

# The New York Times Magazine

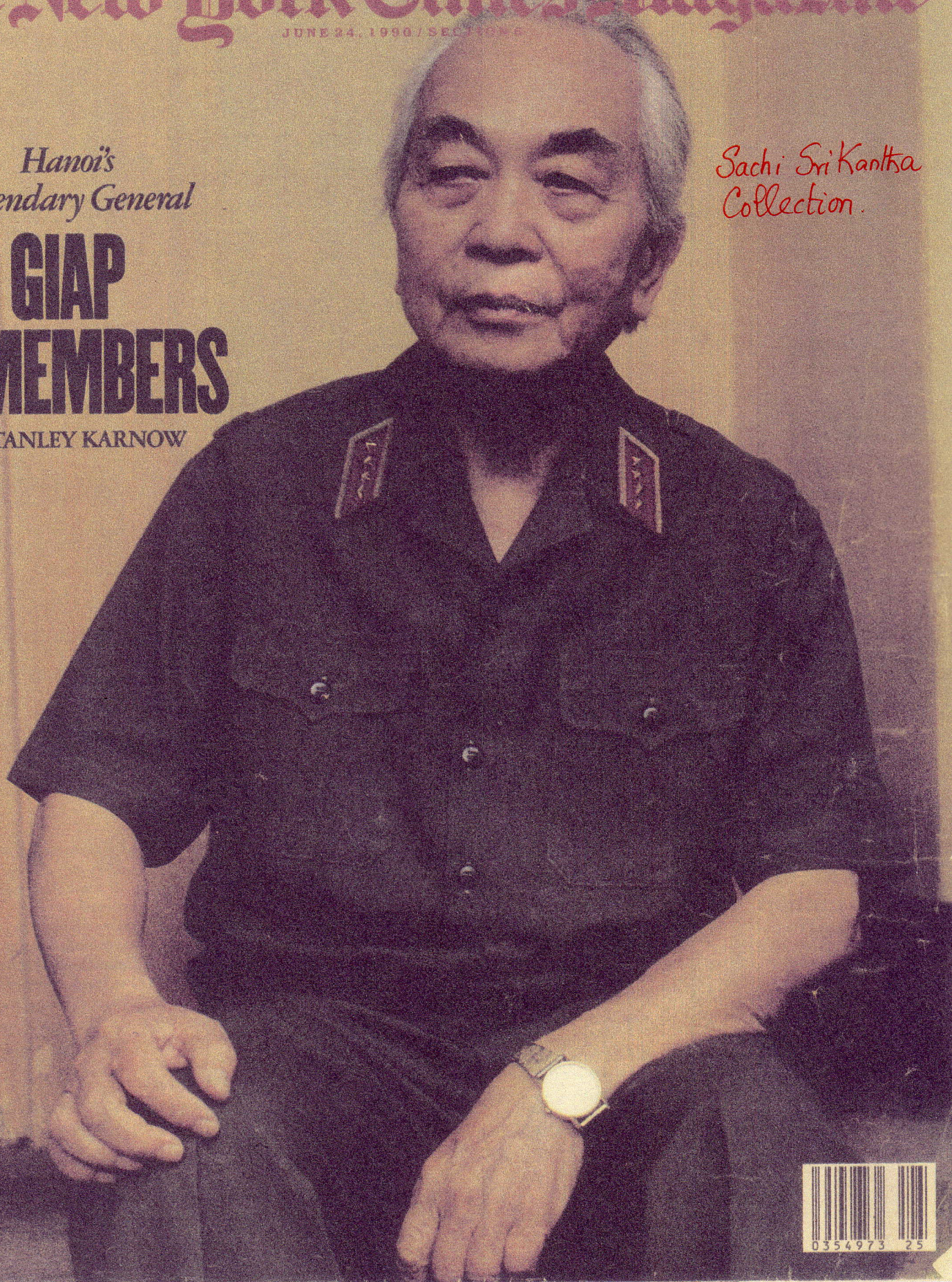
JUNE 24, 1990 / SECTION 6

*Hanoi's  
Legendary General*

## GIAP REMEMBERS

BY STANLEY KARNOW

*Sachi Sri Kantha  
Collection.*



*Hanoi's legendary general drove out the French and then the Americans. They underestimated his willingness to take horrendous losses.*

# GIAP REMEMBERS

BY STANLEY KARNOW

WE MET AT THE FORMER FRENCH COLONIAL governor's palace in Hanoi, an ornate mansion set in a spacious garden ablaze with hibiscus and bougainvillea, where senior Vietnamese officials receive guests. A short man with smooth skin, white hair, narrow eyes and a spry gait, he wore a simple olive uniform, the four stars on its collar the only sign of his rank. Smiling broadly, he grasped me with soft, almost feminine hands and then, to my astonishment, bussed my cheeks in traditional French style.

