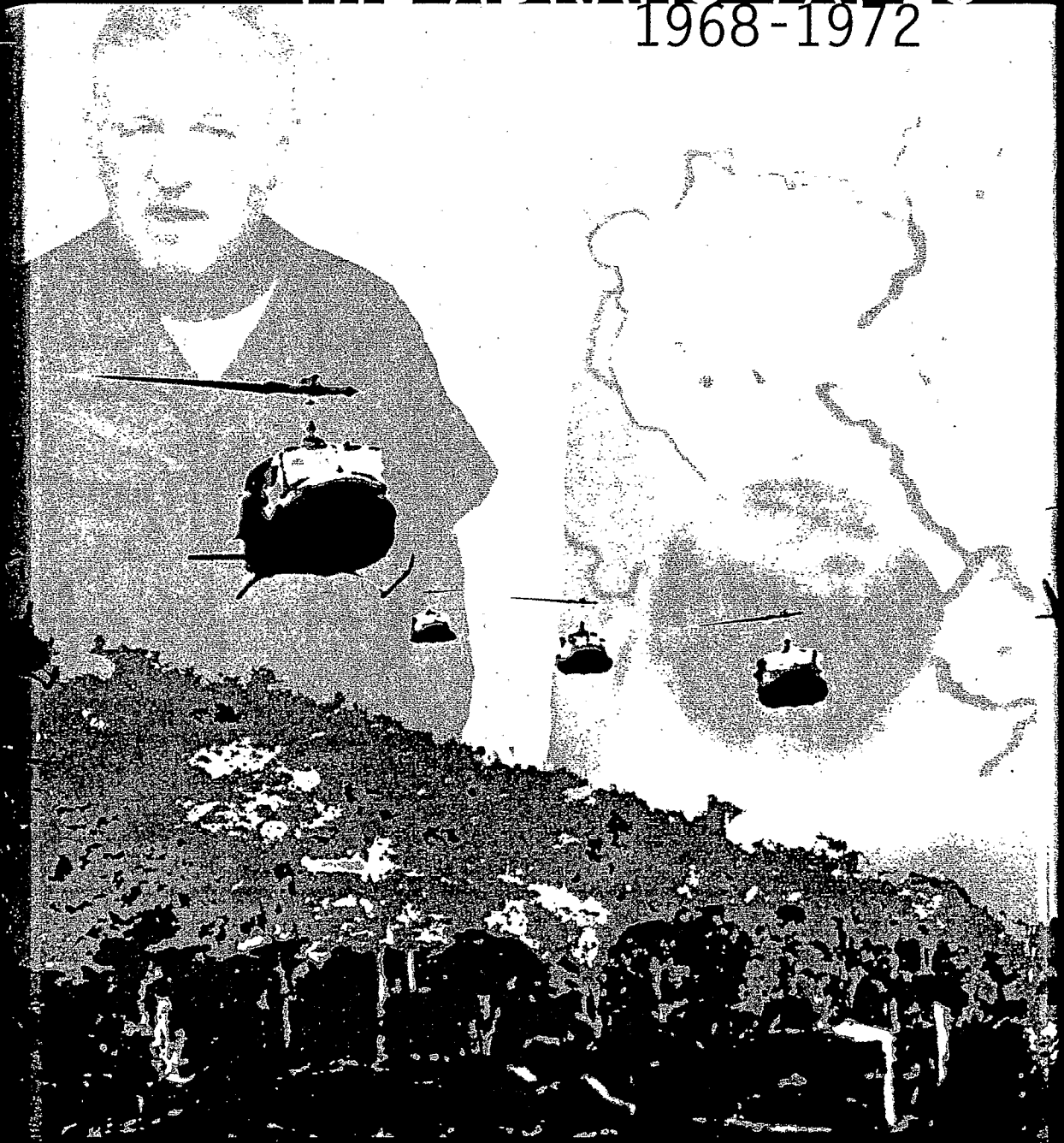


Vietnam  
Chronicles

# THE ABRAMS TAPES

1968-1972



TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY **Lewis Sorley**

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## READING THE TEXT

THE MATERIAL in this volume, even though it comprises about 450,000 words, of course constitutes only a small fraction of the millions of words spoken on the 455 tapes in the Abrams collection that run to more than 2,000 hours of briefings, discussion, and conversation. What has been included, as mentioned earlier, is what seems most important historically and what is most interesting. Much of that is verbatim, but some—especially portions derived from various briefings—is paraphrased. The portions reproduced verbatim are enclosed in quotation marks; paraphrases are not. Given the huge volume of the material, it has not proven feasible to construct a strict transcript of the whole. Rather, what is reproduced has the following characteristics:

- Closely allied comments by the same speaker are grouped together. If there are omissions within a sentence, they are indicated in the usual manner by ellipses. Subsequent comments on the same topic that closely but not immediately follow are shown as another quoted sentence or group of sentences, as for example:

DAVIDSON: "A very high-powered group from CIA, State Department, DIA, at the Washington level came out, and they now agree with us specifically as to this, that there is high-ranking Cambodian complicity in the movement of arms and ammunition through Cambodia. They're inclined to take a disclaimer that Sihanouk himself is involved, although whether he knows [about] it or not they—I think they're inclined to believe he does, as we are." "There is high-level complicity. It may go as high as Lon Nol, the acting prime minister."

