THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

My Perspective on the Event & on the Media

Bác-Sỹ Nguyễn Hiếu, Ph.D
Historians deal with historic events all the times. Sometimes, we even associate events of our own personal life to historic dates.

At national level, Odd question: How well do we really remember events of the past???

What were you doing on Nov 22, 1963 at 12:30pm?
Q: What were you doing on Nov 22, 1963 at 12:30pm when President Kennedy was assassinated?

According to non-scientific surveys:

In 1983: 20 years after the assassination:
the majority of people could give a precise answer

In 2003: 40 years after the tragedy: only 30% could.
The senior citizens’ answers:...
The youngster: “I wasn’t born yet”

In a similar line of thinking, we can ask:
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

What happened during the Tết Offensive of 1968?

Many people will say:
- I was not there or
- I was not born yet

Old events need to be told for future generations

This presentation is a piece of oral history
1- Review of chain of events in my lifetime leading to the Tết offensive and to my attitude change
2- How much the media influence my thoughts during the offensive
3- Use of old photos as flashback

Let’s start from the beginning
Part 1: ADMIRATION

I was born a child of a colonized country in the 1930’s

French Indochina: 5 countries

so was my father, at the turn of the century

France had imposed The Accords of Protectorate to Việt-Nam in 1883 after the massacre at the port Thuận-an.

In my family, we cultivated our identity by studying Vietnamese humanities and Vietnamese history. Children were encouraged to read two books always readily available in the house.
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Book #1- The story of Kiều: our national masterpiece

So bể tài sắc lại là phẩn hồn

Thanh-minh trong tiết tháng ba

Trở như dâ vưng như đọng
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

The Story of Kiều was celebrated and illustrated by Phạm-Quỳnh (1892-1945)

Publisher of Nam-Phong, President of Society for Mutual Instruction Tri-tri, advocate for a Constitutional Monarchy, and Prime minister 32-45
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Book #2: Abridged History of Việt-Nam
By Trần-Trọng-Kim, Teacher, Historian, Author and Prime Minister

My hero: King Hàm-Nghi, the 13 y/o king who, from the jungle, called for the general uprising Cần-vương Movement; he ended in exile in Algeria

At an early age, I developed ADMIRATION
At an early age, I developed admiration for several individuals, who worked diligently to build-up Việt-Namese culture and enhance Việt-Namese identity i.e. Trần-Trọng-Kim, Phạm-Quỳnh, Nguyễn- Văn-Tổ, HM Bảo-Dài, Prof. Hoàng-Xuân-Hần, Nhật-Linh, Nguyễn-Mạnh-Tuong.

Phạm-Quỳnh wrote the FIRST Declaration of Independence in March 1945, (signed by Bảo-Dài and the royal government) P.D.Tọn & N-V-Vinh

Trần-Trọng-Kim, Prime Minister, of the FIRST government of Free Việt-Nam

Bảo-Dài
N.V.Tổ
H-X-Hần
Nhật-Linh
N.M.Tương

...While those individuals had been around for a while
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Nguyễn Phúc Vĩnh Thụy
(1913-1997)
(Modern) King Bảo-Đại: 1925 – 1945
Head of State: 1948-1955

Declaration of Independence
March 1045
Unification of Việt-Nam
August 1945
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Nguyễn-Văn-Tố
(1889-1947)

Researcher, EFEO
Head, Counter-Illiteracy Movement
(1938-1945)
Minister for Social Services
(Sep 1945-Mar 1946)
President, National Assembly
(Mar 1946-Aug 1946)
Minister without folio
(Aug 1946-Oct 1947)
Killed by French in Oct 1947
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Hoàng-Xuân-Hãn
(1908-1996)
Ecole Normal Superieure
Polytechnique
Ponts et Chaussée
Researcher, Writer

Minister of Education
(Mar-Aug 1945)
Introduced Vietnamese as language vehicle
in the National Educational System
Dictionary of technical
and scientific terminology
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Nguyễn-Tường-Tam
Nhật-Linh
(1905-1963)

Writer (Self reliance Group)
Tự-lực văn-doàn
Reformed Vietnamese prose
Vietnamese Nationalist Party
Foreign Minister
(Mar-Aug 1946)
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Nguyễn-Mạnh-Tường
(1908-1997)

Văn Phạm Việt Nam (cùng Bùi Kỳ, Trần Trọng Kim) (1941)

* Việt Nam Tự Điển (Hội Khai Trí Tiền Đức)

* Construction de l'Orient (1937)

* Sourires et Larmes d'une Jeunesse (1937)

* Pierres de France (1940)

* Apprentissage de la Méditerranée (1940)

* Le Voyage et le Sentiment (1940)

* Một Cuộc Hành Trình (1955)


* Lý luận giáo dục châu Âu: Tù Érasme tôi Rousseau thế kỷ XVI, XVII, XVIII - Nhà Xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội - 1994) - 530 trang

* Aikhylos (Eschyle) và bi kịch cổ đại Hi Lạp - Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục (1996)

* Virgile - nhà thơ vĩ đại của thời kỳ La mã cổ đại- Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (1996) - 342 trang
While those individuals have been around for sometimes in Aug 1945, the list of my heroes augmented with an INSTANT celebrity: Hồ Chí-Minh who gave the September 1945 Declaration known as of Independence (a misnomer)

A Declaration of Independence had been made several months earlier by Bảo-Đại and Phạm-Quỳnh

“France had left; Japan surrendered (to the Allied)” so said Minh. He did not wrestle the power from them

Actually, Bảo-Đái abdicated and transferred the power to a Republican government

The so-called Declaration of Independence on Sep 2nd, 1945 was in fact for the Founding of the Republic.

