand in the Wind*, p. 553)

Scarcely had a week gone after the first attacks on Khe Sanh that the news of a general guerrilla attack arrived in the United States. It was then that the public realized Khe Sanh had not been the definitive battle, but the first in a succession of clashes between the Americans and the South Vietnamese Army on one side and the communists on the other. However, the American military should not have taken it as the dumbfounding attack portrayed by the mass media. Communist defectors on the *Chieu Hoi* program, prisoners, captured documents, electronic espionage devices, and covert agents had provided American experts with piles of information on an attack that presumably could not stop at the battle of Khe Sanh. But the information gathered was not interpreted the same way by all the staff in charge of decoding it.[12] Apparently by mid December Westmoreland had warned of "massive movements" of the enemy, but other senior military considered "remote" the possibility of an offensive. Johnson commented in his memoirs that the Vietnamese insurgents were preparing a major attack helped by the North: "I was increasingly concerned that the Communists were preparing a maximum military effort and were going to try for a significant tactical victory. [...] I agreed heartily with one prophetic report from our embassy in Saigon: 'The war is probably nearing a turning point and the outcome of the 1967-8 winter-spring campaign will in all likelihood determine the future direction of the war."[13] Why the disaster, then?

All the intelligence gathering notwithstanding, the Americans found out that the rebels attacked the main Vietnamese cities on the night of January 30, 1968. Years later Westmoreland would explain the offensive as a reaction to his own tactical successes in previous months.[14] But as far as the narratives are concerned, all of the texts point out the shocking effects of the Tet uprising, in the middle of the Vietnamese New Year's festivities. All of them agree in decrying Westmoreland's reasoning. The flattest challenge to the official versions can be read in Anthony Grey's *Saigon* (1982). The main character in this novel arrives in Hue by the time the offensive breaks out in the city, and it will be mostly through his eyes that we witness the ordeal of Hue in those days. The offensive has just started when he is about to depart from Saigon:

> During the night Viet Cong units had carried out a rash of surprise attacks on seven cities north of Saigon in violation of the Tet cease-fire, and the American Commander, General William Westmoreland, had decided to cancel the Tet truce and declare a state of maximum alert for U.S. forces throughout Vietnam. President Thieu had followed suit and put the South Vietnamese forces on a similar alert that morning, but by then half of his army were on leave for the holiday period. [...] although fighting had continued beyond dawn in the seven cities, the American and Vietnamese military Vietcong commands up to the time of Joseph's departure from Saigon had remained skeptical about the prospect of any wider offensive.[15]

On his part, Ketwig reconstructs his experience of Tet in the Pleiku area. Again the incoming was unexpected and disproportionate, in comparison with previous attacks from the guerrilla. Not only are soldiers and officers taken by surprise, but they were shocked at the discovery that the offensive is general:

> The holiday would bring a cease-fire, and downtown would be an exciting chaos of drink, parades or ornate costumes, special banquets, good cheer, firecrackers. I imagined a Mardi Gras atmosphere.From a deep sleep, I awoke

> listening. Something was wrong. [...] I jumped into action screaming "Incoming!" and grabbing for my helmet and boots. In the darkness of the hooch the sounds of frantic motion, chaos and swearing assured us everyone was awake.Round after round was coming now, shaking the ground. [...]
> Lieutenant Baker ran toward us, crouched in our humble corner: [...] The whole fuckin' country's getting this shit! Hue, Saigon, Cam Ranh, everywhere! Pleiku is in enemy hands.
>
> (...*And a Hard Rain Fell*, pp. 92, 95).

Herr describes a very similar atmosphere in Can Tho:

> The first night of the Tet Offensive we were in the Special Forces Camp of the Delta, surrounded, as far as we knew, and with nothing but bad news filtering in: from Hue, from Danang, from Qui Nhon, from Khe Sanh [...] It all happened so fast, as they say, as everyone who has ever been through it has always said; we were sitting around smoking grass and listening to what we thought were Tet fireworks coming from the town, and then coming closer until we weren't stoned any more, until the whole night had passed and I was looking at the empty clips around my feet behind the berm, telling myself that there would never be any way to know for sure.
>
> (*Dispatches*, p. 60)

Joker confirms in *The Short Timers* what other characters have advanced: that unexpectedly the Vietcong showed to everyone that it was as quick and alive as ever. As Joker 'discovers' Tet at Danang, he comes to terms with a reality that the powers that be in Washington had been doing their best to conceal from the public: "Our 'defeated' enemy is lashing out with a power that is shocking" (p. 48).