- Comments are presented in the order in which they were made. The very rare exceptions (one or two instances) are indicated by editorial notes.

- Comments grouped within the same section are on the same or related topics, but in each section what is presented is simply a selection of material from portions of the discussion. Thus, a comment shown here immediately following another does not necessarily immediately follow that comment in the

original transcripts. It is usually apparent where a comment responds to or picks up on one preceding.

■ General Abrams liked to use briefings as a springboard for discussion. Thus, quite often briefings are interrupted by lengthy dialogue on the topic at hand, sometimes involving the briefer but more often among the senior officers attending. This explains what are frequently fairly lengthy departures from the briefer's presentation.

■ When the proceedings move on to a substantially different topic, that is indicated by the following text separator: ■ ■ ■ .

■ Given that the briefings and discussions are taking place at MACV during the years General Abrams was in command, his comments and questions constitute the largest single aspect of the transcripts. Since he knew the other people involved extremely well, and could see by their reactions when they had grasped a point he was making, Abrams often at such times simply stopped speaking in midsentence, which has been indicated by a concluding dash in the text in this manner:

ABRAMS: "It seems to me you can press it to the point—you can never break off communication, and you can't go to a point where you just become a nuisance. Otherwise you've just failed. After that you're not ever going to be effective again. And you can't make that—"

■ Emphatic and unmistakable emphases by speakers, especially but not solely General Abrams, are underlined. In some instances in which the speaker is particularly exercised, this results in multiple words emphasized, even within the same sentence, and not always the words one might expect would have been stressed. This feature has been reproduced on the premise that it provides useful insight into the flavor and emotional temperature of some of the proceedings. For example:

ABRAMS: "I know that these people have struggled with this goddamn war for twenty years. I mean, they really haven't had a hell of a lot of peace around here. And they're tired, and all that. But the truth of the matter is, if they're going to really come out on top of this, goddamn it, they've still got to sacrifice, and they've got to sacrifice a lot! And the alternative to that, the alternative to that, is in the next five or six years, god-damn it, they'll be Communist."

■ Comments by the editor are found in several places, distinguished from the text as follows:

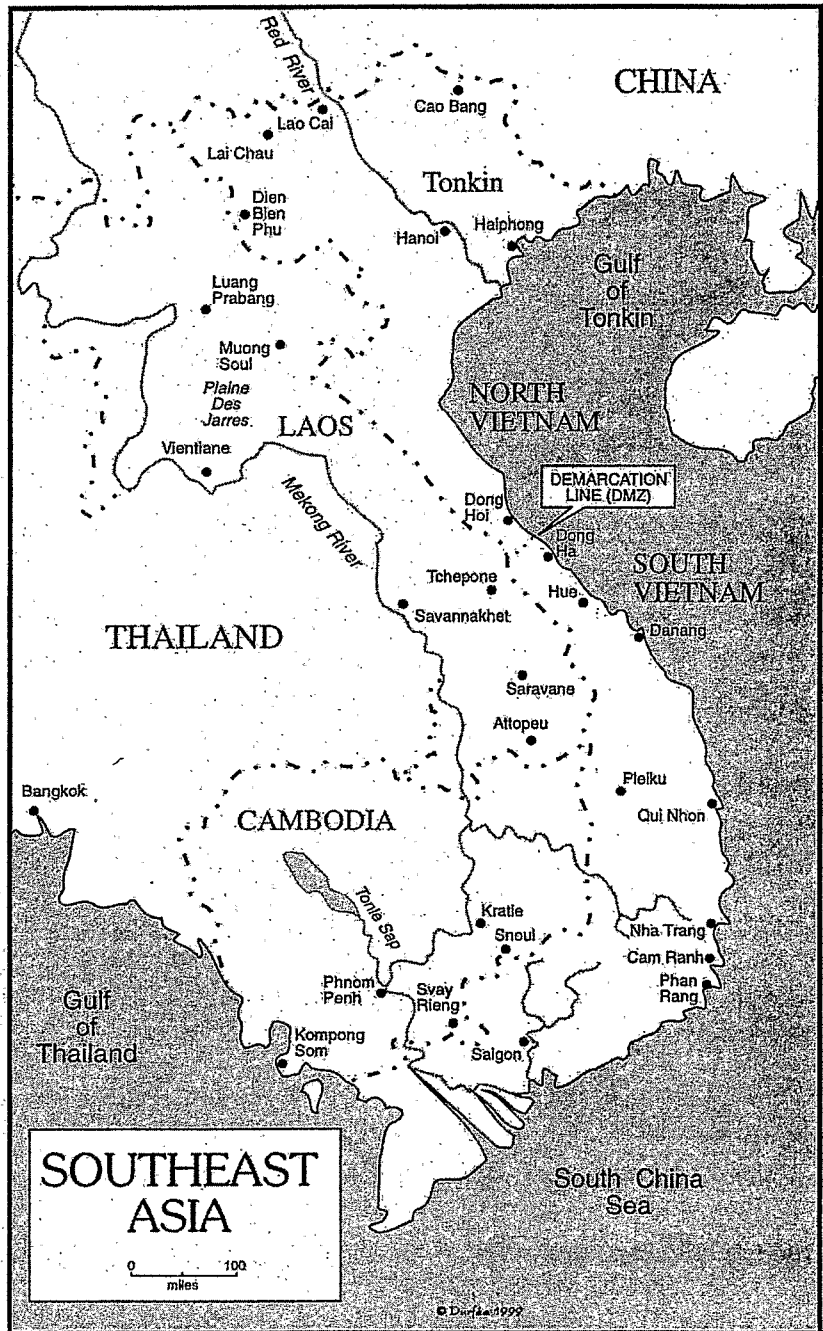
- Editorial comments are found as the prologue and as summary comments at the beginning of each year's section and following the last year.
- Substantive editorial comments within items in the transcript are italicized and set apart.
- Other shorter editorial comments intended to clarify or compress quoted material in the text are included in brackets in the conventional manner and not italicized.

Redactions imposed during declassification review are indicated in the text by [\*\*\*]. Presumably such redactions were made to protect intelligence data or information regarding friendly governments, or out of consideration for privacy. The bulk of the redactions during initial review of the manuscript were imposed by the National Security Agency; many were subsequently recovered by means of a largely successful reclama. In contrast, parallel review by the Department of the Army and the Central Intelligence Agency produced few redactions.

Comments by all the participants of course have the quality of informal oral communication, and thus do not always track smoothly. There are the usual backing and filling, interpositions, and incomplete statements characteristic of people in groups talking with one another.

Readers should also be aware that all the material presented has been transcribed from tape recordings, which, to begin with, were made under "field" conditions and were not of studio quality. Thus, the audibility and clarity of the material recorded were not of uniform character. Names of people and places presented a particular challenge, especially as they were pronounced (or mispronounced) by Americans. They have been rendered as accurately as possible and researched in connection with the matters under discussion at the time to ensure as much fidelity as possible. It seems inevitable, however, that some inaccuracies remain.

■ 1968



*During 1968 major changes took place in just about every aspect of the war in Vietnam. The enemy's Tet Offensive, commencing in late January, was for him a battlefield disaster in Vietnam but a psychological victory in the United States. Public confidence in Lyndon Johnson's administration and its handling of the war dropped precipitously, while within the administration there developed further widespread dissatisfaction with Gen. William C. Westmoreland's leadership and approach to fighting the war.*

*Soon after the Tet Offensive it was announced that in June Westmoreland would return to the United States for assignment as Army Chief of Staff, then, a few days later, that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams would succeed him as COMUSMACV—Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.*

*In early May the Communists launched another series of coordinated attacks, subsequently referred to by the allies as "mini-Tet," and in August a further round of attacks that came to be known as the "Third Offensive." In each they suffered additional severe losses.*

*Under Abrams the strategy, tactics, and concept of the war all changed, with the previous emphasis on body count as the measure of merit now shifting to population security. Large-scale operations conducted primarily in the deep jungles gave way to large numbers of small-unit ambushes and sweeps sited so as to deny the enemy access to the population. A close-knit leadership team headed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Abrams, and William E. Colby proved to be of one mind on how the war should be conducted, often described by them as "One War" in which combat operations, pacification, and improvement of South Vietnamese forces were of equal importance and received equal attention.*

*When Colby became Deputy to the COMUSMACV for CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), the pacification program, for the first time, began to show real progress, not least because the South Vietnamese, led by President Nguyen Van Thieu himself, got behind the effort.*

*Late in the year presidential elections in the United States resulted in victory for Richard M. Nixon, who would assume office the following January and take the war in Vietnam as a first order of business for his new administration.*

*What follows is the earliest tape in the collection. Abrams, who—as is apparent from the message traffic—has been in de facto command since shortly after the Tet Offensive, has now assumed formal command. He continues the practice of assembling the staff principals on Saturdays for a session called the Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update (WIEU). Under Abrams that was really a misnomer,*



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since, as the transcripts will demonstrate, the sessions constituted increasingly wide-ranging discussions of all aspects of the war, not just intelligence. Once a month these conferences included, in addition to the usual staff, senior tactical commanders from around the country, thus producing a Commanders WIEU.

