

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The Arrogance of Firepower

Part I

Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam

by Mark Bowden, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017

The biggest of their guns were sixteen-inchers, a term referring to the width of the barrel's bore. The gun itself was fifty times that long. It could hurl a projectile as heavy as a small car twenty-five miles.

—from *Hue 1968*

“FOR A JOURNALIST INTERESTED IN HISTORY, the sweet spot is about fifty years. Enough time has gone by for a measure of historical perspective, and yet there remain many living witnesses.” So writes Mark Bowden in the first paragraph of “Source Notes” for his monumental *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*. To Bowden's credit and the book's credibility, there is a list of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong veteran interviewees to complement those American veterans who were also interviewed. Bowden was also favored with unprecedented access to both American and Vietnamese war archives. Reporting in as a 600-page tome, the book accounts for the brutal month of the Tet Offensive in Hue, the sacred and historical capital of Vietnam. Though publicly and consistently downplayed by the American senior commander, General William Westmoreland, the battle for Hue was, as Bowden notes, not only the bloodiest of that war, but a turning point in both that conflict and American history. “When it was over,” he writes on the first page of the book, “debate concerning the war in the United States was never again about winning, only about how to leave. And never again would Americans fully trust their leaders.” Indeed, the book concerns itself with the mendacity and unearned conceit of governments (on all sides) and the consequence of these conditions. That Bowden's book appears at the same time as the release of Ken Burn's *The Vietnam War* and Steven Spielberg's *The Post* is entirely fitting.

Bowden early sums up what was, until Afghanistan, America's longest war: “Once begun, a military commitment is a hard thing to contain.” As regards Afghanistan and Iraq, it is impossible to

read *Hue 1968* and to not despair at America's continual blunderings into war without plans or understanding. Let's work, though, to stick in this essay to Vietnam, and the lessons we continue to spurn.

To begin: more bombs were dropped in North and South Vietnam than were dropped over Europe in all of World War II, and this in a country you could drive the length of (if it had decent highways) in ten hours, the width of in three. Problem: there were no real targets for bombing. In an early briefing:

McNamara explained that well over two thousand targets had been bombed in the North so far, and that of the fifty-seven identifiable ones that remained, none were significant enough to justify risking a pilot and a plane, or even the cost of the bombs. One of the targets was a rubber plant that produced only thirty tires a day.

“How do you bomb a nation into the Stone Age when, in modern industrial terms, they are not that far removed from it?” asks Bowden. To dodge this troublesome question, Westmoreland turned to a specious metric to evaluate US success in the war: *body count*. In fact, the body count was Westmoreland's go-to metric. Bowden points out: “It was stark and final, and it offered something that was irrefutable, so much so that it became a substitute for strategy.” What the metric didn't account for was for how many of those bodies were civilians. And how much of the country we were destroying with shelling, bombs, napalm, and poisonous defoliants. There were times during the war, Bowden reports, that a thousand civilians were being killed or grievously injured by American bombing *every week*.

In Hue, the “storm of war” as Bowden puts it, “blew flat all semblance of law, logic, and decency. To soldiers there was a kind of order—causes and lines to be defended, soldiers who were either friend or enemy—but to civilians it was just savagery.” Bowden reports that Vietnamese civilians, when they did come up, were described as a nuisance, even though the battle, like the war, was ostensibly about *them*—their “hearts and minds.” There were so many bodies in Hue (Front soldiers and civilians alike) that they were often just shoved into the killing bomb's crater and covered over.

The great tragedy unfolding in Hue seemed not to register with those in charge. Neither Saigon nor the MACV—nor the press, for that matter—expressed concern

for the masses of people trapped by the fighting. The only concern expressed about collateral damage concerned Hue's historical treasures. . . . None of the stories written about the fierce fighting in the city mentioned mounting civilian casualties. . . . Avenues of escape were few in the fortress, so the crisis there was particularly dire. . . . When civilians did make it into stories filed from the battlefield, it was only to describe the mounting logistical challenge of dealing with them.

And this:

Firepower made all the difference. When it could, the air force now dropped napalm over neighborhoods still occupied by the enemy. It was more effective than bombs, which left piles of rubble into which the enemy could crawl and set up new firing positions. With napalm, the flames sucked all of the oxygen out of underground bunkers, suffocating anyone inside, while incinerating everything above that wasn't made of stone. There was no ducking the onslaught.

