

An Interview with General Giap

Oriana Fallaci

1969

Editor's Note: The following interview with General Vo Nguyen Giap, leader of the People's Army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, first appeared in *Europeo Magazine* in Milan. The Interviewer was an Italian newspaperwoman, Oriana Fallaci. Liberation News Service is distributing excerpts from the interview as published in the Capitol Times of Madison, Wisc.

Oriana Fallaci: General Giap, in many of your writings you ask this question: who will be the definitive winner of the war in Vietnam? I'd like to ask you, right now, in this early part of 1969, can you say that the Americans have lost the war, that they've suffered a military defeat?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: They recognize that themselves. I'll prove to you now that the Americans are beaten both militarily and politically. To prove their military defeat, I'll go back to their political defeat, which is the basis of the whole thing.

The Americans made a big mistake in choosing South Vietnam for a battlefield. The Saigon reactionaries are too weak: Taylor and McNamara and Westmoreland all knew that.

What they didn't know was that, in their weakness, the Saigon leaders wouldn't be able to take advantage of American aid. Because what was the purpose of the American aggression in Vietnam? To build up a new-style colony with a puppet government that's stable, and the Saigon government is unstable in the extreme. It has no influence on the population; people don't believe in it.

So look what sort of a jam the Americans have got themselves into. They can't withdraw from Vietnam even if they want to, because in order to withdraw they'd have to leave a stable political situation behind them. That is, a bunch of lackeys to take their place. But lackeys that are solid and strong. And the puppet government in Saigon isn't strong and it isn't solid. It's not even a good lackey. It can't be kept going even with tanks to hold it up. So how can the Americans withdraw? And yet they have to get out. They can't keep 600,000 men in Vietnam for another 10 or 15 years. That's their political defeat: They can't win politically in spite of all their military apparatus.

Oriana Fallaci: That doesn't mean, general, that militarily they've lost the war.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Be patient; don't interrupt me. Of course it means it. If they didn't feel beaten the White House wouldn't talk of peace with honor. But let's go back to the days of Geneva and the Eisenhower government. How did the Americans start out in Vietnam? In their usual way—with economic and military aid to a puppet government. In short, with dollars. Because they think that with dollars they can settle anything. They thought that they could set up a free and independent government with dollars and an army of puppets paid in dollars: with 30,000 'military advisers' paid in the same, and dollar-built 'strategic hamlets.' But the people stepped into the picture, and the Americans' plan collapsed.

The strategic hamlets, the 'military advisers' and the puppet army all fell to pieces, and the Americans were forced into the military intervention which Ambassador (Maxwell) Taylor had already recommended.

Then came the second phase of the aggression, the 'special war.' With 150,000 men and 18 billion dollars they thought they could finish it by the end of 1965, or 1966 at the latest. But in 1966 the war wasn't finished at all: they

had sent over 200,000 more men and were talking of a third phase, that of 'limited war,' Westmoreland's pincer program: winning over the people on the one hand, and wiping out the Liberation movement on the other. But the pincers didn't hold their grip, and Westmoreland lost his war. He lost it as a general in 1967 when he asked for more men and Washington gave out a rosy report that 1968 would be a good year for the war in Vietnam, so good that Johnson would be re-elected.

In Washington, Westmoreland was greeted like a hero, but he couldn't help knowing that the war was getting to be too expensive, something that Taylor had known all along. Korea cost the Americans 20 billion dollars, and Vietnam has cost them a hundred billion. Fifty-four thousand Americans died in Korea, and there are even more deaths in Vietnam...

Oriana Fallaci: Thirty-four thousand, the Americans say, general.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Hmmm...I'd say twice that many. The Americans always say less than the truth; at their most honest they say three for five. They can't have just 34,000 dead. We've brought down over 3,200 planes! One plane out of every five, they admit it. In these five years of war, I'd say they'd lost at least 60,000 men, maybe more.

Oriana Fallaci: General, the Americans say you've lost half a million men.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: That's quite exact...

To get back to what we were saying...It was 1968, the years in which the Americans were sure of winning. Then, suddenly, came the Tet offensive and showed that the Liberation Front could attack them whenever and wherever it wanted, including the best defended cities, including even Saigon.

Finally, the Americans admitted that the war had been a strategic error. Johnson admitted it, McNamara admitted it. They admitted that it was the wrong time and the wrong place, that Montgomery had been right when he warned against shipping an army to Asia. The victorious Tet offensive...

Oriana Fallaci: Everyone agrees, general, that the Tet offensive was a great psychological victory. But from the military point of view, don't you think it was a failure?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: You'll have to ask the Liberation Front that one.

Oriana Fallaci: I'd like to ask you first, general.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: This is a touchy question, you ought to see that. I can't pass judgment on things of that kind, on what's going on at the front.

It's a delicate matter, very delicate...but you surprise me. Everyone knows that, from both a military and political point of view, the Tet offensive...

Oriana Fallaci: It wasn't quite so successful, general, even from a political point of view. There was no people's uprising, and after a couple of weeks the Americans had everything under control again. Only at Hue did the coup go on for a whole month. At Hue, where there were North Vietnamese...

General Vo Nguyen Giap: I don't know whether the front foresaw or hoped for a popular uprising, although, without such help I don't think it could have got its men into the cities.

I can't discuss the Tet offensive because we had nothing to do with it. The front put it on. It's a fact though, that after the Tet strike, the Americans fell back from attack into a defensive posture. And defense is always a prelude to defeat. I say a prelude.

We haven't won yet, and the Americans can't be called defeated. They're still numerically strong; nobody can deny that. It will take a lot of effort on our part to give them a definitive military beating.