Despite his Asian traits, this elfin figure might have been a courtly old Frenchman. But here was Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietnamese Communist commander, the peer of Grant, Lee, Rommel and MacArthur in the pantheon of military leaders.

A bold strategist, skilled logician and tireless organizer, Giap fought for more than 30 years,

building a handful of ragtag guerrillas into one of the world's most effective armies. He surmounted stupendous odds to crush the French, but his crowning achievement was to vanquish America's overwhelmingly superior forces in Vietnam — the only defeat the United States has sustained in its history.

I covered the two wars — which in many respects were phases of the same war — the first indirectly from Paris and the second as a correspondent in Vietnam. My reporting and subsequent research for a book brought me into contact with senior soldiers from the opposing sides. Giap was unique, having been both a policy maker and a field officer. I had studied his career, and sought to see him on an earlier trip to Hanoi. But only on this recent return did he grant me an interview.

The French once dubbed Giap the "snow-covered volcano" — a glacial exterior concealing a volatile temperament. Now approaching 80, he seems to have mellowed with age. But he still displays the intellectual vigor and fierce determination that propelled him to victory — and have made him a legend. Giap attributes his success to innate genius rather than to any formal training as a soldier. As he laughingly told me, "I was a self-taught general!"

A DAY AFTER OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER I drove to Giap's private residence, a handsome French colonial villa, its parlor lined with a polyglot assortment of volumes and decorated with busts and portraits of Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh, the deified leader of modern Vietnam. His wife, a buxom, cheerful woman, served fruit as he played the paterfamilias, proudly introducing his eldest daughter, an eminent nuclear physicist, and cuddling his grandchildren in

Stanley Karnow is the author of "Vietnam: A History." He recently won the Pulitzer Prize in history for "In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines" (Random House).



Above: In 1945, Ho Chi Minh, left, and Vo Nguyen Giap photographed this picture for a major in the Office of Strategic Services.

Right: In 1952, General Giap wore a white sult as commander of the Vietminh army.



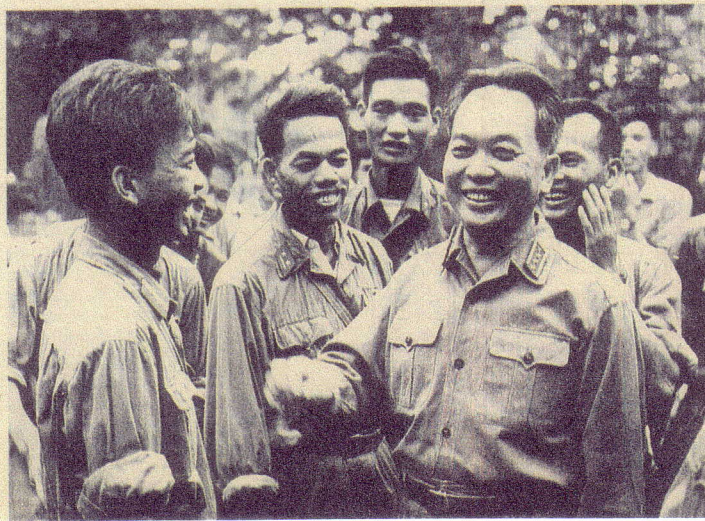
ABOVE: U.P.I./BETTMANN NEWSPHOTOS. TOP: MAJ. ALLISON K. THOMAS



ABOVE: LORI GRINKER/CONTACT. BELOW: PICTORIAL PARADE

his lap. He spoke flawless French slightly seasoned by a tonal Vietnamese inflection. Commenting on my fluency in French, he remarked, "I am glad to see that you are cosmopolitan" — as if he felt that we shared a bond as products of France's *grande mission civilisatrice*. Like many Vietnamese nationalists of his generation, Giap had embraced French culture while struggling against French colonialism.

But as he began to talk seriously, he exploded in a torrent of words. Endowed with a prodigious memory, he recalled the names of old comrades or detailed events dating back decades. He was often didactic, a vestige of his youth as a schoolteacher, and he lapsed into political bromides that evoked his revolutionary past. At times he sounded ironic — as he did when he cited Gen. William C. Westmoreland's "considerable military knowledge," then proceeded to list what he viewed as the American commander's blunders in (Continued on Page 36)



Above: in Ho Chi Minh City last year, General Giap welcomed troops returning from Cambodia.