The most meaningful scenarios of the Tet Offensive were Hue and Saigon. The events in Saigon were particularly meaningful, because the main target of the Vietcong attacks there was the American Embassy. From all points of view the attack on the American legation in Saigon meant a suicidal attempt. However, its propagandistic effects in the United States magnified the attention the public had given to Vietnam up to that moment. The attack on the Embassy discredited for good the bombastic jargon emanated from the Pentagon and the White House just a few days before. As Robert Komer, Director of the CORDS program[16] remembers, "we completely undermined the President's position, because when Tet turned out the way it did, it was in stark contrast to what the President had been telling the nation. The difference between November –hey, we're finally winning– and the next thing you know the US embassy in Saigon is under attack– well, that robbed me of all my credibility and that of everybody else, especially the President."[17]

President Johnson himself justified the impression of Tet '68 on the morale of the military and the prestige of the body politic in terms of moral values. In his memoirs he insisted that although Tet "was no shock", and the allies had accurate information of the movements of the communists, the latter proved to have a magnificent coordination. But more than that, the offensive was an act of defilement: "it was difficult to believe that the Communists would so profane their own people's sacred holiday."[18]

Anthony Grey's *Saigon* offers the most complete fictional reconstruction of how the attack on the Embassy might have been. Unaware of the attack of the suicide com-

mando, American military and diplomats cannot believe what is taking place at their Embassy. Moreover, the incursion of a guerilla platoon in the garden of the Embassy is not one more episode of the war, but an omen of what the fate of the United States in Southeast Asia will be in the near future. Riddled with symbolic images, this fictional attack on the Embassy starts when one of the guerrillas aims his first missile at the eagle of the seal. Not less symbolic is the way the personnel in charge of the American interests in Vietnam discredit the official version of the episode:

> They dashed to the scene to see for themselves, they telephoned and spoke to bewildered Americans on the upper floors of the besieged Chancery, and throughout the long night they cabled, telephoned and telexed their running stories in snatches to New York, London and Paris and thence to tens of thousands of radio and television stations and newspapers around the world; and the world watched, listened and read with fascination of this latest development in the unequal David and Goliath conflict in Vietnam: they could scarcely believe that a small band of Communist guerrillas had seized the symbolic headquarters of the strongest military nation on earth and was resisting all efforts to recapture it.
>
> (*Saigon*, p. 667)

A contrast between Grey's and Johnson's reconstructions is most suggestive of the pains the White House took to find a convincing interpretation of that symbolic clash:

> In Saigon a Vietcong suicide squad in civilian clothes blasted a hole in the wall surrounding the American Embassy compound and entered the grounds. Army military police and US Marines prevented them from entering the Embassy building itself and killed all the attackers.[19]

The seizure of Hue received a different treatment. Had it not been for Hue, Tet might have remained a relatively important communist offensive that was frustrated after a few days of skirmishes and battles, but in no way would it be *the* offensive as it is remembered today. The carnage provoked in that city compromised the moral authority of the United States to the point that not even the old, World-War-II strategies so longed for by the military, enabled MACV to retake the old imperial capital from the communists. All accounts point out that a number ranging between 10.000 and 12.000 North Vietnamese who had gathered around Hue failed to reach it in time. Together with a fifth column of Vietcong cadres, the NVA soldiers held the city until the last week of February. By the time the US military restored the authority of the Saigon regime in Hue, an estimated 80 % of the city had been reduced to rubble.[20]

The fact that Hue had to be conquered back block by block, at first suggested to the Americans that eventually a conventional strategy could be applied in the Vietnam War. In *Sand in the Wind* Colonel Nash issues the order to airlift all his men to Hue, in the hope of taking part in a battle set down in the old style, "like those World War II movies you love so well," (p. 598).