The images of destruction and death in Hue affected American television viewers. Columnist James Reston summed it up: "Here is the dilemma of our military strategy of victory. How do we win by military force without destroying what we are trying to save?"

Moreover, in Hue:

Many men felt misled. Resentment percolated quietly. Their leaders—the officers, not the gunny sergeants and squad leaders who stood with them side by side—were relentless. They would issue orders for the grunts to move forward into danger, and when they emerged intact, feeling they had narrowly escaped a terrible fate, they were ordered to do it again, and again, and again. You could press your luck like that for only so long. As their numbers were whittled down, they came to feel that more was being asked of them than ever should be asked of anyone.

General Westmoreland was steadfast in his false assurances to political leaders and the American public that Hue was not the deadly disaster that it patently was. His refusal to admit to facts, of course,

carried consequences for the soldiers who fought there. Westmoreland's angle from the beginning was to focus on Khe Sahn and its large American presence near the DMZ.

Westy's preoccupation with the vulnerability of Khe Sahn had played perfectly into Hanoi's plans. The buildup of NVA forces there had been a feint. The objective all along had been Hue and the other cities. Westmoreland had fallen for it so completely that even after Hue fell neither he nor his superiors in Washington could see it, much less admit it. . . . Never mind that more than one hundred targets had been struck simultaneously by enemy forces estimated to number more than eighty thousand—so much for Westy's confidence that Hanoi could not muster troops in sufficient strength to mount attacks deep inside Vietnam. In fact, the only major American base that was not attacked on the eve of Tet was Khe Sahn.

When Hue was stormed and taken, the commanders at the American base in Phu Bai, eight miles south, dispatched two companies of marines—just over three hundred men—against ten thousand enemy troops. During the early days of the Battle for Hue, it was a bloodbath.

In a secret cable, following the initial attack, the “ever-upbeat Westy” sent a report to General Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Addressing Hue, he wrote: “The enemy has approximately three companies [about five hundred men] in the Hue Citadel.” He was off by a factor of twenty.

The surprise achieved in Hue was complete. It was not a case of simply being caught off guard. It was so unexpected it triggered not just alarm but disbelief—*deadly* disbelief. . . . Many young Americans would die or be severely maimed over the weeks it took for the truth to sink in. . . . Westmoreland seemed almost oblivious to the largest single battle of the Tet Offensive, if not of the entire war, underway in Hue. His forces were badly outnumbered, struggling, and dying.

There were more enemy soldiers killed in Hue than Americans, by a factor of five to one, so according to Westmoreland's metric the battle was a success. But, as Bowden points out, losses weighed more heavily in the United States than in North Vietnam.

There's no doubt that an authoritarian state can more easily absorb battlefield deaths than a democracy, where every one is a blow to public support. It is to democracy's credit, and benefit, that casualties dampen enthusiasm for all but the most vitally important conflicts. Hanoi, on the other hand, had millions of men at its disposal, and could justify its suffering and sacrifice by asserting the noble cause of independence—more inspiring than some abstract theory about the balance of power.

The lesson we are reluctant to digest, Bowden argues, is that cultivating deep regional knowledge in the practice of foreign policy leads to leadership informed more by understanding than mere ideology. For one large example from Vietnam, the misunderstanding that “home and community were not just an accident of geography—as they frequently were in America—but an obligation and identity.” The wide-spread forcible relocation of people was not only wrong, it was, Bowden rightly offers, the *opposite* of personal freedom.

One bright moment—in this book of despair—takes up this particular concern:

Wallace had rapidly soured on the whole Vietnam adventure, although he intended to stay and do his duty. On one patrol he found a pile of what he thought was burning wood. When he got closer he saw that it was the blackened remains of an old woman. She probably had been hit by a grenade they had launched at her village. Wallace wondered what she had been doing when she had been killed like that.

One day he saw an officer casually aim his rifle and try to shoot a Vietnamese boy in the distance.

“Sir, what are you doing?” he'd asked.

“He's probably supplying the NVA,” the officer said. “What's he doing out here anyway?”

“It's his country!” said Wallace. “What's he carrying? Did you even look through your binoculars to see if he was carrying anything?”