## 29 JUN 1968: WIEU

ATTENDEES: Gen. Abrams, Amb. Komer, Gen. Momyer, MG Kerwin, MG Baker, MG Corcoran, RADM Veth, BG Davidson, BG Frizen, BG McLaughlin, BG Tabor, BG Sidle, BG Bryan, BG Keegan, Col. Avriett, Col. Gleason, Col. Pink, Col. Hinton, Mr. T. D. Morris.

*Infiltration refers to movement of enemy personnel south from North Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A recent breakthrough in intelligence, based on interception and decryption of enemy radio message traffic, has provided a valuable predictive mechanism for dealing with impending enemy offensives.*

BRIEFER (on infiltration): "Now we're getting even ahead of them getting in the pipeline." This is a new capability based on communications intercepts.

BRIEFER: Infiltration now being observed: "It does not appear that these new groups represent another surge of activity, but rather a planned program to provide a steady flow of replacements and filler personnel."

BRIEFER: "We have seen peaks of infiltration activity in March, April, and May, followed by a lull during the first three weeks of June. Now it appears that a relatively stable flow of replacements is being established."

ABRAMS: Asks (his first question) how many of the groups picked up before entering the pipeline have still not entered it. Answer: 11 of 17. Abrams: "We're going to need to do a little bit more to tie that in for the operational impact down here."

■ ■ ■

BRIEFER: Refers to "the five inner provinces around Saigon." Of 96 U.S./FWMAF/RVNAF battalions conducting operations in III Corps, 77 are in these inner provinces (29 in Gia Dinh Province alone). The U.S. 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions each have a brigade positioned to block the 32nd and 33rd NVA Regiments from infiltrating toward Saigon. U.S. forces are in "the outer ring of III Corps."

BRIEFER: "Last week our indications pointed at mid to late July as the earliest that major offensive activity could be expected in I Corps." Now "the apparent relocation of units out of country from along the DMZ further reduces the threat." Thus it is "difficult to see how a major offensive could be initiated in the northern provinces before late July or early August."

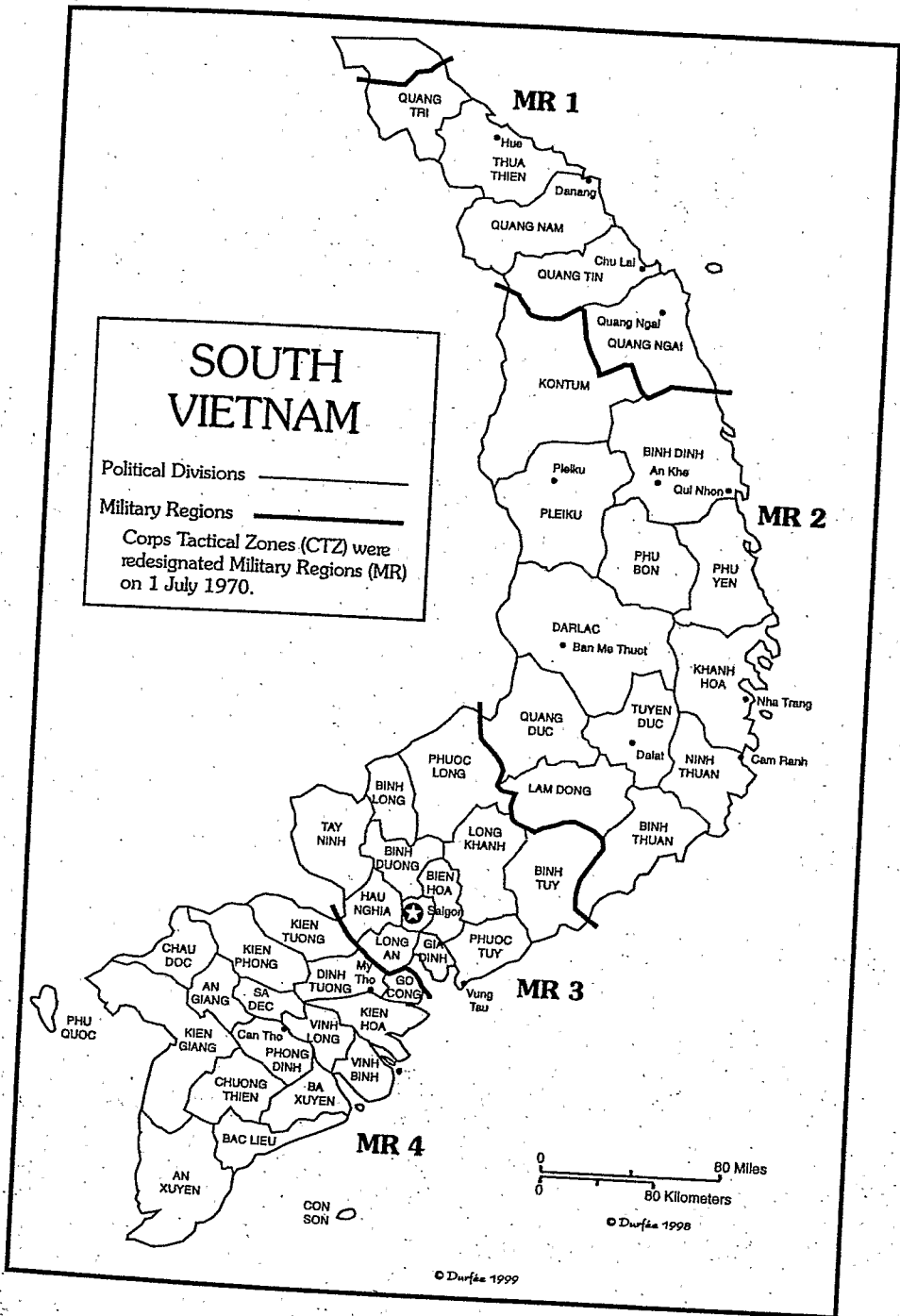
BRIEFER: "Friendly operations have undoubtedly disrupted plans for any large-scale coordinated effort."