But although the plan to take Hue back belonged to the kind of encounters the military academies had studied for so long, it was not what the soldiers in the field had been used to.[21] After months in the rice paddies and the jungles, they had become used to outwit snipers skulking about in the elephant grass, not at windowsills.

William Ehrhart represents in *Vietnam, Perkasie* (1983), the two elements he believes Hue contributed to his military experience in Vietnam: first, the high fighting spirit of the North Vietnamese; second, the city itself, which appeared to be less a war stage than a mousetrap:

> Hour after hour, it continued. Minute after minute. Half a block. Taking fire from all sides, I had never imagined there could be so many NVA in the whole world. And they had to be NVA. The Vietcong had never had anything like this: the recoilless rifles, the heavy machineguns; not in these numbers. The mythical NVA were real, and they were all in Hue City, and they were all trying to kill me.
> [...]
> The fighting was made more difficult by the fact that we were in the third largest city in South Vietnam. After nearly a year in rural areas –never even entering a city except on rare and brief official business– we were faced with dislodging an obviously well-prepared enemy from a built-up urban community of considerable size. We had no experience at this kind of fighting, and the on-the-job training cost us heavily.[22]

In *Saigon* Joseph Sherman is wounded during the skirmishes in the city. His daughter hides him on a sampan on the Perfumed River. It is from that position that he gazes at a large Vietcong flag waving above the Citadel. For Joseph this image encloses the frustration of the Americans' efforts at containing communism in Vietnam. The fact that the insurgents and the North Vietnamese have managed to hold a city from the Americans for such a long time –and successfully challenging them on their favorite stage– proves that the end is near. The first weeks of 1968 had certainly been a watershed, but not in the sense that the Embassy of the United States had expected it to be.

As days passed and the Americans gained time to react (the South Vietnamese Army did not follow suit in military terms), the North Vietnamese finally retreated and set up positions inside the Citadel. The USAF then bombed the outskirts of the city and the South Vietnamese army was left to shell the palace –the only monument of precolonial Vietnam standing.[23] Yet it took a month to drive the enemy troops out. By then Hue lay in ruins. As in most of the Vietnamese cities and towns, destruction was the only way to regain the territory taken by the enemy.

Peter Arnett popularized the most famous aphorism of the offensive, "we had to destroy it in order to save it," as he quoted an American officer after the battle for Ben Tre, in the Delta region. Arnett's quotation can be applied to all the clashes across Vietnam in Tet. The feasible way to seal the populated areas off from the communists was to make a massive use of firepower. The narratives can also echo Arnett's quotation. In a surrealistic passage the narrator of *The Bamboo Bed* represents an American operation resembling the recapture of a position held by the "unfriendlies" throughout Tet: "When all else fails you eliminate everything. The bombs dropped. There is nothing like a good bombing to solve everything. Save something by eliminating everything" (p. 70).

Gustav Hasford describes the dawn of the first day after liberation in Hue:

> The sun that rises in Hue on the morning of February 25, 1968, illuminates a dead city. United States Marines have liberated Hue to the ground. Here, in the

> heart of the ancient capital of Viet Nam, a living shrine to the Vietnamese people on both sides, green Marines in the green machine have liberated a cherished past. Green Marines in the green machine have shot the bones of sacred ancestors. Wise, like Solomon, we have converted Hue into rubble in order to save it.
>
> (*The Short Timers*, p. 123)

On his part, the narrator of *Sand in the Wind* explains why Hue had to be sacrificed:

> In Saigon it was decided that Hue would be recaptured not by the blood of the advancing troops, but rather by the destruction of the city itself. Artillery and bombers were called in indiscriminately. The cold monsoon rains fell upon the bodies of the Viet Cong soldiers and civilians that lay abandoned in the streets and beneath the rubble. [...] The Marines no longer advanced upon a city, but instead its ruins
>
> (*Sand in the Wind*, p. 603).