Wallace had pretty much decided that from then on he wasn't going to shoot at anybody who was not actively shooting at him.

There is sweep and moral authority to Mark Bowden's *Hue 1968*. The battle in that city serves as metaphor for the entire ill-conceived and ill-fated foray into Southeast Asia. For that reason alone, Hue is a battle worth revisiting, with Mark Bowden walking point:

Nearly all the veterans I interviewed—on both sides—are understandably proud of their service. The Americans had a wide range of feelings about it, but there is no question about their bravery and patriotism. In the worst days of this fight, facing the near certainty of death or severe bodily harm, those caught up in the Battle of Hue repeatedly advanced. Many of those who survived are still paying for it. To me the way they were used, particularly the way their idealism and loyalty were exploited by leaders who themselves had lost faith in the effort, is a stunning betrayal. It is a lasting American tragedy and disgrace.

Westmoreland's magical metric, while it accounted for bodies, did not at all account for commitment. How to measure the worth of a soldier who to learn to move invisibly across open fields smears himself with mud from head to toe to inch his way forward, halting every few inches, taking up to a day to move the length of a football field? Or the covert effort to recruit Hue locals to make regular night trips past villages on the city's outskirts to *force* the guard dogs to bark, so that when the Vietnamese troops moved in, the dogs' reactions would go unheeded? Or the Vietnamese version of C rations in which soldiers carried live pigs, drugging them to keep them quiet? And this continuing ignored insight concerning overwhelming American firepower: "What if heightened punishment by US bombs and guns actually *fueled* Communist resistance, inspiring ten recruits for every dead enemy fighter?" America, despite its unparalleled might, ignores such proofs at its peril.

Part II

Siege of Khe Sanh: The Story of the Vietnam War's Largest Battle

by Robert Pisor, W.W. Norton, originally published in 1982, reissued 2018

The North Vietnamese soldier lived with the land. He farmed his fields, cut his bed and his fighting place into it, walked paths drank its water, used its leaves to hide his movements, and tunneled into its depths. The Americans bulldozed the land, dynamited it, burned it with napalm, and dosed it with chemicals and pesticides.

—from *Siege of Khe Sanh*

RUMORS OF A MASSIVE NORTH VIETNAMESE BUILDUP around Khe Sanh had circulated since mid-December, 1967, when India Company and other elements of the Third Battalion, 26th Marines, were airlifted to the combat base on short notice. The commander of all American forces in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, believed that tens of thousands of North Vietnam's finest troops were moving into attack positions around the isolated Marine post. Apprehension mounted as enemy truck traffic on nearby Laotian roads and trails rose from a monthly average of 480 in the fall to more than 6,000 in December.

Though history supports that the commanding general was dismally mistaken, it is, at least, partially comprehensible that Westmoreland put his armies in motion to confront his first notions of Khe Sanh becoming the American Dienbienphu. His fatal error was to never falter in his belief that Khe Sanh was to be *his* and America's crowning victory. This recalcitrance paved the way for General Giap, commanding general of the North Vietnamese armies, to pull off the 1968 Tet Offensive, as Westmoreland's fullest attention was focused on Khe Sanh. And so despite claims that Tet actually resulted in an American military victory, the "victory" sowed deep seeds of dissent in both the U.S. and South Vietnam and altered the course of the war forever. If The Battle for Hue, was as Mark Bowden's book properly claims, the most significant battle of the entire war, The Siege of Khe Sanh was indeed that war's largest battle, a grueling seventy seven-day test of firepower and hand-to-hand combat.

Westmoreland wanted this battle. He had planned it and prepared it. He had willed it.

This was the week before Tet, the Vietnamese celebration on homecoming and thanksgiving that on January 30 would mark the end of the Year of the Goat and inaugurate the Year of the Monkey. Westmoreland planned for 1968 to be the Year of the Hammer. Khe Sanh would be his anvil.

The Marines had resisted building up U.S. forces in Khe Sanh.

“We didn’t want a force that size out there . . . because you had to hold those outlying hills with *something*,” one Marine general said. The assistant commander of the 3rd Marine division was less diplomatic: “When you’re at Khe Sanh, you’re not really anywhere. It’s far from everything. You could lose it, and you really haven’t lost a damn thing.” Westmoreland prevailed, and built up Khe Sanh, the lonely outpost he wanted to make his Dienbienphu, not Giap’s. He meant to “lure the enemy to their deaths” and “destroy them beneath a Niagara of bombs.” Khe Sanh was, as one visitor contended, watching the construction of the base and its airstrip, “like setting out honey to attract flies.”