# SOUTH VIETNAM

Political Divisions \_\_\_\_\_

Military Regions \_\_\_\_\_

Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) were redesignated Military Regions (MR) on 1 July 1970.



1968 . . . . 5

ABRAMS: "I'm sitting here watching all this unfold, wondering what it all means."

BRIEFER: "Ongoing intelligence assessments have been dominated by the phrase 'enemy activity throughout the Republic remains at a low level.'" Displays a chart: "Note the drop-off to pre-Tet levels subsequent to the 5 May attacks. Note also the decided decline in the last four weeks, a decline to the lowest level of enemy action we've seen thus far in 1968."

*The "5 May attacks" refers to the commencement of "mini-Tet," the enemy's second general offensive of the year.*

BRIEFER (analyzing the lull): "If he's not purposely deescalating the war, there are three reasons that could explain this lull: He is preparing for another major offensive, we are preempting him, or he's lost his momentum and effectiveness because his forces are weaker." There "was to have been the late June effort against Saigon." That did not take place.

ABRAMS: "That's an interesting part of the curve out here in June where his [the enemy's] activity goes down, but his KIA go up. That has to mean that ARVN is aggressive. It has to mean that."

SOMEONE: "Plus the elements of the 9th U.S. [Division]."

ABRAMS: "Well, that's right."

ABRAMS: "This is one of the things you can see in this SEER [System for Evaluating the Effectiveness of RVNAF] report. It's true of every ARVN division. The favorable kill ratio goes up when they go on offensive operations. And, with the exception of the 18th ARVN, it goes way down on security and defensive-type things."