By the time the Marines were fighting back in Hue, Eugene Rostow, advisor to President Johnson on Southeast Asia affairs, kept insisting on the historical necessity of the United States to resist the communist challenge: "there is no one to pick up the torch if we let it fall," he quipped in a speech delivered on February 20, days before the communists fled Hue.[24] Yet, President Johnson had been more explicit the year before, when the possibility of a bloody Tet had not loomed over his presidency. In his State of the Union address of 1967 he quoted Jefferson, in order to find an institutional support to his determination in Vietnam: "It is the melancholy law of human societies to be compelled, sometimes to choose a great evil in order to ward off one greater."[25] The reader will discern whether that was an 18th-century version of "we had to destroy it in order to save it."

As far as domestic politics in the United States is concerned, Tet in Hue meant a *deus ex macchina* for conservatives and radicals to prove their respective theses on the American intervention. Radicals had their chance to indict the individuals responsible for the arrival of hundreds of coffins from Vietnam; conservatives scored their points as they exploited the repression the communists inflicted on the civil population in Hue. Depending on the sources the number of victims caused by the communists oscillated between 400 and near 5.000. But they all pointed out that a number of prominent individuals in the local cultural, political, religious life, and even professionals with no political credentials were slain by local commissars.[26] Also personal feuds must have been set using the confusion that followed the vacuum in those days, in a city that had cradled dissent in the recent history of Vietnam.[27] The killings started once the offensive lost ground and the long-awaited "uprising of the people" failed to take place. For the conservatives, this "bloodbath" was a most ineluctable proof that the commitment of the United States was not in vain; had it not been for the American liberators, the killing of civilians would have continued. And the discovery of mass graves scattered all over the outskirts of the city spurred 'hawkish' feelings –which had been experimenting a declining swing during the first confusing days– within the American public opinion.

The accounts the narratives offer on the communist repression in Hue vary depending on their ideological focus. Two representative examples can be found in *Sai-*

gon and *The Short Timers* respectively. The first one, that interprets the American intervention as a failed colonial venture, acquits the communist heroes of the novel, who apparently acted as doomed fellow travellers of agents from Hanoi. Such is the case of Tuyen, who expresses her frustration at being manipulated by the cadres of the party:

> My job here was to help compile lists of government officials, army officers, religious leaders, teachers –people like that. We were told they would be taken away for reeducation. But they were really death lists all the time. Today, because the leadership can see we're going to be pushed out of Hue, they've embarked on a mass campaign of cold-blooded assassination." She stopped, and her voice sank to a whisper. "The names of three thousand people are on those lists– and all of them are to be murdered!
>
> (*Saigon*, p. 682).

Hasford, more emotionally detached from the events described, reconstructs the sequences following the purges. Joker is sent to Hue to take photographs of the corpses found in the mass graves. He has received instructions from his superiors to take crude photographs of the massacre (mutilated bodies, victims with their hands tied, etc.) to be displayed in *Stars and Stripes* and other newspapers acquiescent with the military line:

> We see corpses of Vietnamese civilians who have been buried alive, faces frozen in mid-scream, hands like claws, the fingernails bloody and caked with damp earth. All of the dead people are grinning the hideous, joyless grin of those who have heard the joke, of those who have seen the terrible secrets of the earth.

However, Joker is not able to find the bodies his superiors need for propaganda purposes. He then decides to make a contribution to the official history of Tet in Hue:

> There are no bodies with their hands tied behind their backs. [...] So I borrow some demolition wire from the Arvin snuffies and, crushing the stiff bodies with my knee until dry bones crack, I bind up a family, assembled at random from the multitude –a man, his wife, a little boy, a little girl, and, of course, their dog.
>
> (*The Short Timers*, pp. 126-127).

Official figures of human losses for the whole offensive show a toll of 37.000 Vietcong and North Vietnamese, and 2.500 Americans[28]. To this must be added one more million of homeless Vietnamese.[29] According to MACV, whose assessment was immediately voiced in Washington, Tet became an American victory because the guerillas were decimated. This argument is validated by a diminished insurgent activity in the months following the offensive. The absence of communist cadres enabled South Vietnamese authorities to retake temporary control of the rural areas; so showed the statistics in the reports. But those figures irrefutably suggested a dear victory that the narratives consider pointless. They all underscore the contradiction that since the

United States military force officially had a supporting role, and was not the real foe of the communists in Vietnam (a role nominally taken up by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam) the American soldiers had to renounce to “their” victory, and give the territory conquered on to the South Vietnamese Army. This was tantamount to returning it to the insurgents in the short run.