Robert Pisor rightly argues that the Marine base in the last days of January became the symbol of American determination in Vietnam, just as Dienbienphu had become the symbol of French commitment in 1954. President Lyndon Johnson understood that his top military advisers—primarily Westmoreland—envisioned Khe Sanh as a trap to kill as many as 30,000 enemy soldiers in a single stroke. But the President also knew that no number of North Vietnamese bodies would offset the loss of the built-up Marine base. Westmoreland’s go-to metric of positive kill ratios would not be enough to offset the number of American deaths that would lead to Khe Sanh’s fall. “None of us was blind to the possibility that the North Vietnamese might try to make of Khe Sanh another Dienbienphu,” Westmoreland said, “yet we were aware of marked differences in the two situations, [most notably our] tremendous firepower.”

It was the numbers, the huge numbers, that gave Westmoreland his greatest satisfaction. He had fifty times the mincing power that the French had had at

Dienbienphu. He *wanted* the North Vietnamese to attack. . . . Westmoreland was *positive* the Marines could hold, even if they wavered. He had absolutely no intention of losing the combat base; he was prepared to use nuclear weapons to save it. . . . “Because the region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabitable,” he reasoned, “civilian casualties would be minimal.” It might be an excellent place to demonstrate American resolve in Vietnam.

Nuclear weapons? In official discussions, Westmoreland also mentioned chemical weapons, though it seems this may have been beside the point as Agent Orange and other defoliants were already in use, denuding the jungle and poisoning soil and water. Westmoreland was such a proponent of “firepower” that, as Pisor writes, “Infantry captains were as much the coordinators of supporting arms as they were the leaders of men.”

Now, let us consider, as Robert Pisor does in *Siege of Khe Sanh*, the “American way of war.” For starters, Westmoreland limited Vietnam tours of duty to one year. He built a one-week vacation into the tour of duty. He ordered generosity when it came to battle decorations. There was nickel beer, radio stations, telephone calls home, high-interest savings accounts, prime-time TV, dependable mail from home, and hot meals. But: “Providing these amenities in an undeveloped, tropical country more than ten thousand miles from the United States required an unusually elaborate complex of logistics installations.” In a country with one deep-water port, Westmoreland built an additional seven, replaced three small airfields with eight major airports and fifteen jet runways. He brought millions of cubic feet of air conditioning to Vietnam along with 2.5 million cubic feet of freezing temperature so that steaks and such from the United States could be kept fresh frozen.

Ships full of hand grenades, corn on the cob, napalm, wrist watches, artillery shells, pigs, plastic explosives, lawnmower engines, rifle ammunition, tank parts, and C-rations were unloading *one million tons a month* by late 1967. . . . The United States had been spending about a half billion dollars a year when Westmoreland arrived to replace General Harkins. Westmoreland’s tab for 1968 would run closer to thirty billion dollars.

The tidal wave of American dollars swamped the Vietnamese economy. Whores earned more than cabinet ministers, and shoemakers more than veteran ARVN sergeants. . . .

In an attempt to harness U.S. dollars before they infiltrated the local economy, Westmoreland established and stocked post exchanges with high-end, luxury items:

It was a stroll down Fifth Avenue, a gaudy combination of Saks, Bonwit Teller, Hammacher Schlemmer, and Abercrombie and Fitch. The shelves were crammed with sheer panty hose, lingerie, imported perfumes, diamonds and rubies, fine china, radios, portable and console televisions sets, liquor, mink stoles, sable wraps, and nearly everything the American soldier fighting a tough guerrilla war could possibly require, including Napoleon's favorite brandy, Courvoisier, at \$1.80 a fifth.

But the center of Westmoreland's philosophy of war, as Pisor points out again and again, was not fine china, it was firepower:

It was the foundation of his tactics in Vietnam, and he came to believe that his particular application of firepower had established immutable principles of warfare as important as the ones written in Clausewitz. It was because of his belief in firepower that he looked forward to a North Vietnamese assault on Khe Sanh.