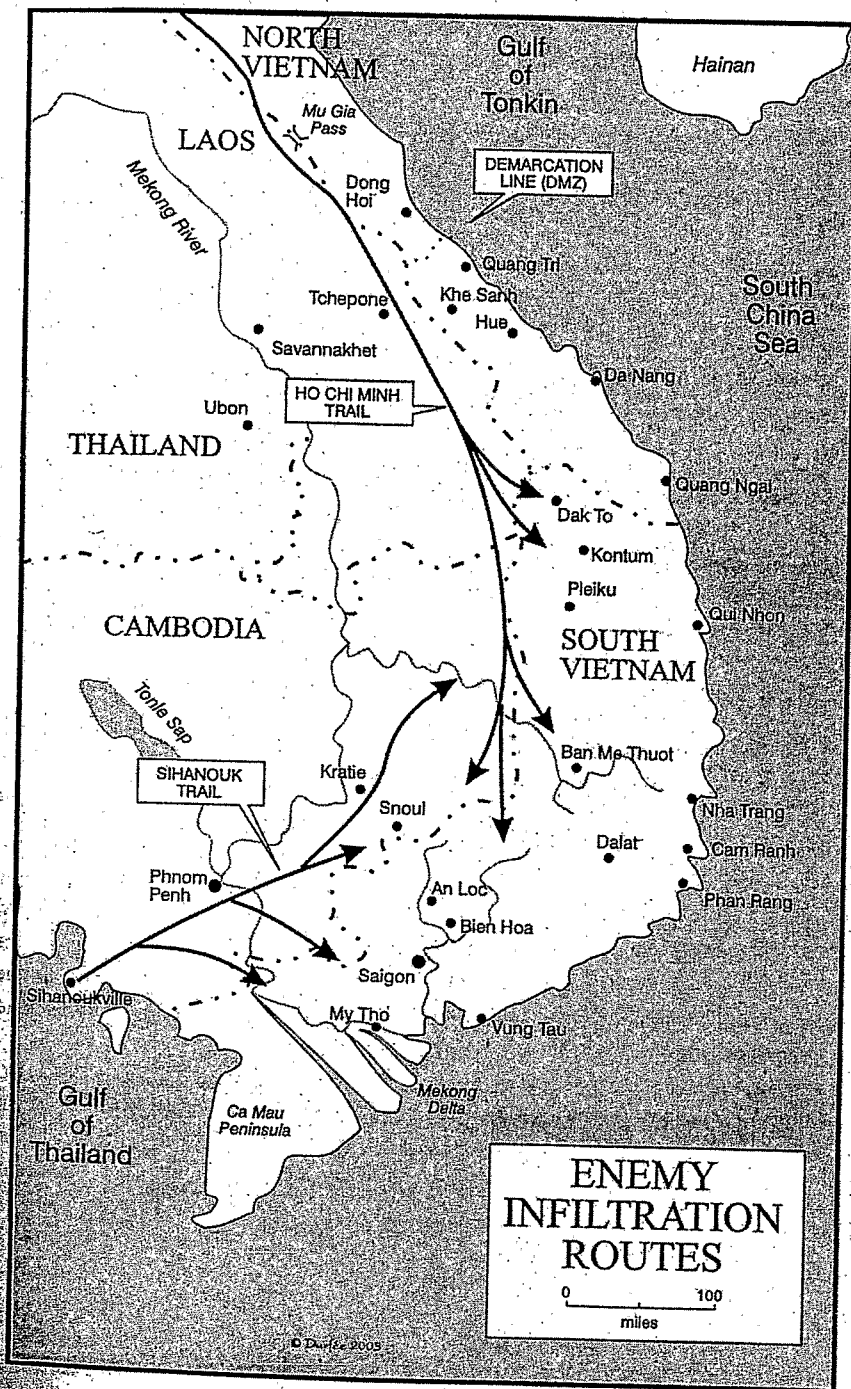
BRIEFER: "The concentrated Arc Light strikes started 14 June. In 14 days there have been 124 strikes, 723 sorties, which yielded 153 secondaries." "After the onset of those attacks the pressure on Saigon diminished. On 19 June the last resistance in the Saigon area collapsed with the surrender of 141 remaining members of the Kiep Thang Regiment. Not even a token of his threatened hundred-rocket-a-day attacks ever materialized."

*"Secondaries" refers to explosions of matériel on the ground caused by bombing, usually the result of striking petroleum or ammunition.*

ABRAMS: "The other day when I was up promoting, pinning another star on, Ray Peers, I was suggesting that the differences between this battle in Kontum and the one last November [1967]—and the possibility that it was because we had different commanders up there. And General Peers hastened to point out [laughing] that the former commander got some 30 B-52 strikes and the current one got—he didn't have that exact figure, but he was very close to it [178]—and he thought that might have made a little difference."

■ ■ ■

*Discussion of dealing with the media.*



1968 . . . . 7

KOMER: "One of the reasons we get such bad press on this Vietnam War is because here we won a campaign and nobody knows it."

ABRAMS: "Yeah, but I must say that, whenever this command goes out to explain how it did something well, they're calling you out before the throw is made to the plate. The umpire out there, the umpire—represented by the bureau chiefs, he's swinging his thumb over the shoulder and, hell, the left fielder still hasn't thrown the ball. It's just that you started for home. And he's calling you out, by god, before the throw is made. That's the game we're in!"

KOMER: "Yeah, but you can do something about choosing the umpire. You get a straight play from Braestrup, Tuohy, Beech, three or four guys."

*Peter Braestrup was Saigon bureau chief for the Washington Post, having earlier reported on Southeast Asia for the New York Times. William Tuohy was with the Los Angeles Times, while Keyes Beech represented the Chicago Daily News.*

ABRAMS: "Well, I think it's a very serious question. The point you raise is a good one, but the—it's a very serious question, because if we lost out, we run the risk of, with these kind of umpires we've got, they'll just further discredit the command. We don't have a free ride on this thing. It isn't that we just lose—you know, make a good country try and they say, 'Well, you're out,' and that's that. It just further, in the eyes of the American people, in the eyes of observers around the world, it further discredits the command." "There's not an awful lot of human sympathy out there in that crowd."

