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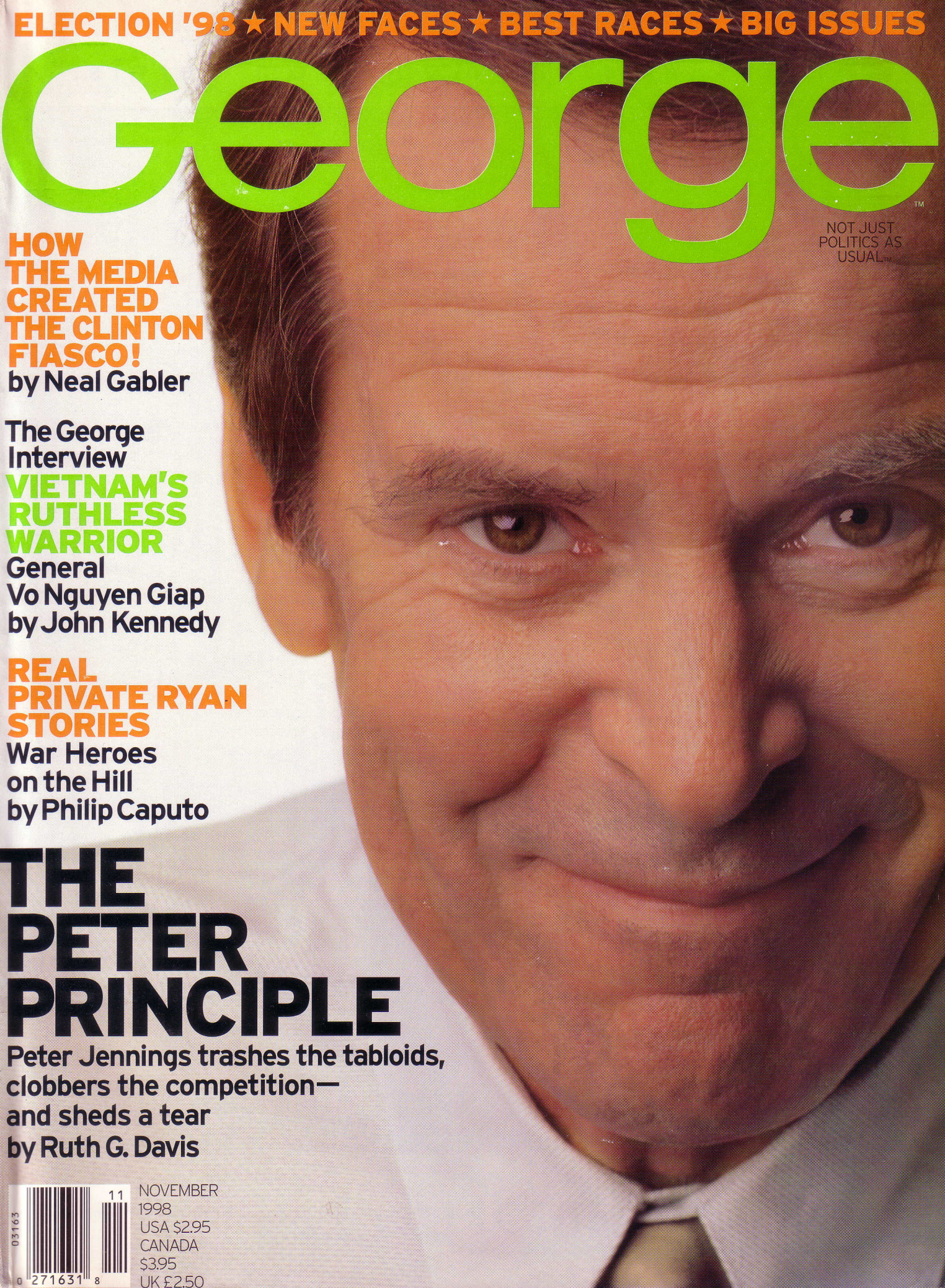

THE PETER PRINCIPLE

Peter Jennings trashes the tabloids, clobbers the competition—and sheds a tear
by Ruth G. Davis

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THE MASTER MIND

Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap, one of history's legendary commanders, faced the full might of the U.S. military—and won. Twenty-five years later, in a rare interview, Giap reveals how he beat the odds.

By **John Kennedy**
portrait by **Robert Curran**

In the heart of Hanoi, in a rambling French villa enveloped by hydrangea and ginkgo trees, lives the diminutive, elderly man who broke the mighty armies of France and the United States and sent them packing, battered and bewildered, from his country.

Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap is the founder and former leader of the People's Army of Vietnam, the man who prevailed in one of the most unlikely victories in military history by crushing the French at Dien Bien Phu and, years later, confounding the Americans at Khe Sanh. "All people must fight," says Giap of the traditional Vietnamese philosophy of warfare. By mixing that principle with the relentless political indoctrination of his troops, he forged a potent fighting force that consistently triumphed against overwhelming odds. It remains among the elite infantry forces in the world today.

Giap was born in one of the poorest areas of central Vietnam to parents of modest means. His father was a scholar who had for years been active in anti-colonialist politics against the French. By the time Giap was ten, his father had died in a

Left, from top: **General Giap,** as Vietnam's defense minister, in the early 1970s; Giap visiting soldiers in 1972. Right: The elderly general at his Hanoi home in August.

French prison. By Giap's thirty-second birthday, both his wife and his sister-in-law, who were imprisoned for their political activities, had died at the hands of the French.

When he was finally introduced to the future Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh, in 1940, Giap was recognized as one of the leading military minds in the Vietnamese communist movement. The old revolutionary was impressed by Giap's knowledge of military history and by his ruthless determination. He entrusted Giap with an unlikely mission for a man with no formal military training: the creation of a communist army force inside Vietnam to expel the French.

Within four years, Giap was conducting guerrilla strikes against French outposts. But the culmination of the war for independence came years later, in 1954. After a bloody, 56-day siege of the seemingly impenetrable French fortress at Dien Bien Phu, Giap's peasant army overran the base. All told, the French lost 11,500 men (including prisoner-of-war casualties) and suffered not only the loss of its "jewel of Indochina" but a colossal national humiliation.

Giap had always believed that a disciplined guerrilla army could defeat a conventional one, no matter how well armed. The battles with the French had proved him right, and in the "American War," Giap again displayed a preternatural ability to exploit his enemy's weaknesses. Perceiving that the U.S. military was ill equipped to achieve the political objectives needed to secure a lasting military victory, Giap adapted his tactics accordingly.

Of the Americans, Giap once said, "We'll beat them at the moment they have the most men, the most weapons, the most hope of winning. Because all that strength will become a millstone around their necks." And so he fought on his own terms, not on the Americans', engaging the enemy when and where it least expected. He involved every able body in the war effort so that the Americans, thousands of miles from home, never felt safe. And he prolonged the war as long as possible so as to drain the enemy's resources and morale, while U.S. domestic opposition to the war festered.

In time, Giap was successful, as he knew he would be. He told a journalist at the height of the war, in 1968, "We'll take as long as necessary, 10, 15, 20, 50 years, until we achieve total victory.... We're not in a hurry, and we're not afraid."

The rap against Giap has always been that he was careless with the lives of his soldiers. General William Westmoreland himself says that Giap willingly took losses no American general could even approach and still maintain a command. Indeed, Giap once offered to an observer, "Every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world.... So the deaths of tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represent really very little."

It was hard for me to reconcile that reputation with the avuncular man with the piercing eyes and easy smile, whom I met on the eve of his eighty-seventh birthday. He was surrounded by his eldest son and daughter, his second wife, and a bevy of admiring aides.

Today, the man who shared jasmine tea and sweet green-bean cakes with me is focused on a different legacy—one as an advocate of a postwar rapprochement between Vietnam and the United States.

"You see," Giap said, patting my knee, "I was once the general of war, but now I want to be the general of peace."

HOW ON EARTH DID YOUR VOCATION AS A PROFESSOR PREPARE YOU FOR A CAREER AS THE SUPREME MILITARY COMMANDER OF VIETNAM?

Because like all Vietnamese, I wanted independence, and in Vietnam we have a saying, "The enemy comes to the house, and even the women fight." So when I am asked, "Who was the best Vietnamese general?" I say, "The Vietnamese people."

WHAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FIGHTING THE FRENCH AND FIGHTING THE AMERICANS?

The French thought that because they had governed Vietnam for nearly a hundred years, they understood the situation, and they were resolved to win. But exactly at the moment the French had assembled their strongest military force and were sure of victory, they failed: at the siege of Dien Bien Phu, in 1954.

Many French generals and ministers came to Dien Bien Phu before it fell—so did some American generals. And they all said that Dien Bien Phu could not be destroyed. Then it fell. [*Smiles*]

THE U.S. AND VIETNAM WERE UNLIKELY ENEMIES. HO CHI MINH QUOTED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IN HIS SPEECHES, AND THE AMERICANS PROVIDED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE DURING THE FIGHT AGAINST THE JAPANESE IN WORLD WAR II. DID YOU EVER THINK THAT YOU WOULD WAGE WAR AGAINST THE U.S.?

