

Major Pat Proctor
4401 Caitlin Dr.
Manhattan, KS 66502
(760) 792-0458
Fax: (785) 320-7864
pproctor@prosimco.com
<http://www.prosimco.com/writing>

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THE VIETNAM "SURGE"

by

Pat Proctor

After the loss of both houses of Congress in midterm elections in 2006, President George W. Bush doubled down on his Iraq war policy. In a dramatic change in strategy that has come to be known as the Iraq "surge," he authorized the deployment of an additional 20,000 troops to Baghdad and al Anbar province in a last-ditch effort to salvage the war. He also replaced Gen. George Casey with Gen. David Petraeus and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld with Richard Gates.¹ Along with more troops and a new security team

¹ David E. Sanger, "Bush Adds Troops in Bid to Secure Iraq," *New York Times*, 11 January 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/11/world/middleeast/11prexy.html?sq=bush%20baghdad%20anbar%20january%202007&st=cse&scp=10&pagewanted=all>, accessed 19 April 2009.

came a new strategy: instead of watching from forward operating bases while Iraq ripped itself apart, US forces struck deals with Sunni insurgents and moved out into the cities to focus on protecting the population.² The gamble paid off. Sectarian violence dropped dramatically as did American casualties. More importantly factions began to reach accommodation on many of the contentious issues which had once threatened to shatter Iraq along sectarian lines.³

With this success came a turnaround in public opinion about the war. While Americans continued to see the decision to go to war as a mistake, Americans also began to see the light at the end of the tunnel. In a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll immediately after the midterm elections, only 34 percent of Americans believed that the United States was winning the war in Iraq. Public opinion sank even lower as the surge was just beginning in March 2007, with only 29 percent of Americans believing the United States was winning. However, as conditions began to improve, public opinion slowly began to improve as well. By February 2009, a majority believed America was winning the war.⁴ This turnaround bought precious time for Bush's Iraq policy that might someday be seen as the critical factor in the war's eventual successful conclusion.

Four decades earlier, the Vietnam War saw similar, wholesale changes. After the Tet Offensive, senior military leaders were replaced and the strategy changed dramatically. And, just as in the Iraq war, the changes netted positive results: North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong attacks were less frequent and less effective, American casualties decreased,

² Gen. David H. Petraeus, "Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Civilians of Multi-National Force-Iraq," Headquarters, Multi-National Force-Iraq, Baghdad, Iraq, 7 September 2007.

³ US Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, March 2009, ii-vii.

⁴ PollingReport.com, "Iraq," PollingReport.com, <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>, accessed 19 April 2009.

American troops came home by the thousands, and, most importantly, the South Vietnamese government was more stable than it had ever been. Yet, unlike in the Iraq war, this change in strategy did not yield a dramatic change in public opinion. After an initial "bump," public support for the war cratered. Nixon was finally forced to accept a humiliating compromise peace with North Vietnam that set the stage for the eventual destruction of South Vietnam.

Why didn't this change in strategy--this Vietnam "surge"--and improved conditions on the ground turn public opinion? To answer this question, this article will examine the war in the way the public saw it, in the television and print media of the day.

AFTER TET

Three years after he committed America to a ground war in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson's war policy was in shambles. Amid declining public support, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara resigned in November 1967.⁵ Public confidence completely collapsed after the shock of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 and, in March, President Johnson announced he would not run for reelection.⁶ In June, the commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Gen. William Westmoreland was replaced by his deputy commander since 1967, the gruff, plain-spoken Gen. Creighton Abrams. Immediately upon assuming command, Abrams began to refocus the US effort. Since the first commitment of ground forces to direct action in ground combat in 1965, the US military had been focused on attrition warfare--finding, fixing, and killing the enemy until his will to fight was broken. Under General Abrams, the US

⁵ Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1988), 118.

⁶ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 250-253.

military began to attack vulnerable enemy supply routes and isolate the rural population from the enemy.⁷

The change in strategy had nearly immediate effect. In October 1969, US forces found a 41 page strategy document published the previous year by the North Vietnamese. The document gave a bleak assessment of the situation inside South Vietnam and recommended falling back to rebuild. This reduced capability was due in part to losses in the Tet Offensive and previous large-scale operations. But it was also due to America's new focus on interdicting enemy supplies and isolating the rural populace.⁸

However, this change in strategy was overshadowed by presidential politics. The administration worked feverishly in 1968 to end the war, if not to help the eventual Democratic presidential nominee, then at least to rehabilitate Johnson's imperiled legacy.⁹ Johnson wanted to bring the North Vietnamese to the table to reach a settlement that would allow the US to leave and South Vietnam to survive as an independent country. Johnson inaugurated this effort on the same evening he announced his withdrawal from the presidential race by also announcing a bombing halt everywhere in North Vietnam except the area just above the demilitarized zone (DMZ).¹⁰ Two weeks later, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford ended the disastrous strategy of gradual escalation when he announced that a ceiling had been reached on troop levels.¹¹

The North Vietnamese, however, sensing America's weakness, pursued a strategy of "fighting while negotiating". They agreed to talks in Paris which they intentionally deadlocked. At the same time, they launched a spring

⁷ John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 16-17; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 284.

⁸ A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 555.

⁹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 250-253.

¹⁰ Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 493.

¹¹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 250-253.

offensive in Saigon.¹² Johnson was caught between the desire to keep pressure on the Vietnamese to secure a peace settlement and the desire to end bombing to help Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey get elected. In the end he got neither. The North rejected US peace proposals and, despite an "October surprise" unconditional bombing halt, Hubert Humphrey lost the election by a half-million votes.¹³

The print media largely missed the change in Vietnam War strategy in 1968. The only change in strategy that the *New York Times* noted after Abrams took over came on 8 July, when they reported that he had stepped up river patrols and B-52 strikes in an effort to increase security in Saigon.¹⁴ Successful interdiction of supplies in South Vietnam only made the *New York Times'* front page twice between August 1968 and the presidential election in November. In one instance, on 21 September 1968, the *Times* reported that Marines had discovered 500 enemy rifles. The *Times* also wrote that the "operation marks departure in American tactics," but the departure it noted was the proximity of the ground operation to the North Vietnamese border, rather than its focus on supplies instead of attrition.¹⁵ Gene Roberts, in a report on 16 October in the *Times*, quoted a general who said, "We keep getting captured documents and other information that indicate the enemy wants to attack some cities again--and especially Saigon...But he can't get his supplies in place." Yet Roberts was skeptical that the enemy's capability had actually been reduced or that it had anything to do with US forces.¹⁶

¹² Herring, *America's Longest War*, 254-255; Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 507-508.

¹³ Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 514-527.

¹⁴ Joseph B. Treaster, "Allies Intensify Patrols on River to Protect Saigon," *New York Times*, 8 July 1968, 1.

¹⁵ United Press International, "Marines Landed Within the DMZ; Push Southward," *New York Times*, 21 September 1968, 1.

¹⁶ Gene Roberts, "New 'Lull' Poses Question: Is It a Signal From Hanoi?" *New York Times*, 16 October 1968, 1.