*Opponents of American involvement in the war were arguing that the enemy was showing restraint and deescalating the conflict, and that the United States should take reciprocal action.*

BRIEFER: Somewhere in the range of 45–58 enemy maneuver battalions (37 percent of the 155 total) appear to have withdrawn to sanctuaries or into North Vietnam. This lull began approximately four weeks ago. "This of course has tremendous implications in the political context of the current Paris dialogue. However, it's much too early to draw conclusions of political intent, as other evidence indicates no deliberate deescalation."

BRIEFER: "In sum, we believe that the present lull in enemy activity is one that's been forced on the enemy rather than one of his own choosing, a lull that runs counter to his schemes for increasing the intensity and tempo of the war, but one forced upon him by his deteriorating force posture and the overpowering strength of friendly counteraction and firepower."

ABRAMS (re the briefing): "I think what you've got in this thing is very good, all of it. But the question is, if he's hurting, where is he hurting the most? And then, what can we do to aggravate his problem—more?"

ABRAMS (re the enemy): "He's a very resourceful guy. And it hasn't worked out quite the way—. Then what—how did he adjust to it? Which leads you a little closer, then, to the things he really thinks are important in this thing, which then leads you to where you can apply your resources to hurt him the worst."

DAVIDSON: "I think he's been hurt worst in the B-3 Front. Maybe not in sheer casualties, but in what he intended to do versus what he was able to do. That is the most abysmal failure I think we've seen."

*The B-3 Front is the enemy's designation for the Central Highlands.*

ABRAMS: "Yeah, but what was that—what part did that play in the scheme of things?" "As before, he probably wanted to drag some more forces up there to help him out a little bit in other places, take down the forces somewhat in III Corps, possibly even move forces out of I Corps. That didn't work out, but Saigon certainly is far more important to him than that part of his campaign. And I Corps—Danang, Hue—are certainly more important to him."

ABRAMS: "But it's interesting the way he has just gone ahead and denuded II Corps. And it's even more interesting if we believe that he, as an integral part of his campaign, planned a success in the highlands. See, bringing the 325C down there is no—that's no small thing. And even bringing at least one regiment of the 2nd NVA down there—temporarily. And he has laboriously placed the 32nd and the 33rd down there in Darlac. And with the 3rd NVA in the coastal area, he really sort of set the checkers up to put the—if he could get a good thing going at Ban Me Thuot, get his attack on Kontum, raise hell with Dak Pek, overrun it if he could. And the 3rd NVA doing the best they could down there in the coastal area to tie down the 173rd [Airborne Brigade] or whatever you had down there. And he sort of set the chess game up there—you know, you could make quite a story out of that. Well, now, it hasn't happened like that. There goes the 2nd back. There goes the 3rd—up. He sends the 32nd and the 33rd down. Now you suppose he planned it that way originally?"

ABRAMS: "Spike?"

MOMYER: "I have a real problem, following the Tet Offensive, trying to figure out what his overall strategy is—I mean military strategy, forget about the political strategy."

ABRAMS: "Dutch?"

KERWIN: "There's no doubt he's going for economy of force." "He now realizes that he's got to produce something. There's only two places to do it—I Corps and Saigon." May have seen the last of his offensives in the B-3 Front. "I'm becoming more and more convinced that we're going to see a major confrontation up there in I Corps and down here in Saigon. He just hasn't got the forces to do it at the present time. He's too weak."

ABRAMS: "Charlie?"

CORCORAN: "The moving of our own forces may have some impact on the enemy. Our greatest strength on the ground certainly is in I Corps and around Saigon. If he's having the problems logistically that we think he is, then he's running right into our strongest area."

ABRAMS: "Charlie Stone was on all those peaks out there last November that he [the enemy] had to fight for. That's where all the blood was spilled." "He [Stone] controlled the terrain up there, which did a lot of things. It gave you a

lot better intelligence. It's not only that the B-52s were put in there, but they knew a lot more about where they ought to be put. And that derived directly out of being out there in the damn thing. And, as you know, they were—the enemy was around them—you know, they were all out there together. Except Charlie Stone had the B-52s, and they just had some—few mortars, few rockets. It was a mismatch.”

ABRAMS: “He’s [the enemy] been winning in his terms—psychological impact, political pressures, and so on. What we’re talking about is how to prevent that from occurring. I think he has lost a little bit since these talks started. Shelling Saigon didn’t do him, really didn’t do him any good. It caused some people who were supporting him to criticize this, so in that arena, where he made great progress in Tet, and some of the ground attacks on Saigon—burning buildings here and that sort of thing—he’s lost a few of his credits.”