Herr asserts that the base at Khe Sanh was destroyed by the same Americans who had defended it. For the brass it had already lost the strategic and psychological importance it once had. Khe Sanh, a “Diem Bien Phu in reverse,” as Westmoreland would tag it, simply ceased to exist.

Saigon continued being the amorphous, surreal, scenario of the big lie, the “poisonous flower,” as Herr calls it. The narratives that deal with Tet ’68 do not generally concern themselves with the aftermath of the offensive in Saigon. They would hardly be more explicit than the gesture of the city’s police chief, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, as it was immortalized by Eddie Adams.

Again it is Hue where the alleged victory of the allies appears more dubious. *Sand in the Wind* insists on the futility of the Americans fighting there. After winning his third and definitive purple heart, Lieutenant Kramer is resigned to the stark fact that “what had taken weeks and lives to gain was left behind in minutes” (p. 623).

Other narrators prefer to deal with the assumption of many of the soldiers trapped in Hue –if they had fought a World War II battle, the event deserved a World War II ceremony. But it could not be so, lest it embarrassed the Department of State. One of the characters in *The Short Timers* offers his version of the actual defeat of the Americans in Hue:

> We stomped the NVA and they stomped us and then the lifers send in the Arvins, like the godamn Arvins did it. Mr Shortround said it was their country, said we was only helping out, said it would boost the morale of the Vietnamese people. Well, fuck the Vietnamese people. The horrible hogs in hard, hungry Hotel Company ran up an American flag. Like on Iwo Jima. But some poge officers ordered them to take it down. The snuffies had to run up the stinking Vietnamese flag, which is yellow, which is the right color for these chickenshit people
>
> (*The Short Timers*, p. 109).

These developments in Vietnam were the prologue to one of the most stressful years in the recent history of the United States. Tet radicalized hawkish and dovish sentiments among the public, and deepened the confusion of those who had taken the comfortable position of the “dwak”. Liberals who wished a negotiated settlement and radicals decried Westmoreland’s plans to seek 206.000 more men for Vietnam. If the Tet Offensive was such a success, why was it necessary to send more troops? On the other hand the conservatives and moderates who manifested their opinions to keep up the escalation put Hue as an example of the crucial role of the United States at containing communism. Allegedly it was Tet that led Robert Kennedy to announce his candidacy to the presidency, outdoing the promises his brother had carried into the liberals’ hearts at the beginning of the decade. Finally, Tet became the definitive event that shaped Johnson’s decision not to run for reelection.

But Vietnam had become the liberal’s war, and the outcome of Tet sanctioned the suspicion that the war in Southeast Asia had undermined liberalism as the leading

force in American thought. Thinking that they had free hands, self-avowed "hawks" decided to run the war since November 1969, not without the support of a majority of the Americans. One year later, nationwide student protests on account of the invasion of Cambodia were settled with the death of four at Kent State, and two at Jackson State –but all in all, the country preferred to lose six students rather than the war. And that mood, somehow bruised after events in Iran and Lebanon, but still prevalent thanks to the spur of Reagan's stardom, can also be tracked down in the narratives about 1968. If the works closer to Tet were rather biased towards the skepticism at the way Americans managed and justified the war, those written around the 80s display divided opinions. When remembering those days, Ketwig speaks of his faith in Robert Kennedy and his exhilaration at Johnson's no-run speech on March 31, 1968. But the recreation of the aftermath of Tet stands a conservative fictional reconstruction too. *A Country Such as This* (1983) by James Webb may be a genuine example of conservative revision of the War taken into literature. Its main character, Josiah Judd, makes an impassioned defense of values that the American right has renegotiated as its own. The stage is 1968, and in the midst of the social and political upheavals that follow Tet, Judd proclaims his love for the American flag, the one that the politicians did not allow to be raised above the Citadel: "If the church represents the body of Christ, this flag represents the body of our country, all of our values, everything good and decent we stand for. And when somebody burns it, they're burning me. When somebody spits on it, they're spitting on me."[30]