Left: The general with his soldiers in September 1968, half a year after the success of the Tet offensive.

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## GIAP

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Vietnam. And, like generals everywhere, he glossed over his setbacks. He admitted that, yes, "there were difficult moments when we wondered how we could go on." Yet, he thundered, "We were never pessimistic. Never! Never! Never!"

Giap's men did indeed show phenomenal tenacity during the war, confounding United States strategists who assumed that sheer might would crack their morale. Westmoreland, pointing to the grim "body count" of enemy dead, constantly claimed that the Communists were about to collapse. Following the war, still perplexed by his failure, Westmoreland said, "Any American commander who took the same vast losses as Giap would have been sacked overnight."

But Giap was not an American among strange people in a faraway land. His troops and their civilian supporters were fighting on their own soil, convinced that their sacrifices would erode the patience of their foes and, over time, bring Vietnam under Communist control. He had used this strategy against France, and he was confident that it would work against the United States.

"We were not strong enough to drive out a half-million American troops, but that wasn't our aim," he told me. "Our intention was to break the will of the American Government to continue the war. Westmoreland was wrong to expect that his superior firepower would grind us down. If we had focused on the balance of forces, we would have been defeated in two hours. We were waging a people's war — a *la manière vietnamienne*. America's sophisticated arms, electronic devices and all the rest were to no avail in the end. In war there are the two factors — human beings and weapons. Ultimately, though, human beings are the decisive factor. Human beings! Human beings!"

How long was he prepared to fight? "Another twenty years, even a hundred years, as long as it took to win, regardless of cost," Giap replied instantly. What, in fact, had been the cost? "We still don't know," he said, refusing, despite my persistence, to hazard a guess. But one of his aides confided to me that at least a million of their troops perished, the majority of them

in the American war. As for the civilian toll, he said, "We haven't the faintest idea."

Listening to these horrendous statistics recalled to me the Americans who observed during the war that Asians have little regard for human life. But, judging from the carnage of two World Wars, the West is hardly a model of compassion. Moreover, Giap maintains, the Communists would have paid any price for victory because they were dedicated to a cause that reflects Vietnam's national heritage — a legacy that has also fueled its fierce martial spirit.

"Throughout our history," he intoned, "our profoundest ideology, the pervasive feeling of our people, has been patriotism." I knew what he meant. A battlefield for 4,000 years, Vietnam is awash in stories of real or mythical warriors who resisted foreign invaders, mainly Chinese. Its struggles forged a sense of national identity that is still alive in poetry and folk art, and in rural pagodas where children burn joss sticks before the statues of fabled heroes and heroines.

**T**HE FRENCH HAD conquered Vietnam by the early 20th century, but their authority was recurrently challenged by uprisings, which they often quelled brutally. Giap was nurtured in this climate of rebellion. The elder of two sons in a family of five children, he was born in 1911 in the Quang Binh Province village of An Xa, just above the line that would divide Vietnam 43 years later. The region of rice fields and jungles, set against a horizon of hazy mountains, had only been recently "pacified" by the French, and the exploits of its local partisans were still fresh memories.

At the village kindergarten Giap was taught elementary French, but at home his parents spoke only Vietnamese and, as he put it, "they ingrained patriotism in me." His father, a scholarly peasant, manifested his nationalism by teaching written Vietnamese in Chinese ideographs. From him Giap learned to read his first book, a child's history of Vietnam: "I discovered our forebears, our martyrs, our duty to expunge the disgrace of past humiliations."

His voice softened as he re-  
(Continued on Page 39)

## PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS

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Sunday, August 26  
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### HOME DESIGN

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### THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER

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Sunday, December 2  
Four-color closes Monday, October 1  
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# GIAP

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called the day he left home for primary school. "My mama and I were separating for the first time, and we both wept." In 1924, he went to the old imperial capital of Hue to attend the prestigious Quoc Hoc academy, whose alumni included Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Din Diem, later the anti-Communist president of South Vietnam. There, barely 13, he began his political education.

Students met secretly to discuss anticolonial articles — particularly those by a mysterious expatriate, Nguyen Ai Quoc, "Nguyen the Patriot," later known as Ho Chi Minh. But Giap was especially inspired by Phan Boi Chau, an early nationalist whom the French had put under house arrest in Hue. He imitated Chau's exhortations for me: "The cock is crowing! Arise, arise and prepare for action!"

Thus aroused, the youths protested openly against a French ban on nationalist activities. The protest fizzled, and Giap was expelled from school. "We now wondered what to do next," he recalled. "Nobody knew. We lacked direction."