But, as Pisor establishes: Long before Khe Sanh loomed as a battle, bombing tonnages in Vietnam had surpassed bombing tonnages against Germany in World War II. And this: Westmoreland was using bullets faster than any previous military commander in history, and he was doing it with "a technician's curiosity about new battlefield equipment." Westmoreland complained after leaving Vietnam that he had been "forced to fight with but one hand." Nothing could have been further from the truth. From a weapons point of fact, Westmoreland had whatever he needed: masses of troops on the ground and the ability to move them quickly, a virtually undeterred air force, shelling by land and sea, all form of bombs, rockets, napalm, bullets, grenades, sensors, chemicals. . . . Consider "Spooky," the recycled C-47 cargo planes refitted with electric Gatling guns capable of raining 18,000 bullets at a burst.

What Westmoreland did not possess was an army comprised of soldiers who were not on one-year tours; in fact, some "enemy" troops fought the entire war without ever returning home. And of

course many of their awaiting families had been forcibly removed from their ancestral homes which were then turned into burned and cratered landscapes, denuded forests and poisoned rice paddies.

Westmoreland's way of war, Pisor writes, "was costly, but because it was designed to reduce American casualties it found ready acceptance in Washington." Robert McNamara summed it up: "The thing we value most deeply is not money but men. We have multiplied the capability of our men [with firepower]. It's expensive in dollars, but cheap in life." Tell this to the Vietnamese who lost as many as 2 million civilians on both sides and another million and a half soldiers.

The difference, as Pisor correctly paints it, was that the Americans wanted, and tried, to wage a war in Vietnam without disrupting the daily routine of American citizens. The Vietnamese could not conceive of such a war.

. . . to a much greater degree than American soldiers, the *bo doi* had "an unshakeable conviction that their cause was just." U.S. soldiers inked DEROS calendars on their helmets to keep track of the exact number of days remaining in their Vietnam tour; the soldiers of the People's Army painted "For Nation—Forget Self" on their hats.

What the *bo doi* lacked in firepower, they made up for in will and willingness. Pisor writes that "[t]he *bo doi's* most important piece of equipment was a thirty-inch straight shovel with a hand-hewn hardwood handle worn smooth and dark from steady use." With that shovel they dug fighting positions—trenches and tunnels—that protected from air strikes and artillery—positions invisible because of camouflage, another of the *bo doi's* implements of war:

Camouflage had special meaning for an army without air cover. . . . Hardly anyone in North Vietnam traveled without first donning a broad hat decorated with leaves and twigs, every moving vehicle was covered with a rope fretwork into which boughs and branches had been woven. Camouflage could be a companion more worthy than a flak jacket; the armored vest might stop bullets or shell fragments, but camouflage could keep the bullets from coming at all.

In the end, America's well-armed and well-provisioned troops proved an inferior match. Defending what other generals labeled an unnecessary outpost, Westmoreland called Khe Sanh's resupply effort "the premier logistical feat of the war." Marine and Army artillery had distinguished themselves by

firing 158,891 shells during the siege—answering every enemy shell with more than ten. The Air Force made 9,691 fighter bomber attacks at Khe Sanh, the Marines 7,078, and the Navy 5,337—delivering 39,178 tons of bombs, rockets, and napalm, contributing their share to what Westmoreland called, with satisfaction, “one of the heaviest and most concentrated displays of firepower in the history of warfare.” B-52s added an additional 75,000 tons in 2,602 sorties.

What the immense effort was to come to was this:

Five months after the Siege of Khe Sanh began and six days after Westmoreland left Vietnam, “the Marines began slashing sandbags, blowing up bunkers with plastic explosives, filling in trenchlines with bulldozers, and peeling up the pierced steel plates of the airstrip. All supplies, equipment, ammunition, vehicles, building beams, and airfield matting were to be trucked out, the order read “[and] everything else buried by bulldozer, burned, or blown up.”

It is no doubt befitting that a final word belongs to the Vietnamese. In Paris, the spokesman for North Vietnamese affairs, Nguyen Thanh Le:

“The United States military commanders once decided to defend the base at all costs. They are now forced to retreat from the base. The high command pretends the retreat was ordered because the base is unessential now.”

We should remember that at the time of The Fall of Saigon, our presence in Southeast Asia constituted American’s longest war. The same war for Vietnam—in its longer history—was its shortest.

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