March 4, 1968

Dear Clark:

As an historian, I know analogies are as often misleading as they are illuminating.

Nevertheless, this paper, volunteered by Henry Owen, head of State’s Policy Planning Council, is worth reading.

W. W. Rostow

Honorable Clark Clifford
Secretary of Defense
Washington, D. C.

"How Wars End -- With a Bang, Not a Whimper"

WWRostow:rln
Wednesday, Feb. 28, 1968
6:45 p.m.

MR. PRESIDENT:

Henry Owen has prepared this interesting
and somewhat comforting historical memorandum
relating to the Communist Tet offensive.

W. W. Rostow

Attachment
MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: How Wars End - With a Bang, Not a Whimper

TV accounts of the Communist offensive in Vietnam bring to mind how, in three past major US wars:

-- the losing side threw everything it had into one last all-out offensive;

-- the winning side was psychologically discom­bobulated by same;

-- the net effect was to hasten the end of the war.

These cases are cited below - as a study of human nature in war and defeat, rather than a guide to what will happen in different circumstances in Vietnam.

1. World War II. As his armies retreated toward final defeat in late 1944, Hitler resolved on what Eisenhower has called "an attack of desperation": The Battle of the Bulge.

Aided by surprise and bad weather, which limited US air operations, the German attack gained substantial ground and inflicted large losses. Great gaps were torn in the US line in the Ardennes; the German advance was rapid through the center of the breakthrough; and Liege seemed threatened. Three US divisions were roughly handled and the US lost 77,000 men in short order.

A fair amount of gloom characterized US press reports of these events: If Hitler could mount an attack of this magnitude, the press suggested, he could not be very close to defeat.

But US commanders kept their nerve; necessary reserves were amassed for counter-blows from the flanks; and the German forces were driven back to their starting positions with losses of 90-120,000 men.
The net effect was significantly to hasten the end of the war, for reasons that General Eisenhower explains in his memoirs: "...In the Battle of the Bulge the enemy had committed all of his remaining reserves. I counted on a greatly weakened resistance from that moment onward, both because of losses suffered by the Germans and because of the widespread discouragement that I felt sure would overtake his armies."

2. World War I. Contemplating a steadily darkening military prospect, as a result of the tightening Allied blockade and mounting US troop shipments to France, Ludendorff decided in early 1918 on one last throw of the dice. He transferred every German military unit that he could lay his hands on from the Eastern to the Western front and, on March 21, 1918, threw his forces against the juncture of the French and British forces on a seventy-four mile front in Northeastern France. His object was to roll up the British northward to the Channel ports, either to destroy or contain them there, and then turn on the French.

At first, his scheme seemed to prosper. The British Fifth Army was driven back forty miles and the allied armies seemed in danger of being split apart. The French commander-in-chief (Pétain) pointed to his British counterpart (Haig) and said: "There is a man who will soon have to surrender his army in the field".

But this first German attack petered out after a week, due to lack of supplies, and so, on April 9, they mounted a "second wave" attack at another part of the front. Once again the British were forced back as a large gap was opened in the allied line by the rout of (Portuguese) forces.

By April 26, this attack, too, had ground to a halt and so, on May 27, the Germans launched a third wave - this time against the French. Seen from the allied side, these successive attacks seemed a measure of resilient and unending German strength. We know now that they were, in fact, a counsel of despair - the decisions of a German High Command confronted with successive failures, not knowing how to recoup these failures, and unwilling to
yield what they knew must be their last initiative in the war. This third attack, too, gained surprise and success; in four days it penetrated thirty miles, and cost the French 60,000 prisoners and 650 guns. Panic swept Paris, which seemed directly in the path of the attack, and hundreds of its inhabitants fled to southern and western France. But American reinforcements helped to stem the tide, and the fourth and last German attack (July 15) which followed collapsed in failure.

The allies then went over to the offensive. They expected the war to last another year and so were trying to gain positions from which to push forward in 1919. But it soon became apparent that Ludendorff had consumed Germany's reserves of manpower, materiel, and morale in his last desperate attacks. In the face of the allied offensive, the German armies fell back and apart with unexpected speed and the war came to an end in November - one fighting year earlier than it would have ended if the Germans had not attacked.

3. Civil War. In the summer of 1864, Grant was pressing on Lee in Virginia and Sherman was moving forward in Georgia, despite a skillful defense by General Johnston. The military tide was running against the South - although at a rather slow pace.

Then Jefferson Davis decided to try to reverse the tide, before it was too late, with a bold offensive. He replaced General Johnston with General Hood, and told Hood to strike boldly at Sherman, despite the weakness of Hood's army. Hood complied, and launched three all-out attacks - on July 20th, 22nd (seven separate assaults), and 28th (six assaults). All were repulsed, with a total loss of 20,000 men. Greatly weakened, Hood could no longer defend Atlanta, which Sherman entered September 2.

Then Hood decided to mount a real "last gasp". On October 16, he led his army north out of Georgia and into Tennessee, intending to pass through the Cumberland Gaps to attack Grant in the rear. His object was to "defeat Grant and allow General Lee, in command of our combined armies, to march upon Washington or turn about and annihilate Sherman". It was to be all or nothing.
At first, Hood's desperate gamble seemed to be succeeding; the Union forces retreated to Nashville after a stand-off in the battle of Franklin. There was concern in Washington. A worried Grant, several hundred miles away in his Virginia headquarters, decided to relieve the Union commander at Nashville, General Thomas.

But the battle at Franklin and Hood's earlier offensives had cost the Confederate army more heavily in men and morale than was realized. When Thomas attacked on December 15 (before the order relieving him could be delivered), Hood's forces collapsed. A Union officer wrote: "In those few minutes, an army was changed into a mob, and the whole structure of the rebellion in the Southwest, with all its possibilities, was overthrown".

General Stephen Lee, trying to rally Hood's men, said: "I doubt if any soldiers in the world ever needed so much cumulative evidence to convince them that they were beaten". Hood, by his last gasp offensive, had supplied them with that evidence and thus measurably hastened the end of the war in this area.

4. Conclusion: All of which suggests that there may be a law of human nature which comes into play toward the end of wars, and which:

- prompts the losing side to take large risks and losses in a last offensive (or, more usually, a wave of successive offensives) just before its collapse - even when military considerations, coldly calculated, suggest that defeat could be staved off longer by more cautious tactics;

- conceals from the winning side the degree of the enemy's desperation and the extent to which, despite tactical successes, the enemy's offensive has hastened his ultimate defeat.