#### 4 JUL 1968: Special Brief—COMUS

*This is a monthly Commanders Conference.*

ATTENDEES: Gen. Abrams, Amb. Komer, Gen. Momyer, LTG Mildren, LTG Weyand, LTG Rosson, LTG Peers, MG Eckhardt, MG Kerwin (Chief of Staff), RADM Veth, MG Corcoran (J-3), MG Baker (J-5) BG Davidson (J-2), BG McLaughlin (COC), BG Bryan (Deputy Chief of Staff). Per tape, also present: BG Flanagan (G-3 III MAF), Col. Beckington (G-2 III MAF), LTC Whitney (G-2 I FFV), Col. Everett (G-3 I FFV), Col. Foulk (G-2 II FFV), Col. Fuller (G-3 II FFV), LTC Carey (G-2 IV Corps), LTC Schofield (G-3 IV Corps), Col. Davis (G-2 USARV), Col. Gibson (G-3 USARV), BG Keegan (DCS Intelligence, Seventh Air Force), BG Sweat (Director of Combat Operations, Seventh Air Force), Capt. Rectanus (N-2, NAVFORV), Capt. Eason (N-3, NAVFORV).

ABRAMS: “We want to kind of wring this out this morning, see what you all think.”

*Briefer presents an assessment of the enemy situation.*

- “We have concluded that the enemy made a major planning decision, sometime in February when his Tet momentum had waned. This decision probably occurred sometime after his attempt at a countrywide second phase on the 18th of February, and most certainly by the 26th, when his resistance in Hue had collapsed.”
- “This was the situation he faced: He could not afford another countrywide offensive of the Tet magnitude. His permanent losses in less than a month of fighting were nearly 45,000, or one-fifth his total in-country military strength. More than 33,000 of these were KIA alone.”
- “His major objective of smashing the government of Vietnam and causing a general uprising had not been attained. On the other hand, Tet was a psychological success in South Vietnam and the United States, hence a military one

that he could continue to exploit. Thus his decision was to sustain the pressure by staggering the main blows of his offensive where and when his capabilities peaked."

■ Evidence: Major unit moves, beginning in early March. Period of very low combat activity. 36,000 men put in the infiltration pipeline in March. Another 31,000 in April. Included the 308th NVA Division, and probably the 312th. "The decision to make this heavy commitment of North Vietnamese replacements and strategic reserves probably occurred in mid to late February." Planned to launch a second general offensive against Saigon and Hue in mid-April, and a major effort in the highlands in mid-May, southern I Corps around Danang in mid-June, and the DMZ area in mid-July. Based on observed activity and troop movements, rallier Colonel Dak, reinforcement flows, [\*\*\*].

■ Cites "the twice-postponed [from 15 and 27 April] second general offensive, which finally got moving on the 5th of May." "The main effort was Saigon." "By about 11-15 May the assault on Saigon was an obvious failure."

■ "The second general offensive was delayed by two or three weeks. It was countrywide. It was obviously and quickly unsuccessful."

■ "The situation as the enemy must have seen it around 8-9 June: The B-3 Front was a dead loss. Things were comparatively good in the DMZ and near Hue, except for the problem of acquiring rice. Thus things remained quiet."

■ "Basic conclusion of great strategic significance: The enemy has displayed the weakness he inherited from his high-cost failure at Tet. He's been unable to maintain the momentum. He's not been able to execute his offensives at the times planned, nor has he been able to muster the military strength his plans required. The war is not going well for him."

*End of this briefing.*

■ ■ ■

WEYAND: "The great value of the B-52s to me has been that you've given them to us in advance a couple of days so we could plan ahead and use them in mass."

PEERS (re situation along the border): "He's been hurt, and hurt badly, over there, with those B-52s in particular."

ECKHARDT: "Their great fear is B-52 strikes. They don't know when and where they're going to come. This is bait we use to get the ARVN into the base areas, and we won't use one unless they'll go in after it."

ABRAMS: "What I've really been trying to do is avoid shifting forces, that is maneuver battalions, from one corps to another. I've also been trying to permit the JGS to keep their general reserve, the airborne battalions and four of the marine battalions, here in Saigon. The way I tried to do that is to shift the air effort, which is a fairly painless process compared to moving a brigade from III Corps to II Corps, or I Corps to the B-3 Front, or something like that, and instead try to make up where the real heat is, or other differentials, by the distribution of the air effort—B-52s and the tac air."

ABRAMS: "One thing that shows up here very clearly is the deficit in artillery in

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