The military problem—now I'm speaking as a soldier...yes, they have plenty of arms. But arms don't do them any good, because the Vietnam war isn't just a military matter. Military strength and military strategy can't help to win, or even to understand it.

The United States has a strategy based on arithmetic. They question the computers, add and subtract, extract square roots, and then go into action. But arithmetical strategy doesn't work here. If it did, they'd have already exterminated us.

With their planes, for instance. Of course they thought they could bring us to heel in a few weeks by dumping billions of explosives on us. Because, as I told you, they figure everything in billions, billions of dollars. They don't reckon with the spirit of a people fighting for what they know is right, to save their country from invaders.

They can't get it into their heads that the Vietnam war has to be understood in terms of the strategy of a people's war, that it's not a question of men and material, that these things are irrelevant to the problem.

For instance, they said, at one point that they needed a ratio of 25 to 1 in order to win. Then, when they couldn't put that many men in the field, they brought it down to 6 to 1, and finally to 3 to 1 even if that was a little risky. But ratios of 3 and 6 and 25 to 1 won't do it.

Victory calls for something more, and that's the spirit of the people.

When a whole people rises up, nothing can be done. No money can beat them.

That's the basis of our strategy and our tactics, that the Americans fail completely to understand.

Oriana Fallaci: If you're so sure, general, that they'll be definitively beaten, can you give us any idea of when?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Oh, this isn't a war that can be won in a few years. War against the United States takes time...They'll be beaten with time, worn out. And to wear them out we have to go on, to endure...That's what we've always done.

We're a small country, only 30 million people...We were only a million at the beginning of the Christian era, when the Mongols descended upon us. But the million of us beat them. Three times they came, and three times we beat them. We didn't have weapons like theirs. But we held fast and lasted out.

The whole people, we said already then, has to get into the fight. And what was true in the year 1200 is still true today. The problem is the same. We're good soldiers because we're Vietnamese.

Oriana Fallaci: But, general, the South Vietnamese who are fighting alongside the Americans are Vietnamese too. What do you think of them as soldiers.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: They can't be good soldiers, and they aren't good soldiers. They don't believe in what they're doing, and so they have no fighting spirit. The Americans know this (and, incidentally, they're better fighters). If they hadn't known that these puppets couldn't fight they wouldn't have brought over many of their own troops.

Oriana Fallaci: General, let's talk about the Paris conference. Do you think peace will come from Paris or from a military victory such as you won at Dien Bien Phu?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Dien Bien Phu...Dien Bien Phu...the fact that we've gone to Paris shows that we have good intentions. And nobody can say that Paris isn't useful, since the Liberation Front is there too. In Paris, They've got to transfer what's happening here in Vietnam to a diplomatic level...Paris, madame, is for the diplomats.

Oriana Fallaci: You mean, then, that the war won't be settled in Paris, general, is that it? That it calls for a military rather than a diplomatic solution? That the American Dien Bien Phu is yet to come, and will come some day?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Dien Bien Phu, Madame...Dien Bien Phu...History doesn't always repeat itself. But this time it will. We won a military victory over the French and we'll win it over the Americans too. Yes, Madame, their Dien Bien Phu is still to come. And it will come.

The Americans will lose the war on the day when their military might is at its maximum and the great machine they've put together can't move any more. That is, we'll beat them at the moment when they have the most men, the most arms and the greatest hope of winning. Because all that money and strength will be a stone around their neck. It's inevitable.

Oriana Fallaci: I may be wrong, general, but wasn't Khe San meant to be the second Dien Bien Phu?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Oh, no. Khe San wasn't—and couldn't be a second Dien Bien Phu. It wasn't all that important. Or only inasmuch as it was important for the Americans, whose prestige was at stake, the usual American paradox. As long as they held out in Khe San to uphold their prestige, they said it was important. When they abandoned Khe San, they said it had never mattered. Don't you think Khe San was a victory for us? I say it was.

But newspaper people are curious, do you know that? Too curious. I'm a newspaperman myself, and I'd like to reverse our roles and ask you a couple of questions.

First: Do you agree that the Americans have lost the war in the north?

Oriana Fallaci: Yes, general, I'd say so. If by war in the north you mean the bombardments, I'd say they've lost it. The bombardments didn't do them any good, and then they had to suspend them.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Another question: Do you agree that the Americans have lost the war in the South?

Oriana Fallaci: No, general, They haven't lost it. Not yet. You haven't driven them out. They're still there, and they're staying.

General Vo Nguyen Giap: You're wrong. They're still there...but under what circumstances? Bugged down, paralyzed, waiting for new defeats that they hope to ward off, they don't know how. Defeats that have had and will have disastrous economic, political and historical consequences. There they are; with their hands tied, locked up in their own power. They can only hope in the Paris talks. But there, too, they're stubborn. They won't let go.

Oriana Fallaci: General, you call the Americans in Paris stubborn. But they say the same thing about you. What good are the talks, then? General, here everyone talks about peace, but it seems as if nobody really wanted it. How long do you think the Paris conference will go on?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: A long time! Especially if the Americans don't climb down from some of their positions. Yes, a long time. We're not retreating from ours. We're not in a hurry. We have patience. While the delegates talk, we fight. We want peace, but not peace at any price, not a compromise peace.

For us peace must mean total victory; the Americans must get out. A compromise would be a threat of enslavement. And we'd rather die than be slaves.

Oriana Fallaci: How long then, will the war go on general? How long will this poor people be called upon to suffer and sacrifice itself and die?

General Vo Nguyen Giap: It will last as long as necessary-10, 15, 20, 50 years. Until, as our President Ho Chi Minh says, we have won total victory. Yes, even 20, even 50 years. We aren't afraid and we aren't in a hurry.

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Fifth Estate #85, August 7-20, 1969

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