It's true. The Vietnamese and the Americans have had a long history. President Jefferson, when he was minister to France in Paris, met the son of a Vietnamese king. He wanted some seed rice to take home with him to the United States.

During World War II, a group of Americans, commanded by Major Allison Thomas [an OSS officer], parachuted into the war zone and worked with us as we fought the Japanese. If such cooperation had continued, there would have been no war between the United States and Vietnam.

General De Gaulle came to Phnom Penh in 1963 and said, "We have lost the war, and therefore America should not enter it." But the Americans answered, "France is one thing, America another. America has gigantic strength, and therefore we will win." And at the moment when American strength was greatest, when they were sure of victory, they too failed.

When your father was president, I was commander in chief, and I had to very carefully research his thoughts and policies. I originally believed that his plan was to use military strength to help the Saigon government stop the communist movement. But now, by way of historical documents, I have learned that some time later President Kennedy had rethought this and didn't want to support the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in Saigon. He wanted the United States to be involved in the Vietnam War only to a certain extent. If that unfortunate event—the death of your father—had not taken place, things would have been somewhat different, not as they were under Johnson and Nixon.

YOU SAY THAT THE WAR AGAINST THE UNITED STATES WAS AS MUCH A POLITICAL WAR AS IT WAS A MILITARY ONE. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

As Chairman Ho Chi Minh said, there is never a strategy CONTINUED ON PAGE 132

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 92 that is purely military. So our strategy included everything—political, military, economic, diplomatic aspects. And it was not a war fought solely by the military; it was fought by the whole people. This is a point that American generals and politicians didn't understand.

"If we had fought the Soviet way, we wouldn't have lasted more than two hours."

WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY THAT FRANCE AND THE U.S. WERE DEFEATED AT THE MOMENT THEY WERE MILITARILY AT THEIR STRONGEST?

Compared with China or with America, Vietnam is a small country. Our population is not so great. But in a thousand years of independence, every single Chinese dynasty attacked Vietnam, and every one lost. Because the Vietnamese have a way of fighting that is all our own.

In the 1960s, I went to the Soviet Union to seek aid, because at that time the U.S. B-52 bombers were attacking quite heavily. At the meeting in Moscow, the entire Soviet politburo was assembled, with [Soviet president Leonid] Brezhnev and Prime Minister [Alexey] Kosygin. Kosygin asked me this, "Comrade Giap, you say you'll defeat America. So I want to ask you, how many mechanized infantry divisions do you have compared to the Americans? And tanks and jet aircraft—how many have the Americans?

I replied, "I understand your question, comrade, about the comparison of forces. It's the basis of Soviet military science, an outstanding science that has defeated many enemies. But if we were to fight your way, we wouldn't last for more than two hours."

After our victory, I had an occasion to return to Moscow, and I met Kosygin again. He shook my hand and was very surprised. "Great!" he said. "You comrades fight very well."

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON HOW THE AMERICANS WERE ILL EQUIPPED AND ILL SUITED TO FIGHT A LAND WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?

I read some speeches made by American G.I.'s about how the war was fought. A first lieutenant said, "When you go out on the battlefield [in Vietnam], only then do you know what the war is like. The leaders above us don't understand. We search for the enemy everywhere and find nothing, but when we think there is no enemy, then the enemy appears. There are no front lines, yet the front lines are everywhere. We see a person and are afraid. We see a child and are afraid. We see a leaf shaking, and again we are afraid."

DURING MY VISIT HERE, I'VE BEEN SURPRISED AT HOW LITTLE HOSTILITY THERE IS TOWARD AMERICANS. WHY?

Recently, an American war veteran came to see me, and I received him very warmly. He said, "I don't understand that previously I came here to attack Vietnam, and yet you receive me like this." And I said, "Before, the G.I.'s came here carrying Thompsons, and so we received them as people carrying guns. Now you come as tourists, and we receive you with the spirit of hospitality." And the man began to cry.

I also received Admiral Zumwalt, the commander who ordered the dropping of Agent Orange. He told me that his own son had suffered because of that chemical. "I was just doing my duty," the admiral said. And I said, "I understand."

So, now the question is, How can we make our two peoples, both of whom love peace, come closer together?

HOW CAN RECONCILIATION BE BEST ACHIEVED?

Every American citizen who has goodwill should do something to make the relationship better. We must understand each other better, especially the younger generation.

I'll make one more point. Perhaps the most painful legacy of the war is the effects of Agent Orange. As humanitarians, we have a shared responsibility to help Vietnamese victims overcome these difficulties.

Robert Curran is a Miami-based photographer whose work has appeared in Details, Detour, *and* Aperture. *Special thanks to Kyle Horst for all his help.*