That Declaration of the Republic was signed by the whole Provisional Government.
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Ex-King Bảo-Đại became the Supreme Councilor

H-C-Minh had fought for the country, founded the Republic and was able to surround himself with respectable and respected individuals in the government as well as in the team going to the Đà-lạt Preliminary Conference

The reseacher Tỗ, min. Soc.Affairs

Nhất-Linh, Foreign Minister

Giáp, Deputy Head of delegation

Tuồng, cultural Chief, Đà-lạt

Hãn, Political Chief, Đà-lạt

For a while, the country was united behind Minh
Soon, from admiration, I experienced pain as I watched my heroes and leaders fight bitterly among themselves.

PART 2: PAIN

Many men and women of my generation felt trapped as children in a dysfunctional family

The Saga of children in a Dysfunctional family
The Unity Government collapsed by the mid-1946

The Supreme Councilor was sent to China then ordered to stay there

*(he would be judged in absentia in 1948)*

Vice-P.M. Nguyễn-Hải-Thần (VNCMDMH) and Foreign Minister Nguyễn-Tương-Tam (VNQĐĐ) left

Other non-Communist politicians disappeared

News of Phạm-Quỳnh being taken prisoner then “disappeared”

The Non-Communist leaders entertained the idea of forming a new Nationalist front. Many of them resurfaced around Bảo-Đại.

France took advantage of the situation:

The State of Việt-Nam was created
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE
The country was divided in July 1954
Families became divided. By choice? by chance? by circumstances?
PAIN: The Saga of a divided country: the 1954 exodus
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

PAIN:
The Saga of Divided People

TO LEAVE or NOT TO LEAVE

That was the question
The Pain
The Saga Of A Broken Family

My parents became communist comrades and my parents-in-law became anti-Communist fighters. Not by choice but by family circumstances.

(for this quilt show) I created a Vietnamese map, cutting the map in half at the 17th parallel to represent the Split in 1954. In the process of creating this quilt, I made every effort to stitch the split back together. It will take immense effort, tireless work and many stitches to heal the spirit.

I hope our generation and generations to come will work together to heal our historical pain.

Chau Thuy Huynh graduated from UC Berkeley in May, 2006.
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

PAIN:
The Saga of a divided people affected old and young
To Stay or To Leave?

PAIN:
The Saga of a Symbol:
The FLAG

Anh hy sinh, lá cờ in vất đạn
Em vá cờ, em vá mạnh giang san..
PAIN: The Saga of a Broken Country: The Story of the Two Flags

Growing up in Việt-Nam, every Monday at school, I had to salute the Communist Việt-Namese flag, I felt extremely proud of being Việt-Namese and extremely proud of the flag.

When I came to the US, I witnessed a different attitude... The Việt-Namese-Americans were (also as proud) saluting "their" own flag, as I would be when saluting mine.

I soon came to realize their perspective and developed a sense of respect for both flags.

Chau Thuy Huynh, UC Berkeley
The flags have different patterns, but they use the same two colors: red and yellow. In this quilt, I combined the two flags. The two flags are of the same origin and when combined, they balance each other and make each other more beautiful.

Chau Thuy Huynh, UC Berkeley
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Following the Admiration, came the Pain of a Divided Nation
In 1954: my family moved from Hà-nội to Sài-gòn.

Part 3: DISILLUSION
Disillusion filled my heart as I learned about
what was happening in North Việt-Nam
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

LAND REFORM & DENUNCIATION PROGRAM

LAND REDISTRIBUTION & CLASS STRUGGLE

PHOTOS BY DMITRI BALTERMANT
## RESULTS OF LAND REFORM AND CLASS DENUNCIATION PROGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th># killed</th>
<th># wrongly condemned</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploiting Landowners</td>
<td>26,453</td>
<td>20,493</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Plain) Landowners</td>
<td>82,777</td>
<td>51,480</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landowners (having participated in Revolution and Resistance)</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Farmers (Not owning land)</td>
<td>62,192</td>
<td>51,003</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All categories</td>
<td>172,008</td>
<td>123,226</td>
<td>71.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OUT OF FOUR VICTIMS, 3 WERE WRONGLY KILLED
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

One-hundred flowers affair
Repression of intellectuals and writers who demanded freedom of thought and of expression

THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

ONE-HUNDRED-FLOWERS AFFAIR

Expelled from Professional Associations, no further professional creative activity
Khai trừ vịn-viện (definitively):
Phan Khôi, Trường Tứu, Thụy An (Hội Nhà Văn), Trần Duy (Hội Mỹ Thuật)

Khai trừ ba năm (3 yrs):
Trần Dân, Lê Đạt (Hội Nhà văn), Tử Phác và Đăng Đình Hùng (Hội Nhạc sĩ)

Khai trừ một năm (1 yr):
Hoàng Cầm và Phùng Quán ra khỏi (Hội Nhà Văn)

I was bewildered at the harsh treatment inflicted to intellectuals because of their demand for free thought and expression

Jail time & banishment
Thụy-An, Nguyễn-Hữu Đặng, Trần Duy bị kết án từ 12 đến 15 năm tù.

Removed from office and placed under house arrest /social & economical isolation
Các giáo sư đại học như Trường Tứu, Trần Đức Thảo, Nguyễn Mạnh Trường, Đào Duy Anh... bị cách chức và bị quản thúc
With pain and disillusion in my heart, nevertheless, I still hoped that the two sides of my then divided country would enter a peaceful competition to provide greater freedom, richer economy, better education, brighter opportunities and overall more fulfillment in the lives of our people.

Part 4: AWAKENING

Instead, the 1968 Tết Offensive produced a rude awakening for the nation: North Việt-Nam had only chosen the war option
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

AWAKENING

On New Year, during the ceasefire, North Việt-Nam forces attacked some forty cities and strategic points with two main objectives:

1. to upset SVN administration, hoping to trigger a general uprising

2. militarily, to obtain some land and a city to serve as capital for the Việt-công: they chose the city of Huế.
The general uprising failed to occur

The enemy was pushed back

Nevertheless, North Việt-Nam claimed victory at Huế; they issued a commemorative stamp which says: BRAVO FOR HUẾ GREAT VICTORY

Death and desolation were not reported in North Việt-Nam
Soon after the battle:
- Mass graves were found
- Mass execution, discovered
- Some victims, found even buried alive

We watched on TV, days after days, exhumation of bodies, we grieved with mourning families
I felt rage and disbelief at the exposed atrocities. My journey from Admiration to Pain, to Disillusion then Awakening was personal; but I feel that many men and women of my generation went through the same process.

The Huế Massacre
Reported by Douglas Pike, Don Oberdorfer
Denied by Gareth Porter and associates
Confirmed by Stanley Karnow, Marilyn B. Young, etc.
THE 1968 TẾT OFFENSIVE

Role of the Media? The Saigon government has made negligible propaganda use of the massacre. (Time Magazine, Oct 1969)

In the aftermath of the Offensive, everybody everywhere had firsthand witnessed Communist treachery and cruelty.

No media/TV was necessary to appreciate those facts.

The media did fuel a surge of patriotism, build up a sense of urgency and fortify the general commitment to the struggle.

Feb 1st: Declaration of martial law

June 15: the National Assembly ordered a general mobilization (a decree that had failed to pass only five months previously)

Military mobilization, anti-corruption campaigns, demonstrations of political unity, and administrative reforms were quickly carried out; new determination exhibited among the ordinary citizens.

The Tết Offensive heightened rather than dampened our spirit

(J.Willbanks: dawn of 24 Feb 68: 2nd battalion, 3rd regiment, ARVN)
In the US, the same Tết Offensive was reported in a much more negative way. TV showed daily war reports of devastation and death:

"(Our) most important guerrilla ally during the war was the America press." (Võ Nguyên Giáp)

In fact, the media fuel antiwar movement.

Despite the outcome of the battle, the American people and their leaders came to perceive the Việt-Nam war as lost.

In all honesty, we didn’t achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention but it turned out to be a fortunate result. (Gen. Trần-Độ)
In N. Việt-Nam, the government-controlled media reported “the victory of Huế” without any mention of destruction, death and despair that N-VN forces had brought along.

In 1975, Xuân-Phượng, head of film propaganda unit, while filming the so-called liberation of South Việt-Nam, wondered why Huế people ran away from the “liberating” NVN forces.

Fifteen years later, writing her autobiography, in a foot note, she gave the finally-found explanation: I, as the people of North Việt-Nam, had had no knowledge of the Huế Massacre.

Xuân-Phượng: Áo-Dài, Plon, 2001:207
Conclusions:

1- The media, also called the 4th power, can do magic trick

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South Việt-Nam</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>North Việt-Nam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>Pessimism</td>
<td>State controlled media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General mobilization</td>
<td>Mood for Withdrawal</td>
<td>Black out =No information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Give the media  
half a glass of water;  
it can

make it half FULL  
or half EMPTY or even  
make it DISAPPEAR

A question arises: Should there be a 5th power to control the 4th one, and assure its veracity and its impartiality?

(Reed Irvine’s AIM? or Ignacio Ramonet’s 5th power?)

2- My journey **Admiration-Pain-Disillusion-Awakening** is personal
However, my story resonates with many men and women of my generation