That Iraq offset Vietnam, and that the "Mother of all defeats" offset Tet are mind-twisters the media resorted to when the Desert Stormers returned home. But the literary reconstructions of the offensive record the different moods with which authors and reading public alike have perceived that doomed February 1968, whose effects have transcended time. Hussein's regime in Iraq has continued all throughout the decade; The Marines' mandate in Somalia ended without any glamorous sign of successful accomplishment; the U.S. army's deployment in Bosnia was tinted with popular and political reticence. Our 30-year hindsight allows us to regard Tet as a military victory, but a psychological blow that capped the U.S. intervention in the Vietnamese conflict. As portrayed by the narratives of the Vietnam War, Tet 1968 could give us clues to understand the reluctant leadership of the United States in the New World Order.

Notes

1. William Eastlake, *The Bamboo Bed* (London: Michael Joseph, 1969) 121.
2. Robert Roth *Sand in The Wind* (New York: Pinnacle, 1973) 567.
3. *New York Times* (February 7, 1966): 1.
4. Loren Baritz, *Backfire: Vietnam –The Myths That Made Us Fight, The Illusions That Helped Us Lose, the Legacy That Haunts Us Today* (New York: Ballantine, 1985) 118.
5. William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: Fawcett, 1985 [1958]) 18.
6. John Briley, *The Traitors* (New York: Putnam, 1969) 340.
7. Gustav Hasford, *The Short Timers* (New York: Bantam, 1985 [1979]) 75.
8. Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Random House, 1969) 59.

9. John Ketwig, *...And a Hard Rain Fell* (New York: Pocket, 1985) 99-100.
10. Baritz, *Backfire* 117.
11. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Pan, 1979 [1977]) 85-86.
12. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 543; See also the CORDS report for late December 1967 in John Pratt ed. *Vietnam Voices* 306 ff. For details on CORDS, see note 16 below.
13. Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Popular Library, 1971) 371.
14. Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (London: Scolar, 1978) 138. See also Westmoreland's own account of the preparations for the offensive in his memoir, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, Da Capo, 1989 [1976]) 315 ff.
15. Anthony Grey, *Saigon* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982) 682.
16. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. A program designed by the MACV in order to increase the support of the non combatant native population for the South Vietnamese government. Its aim was to combine the military operations with social and economic programs. Eventually CORDS did not achieve a significant shift in the support of the peasants and its net gains came from the refugees from rural areas pouring into the cities.
17. See Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine, 1980) 610.
18. Johnson, *Vantage Point* 384.
19. *Ibid.* 382.
20. For accounts on the number of troops amassed on both sides compare the figures offered by, among others, Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 309 ff; Baritz, *Backfire* 169; Thomas Boettcher, *Vietnam: The Valor and the Sorrow* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985) 342; Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1972) 523-524.
21. See Baritz, *Backfire* 169.
22. William Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 1983) 244, 246.
23. For accounts of the joint American-South Vietnamese pushout of the communists see Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* 524; Karnow, *Vietnam* 532-533; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Knopf, 1979) 187.
24. Reprinted in William Benton, *The Annals of America, 1961-1968: The Burdens of World Power* [vol. 18] (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968) 607.
25. Quoted by Miller, *Lyndon* 568.
26. Compare the surveys made by different historians of the war. Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* 234, constructs a toll of 400; Pratt quotes sources that indicate 1.000 individuals, *Vietnam Voices* 336; Boettcher mentions 2.800, *Vietnam* 347, and Herring includes the same number of confirmed dead and 2.800 missing, *America's Longest War* 187.
27. See Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* 235.
28. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* 332. On his part Alexander Kendrick, *The Wound Within* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974) 249, raises the figure of American dead to 4.100 apart from 2.300 South Vietnamese fatal casualties.
29. See Baritz, *Backfire* 170; Fitzgerald doubles that number, *Fire in the Lake* 525.
30. James Webb, *A Country Such as This* 478.