He found his gospel after he was hired to assist a Vietnamese teacher who owned an illicit collection of Marx's works in French. "I spent my nights reading them, and my eyes opened," he said. "Marxism promised revolution, an end to oppression, the happiness of mankind. It echoed the appeals of Ho Chi Minh, who had written that downtrodden peoples should join the proletariat of all countries to gain their liberation. Nationalism made me a Marxist, as it did so many Vietnamese intellectuals and students."

Still he clung to the Confucian ethic of his father. "Marxism also seemed to me to coincide with the ideals of our ancient society," he added, "when the emperor and his subjects lived in harmony. It was a utopian dream."

By 1930, the global depression had hit Vietnam, and peasant unrest spread through the country, spurring radicals to rebel against the French, who summarily executed hundreds in reprisal. Foreseeing further revolts, Ho hastily founded the Indochinese Communist Party.

Now a professional agita-  
(Continued on Page 57)

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# Local accents.

The image shows a world map with various Reader's Digest magazine covers and editor portraits placed over different geographical regions. The covers are in various languages and feature local editors. The portraits are of the editors themselves, with their names and locations listed below them.

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# GIAP

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tor, Giap was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison, but a sympathetic French official released him earlier. He went to Hanoi, graduated from a French school, the Lycée Albert Sarraut, then obtained a law degree at the University of Hanoi, another French institution.

To earn a living, he taught at a private school, where his courses included Vietnamese history — “to imbue my students with patriotism,” he told me. He also lectured on the French Revolution “to propagate the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.” When I asked him to name his French hero, he snapped, “Robespierre!” “But he was the architect of the Terror,” I remonstrated. “Robespierre!” he repeated. “Robespierre fought to the end for the people.” And Napoleon? “Bonaparte, yes. He was a revolutionary. Napoleon, no. He betrayed the people.”

In 1936, Socialists and Communists formed a Popular Front government in Paris, and tensions in Vietnam eased. Giap had by then joined the Communist Party, which could now legally publish newspapers in French and Vietnamese, and he wrote articles in both languages. He married Minh Khai, a Communist militant, and they had a daughter. The physicist I met at his home in Hanoi was the child grown up.

Giap avidly read Ho's writings as they reached Vietnam. “I tried to imagine this man,” he said. “I looked forward to meeting him some day.” His chance came in early 1940.

Ho, then in China, decided to reinforce his movement in Vietnam, and he summoned Giap and Pham Van Dong, the future Vietnamese Prime Minister. Left behind, Giap's wife was arrested. She died in prison following the execution of her sister, also a Communist, by a French firing squad. Giap was distraught when he learned of their deaths three years afterward. He subsequently married Dang Bich Ha, his present wife, the daughter of a professor.

In Kunming, the Yunnan Province capital, Giap met Ho, a frail figure with a wispy beard, who then called himself Vuong. Giap was disappointed. “Here was this legend,” he told me, “but he was just a man, like any other man.”

Ho ordered him to Yen-an, in north China, where the Chinese Communists conducted courses on guerrilla warfare. Balking, Giap said, “I wield a pen, not a sword.” But he went nevertheless, wearing an oversized Chinese army uniform. En route, he received a telegram from Ho, countering the order. France had fallen to the Germans, and the situation in Vietnam was about to change completely. The moment had come, Ho said, to return to Vietnam.

Early in 1941, Ho set foot in his homeland for the first time in more

than 30 years. He established his sanctuary in a cave near Pac Bo, a remote village nestled in an eerie landscape of limestone hills. There, joined by Giap and others, he founded the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh, the Vietnam Independence League — Vietminh for short. From its name he borrowed his most famous alias, Ho Chi Minh — roughly Bringer of Light.

“Political action should precede military action,” Ho asserted. Giap and his comrades started by recruiting the poor, alienated hill tribes of the region. They trekked through the mountains, creating cells of five men and women, who in turn converted other villagers to the cause. The cells multiplied swiftly — testimony to Giap's organizational skill.

Meanwhile, Giap began to form guerrilla bands to guard the political cadres. He assumed a *nom de guerre*, Van, but he had no military experience. Except for a dud Chinese shell, he had never handled a lethal device — not even a gun. His partisans possessed only knives and a few old flintlocks. Once they did acquire a grenade, but he could not figure out how to detonate it. He also tried in vain to polish his ragged ranks. Sounding like a drill sergeant as he told me the story, he said: “We didn't even know how to march in French — *un, deux, un, deux*. So I translated the numbers into Vietnamese — *mot, hai, mot, hai*.”

He recalls that time as harrowing. Hunted by French patrols, Giap's bands retreated into the jungle, where they suffered from diseases, and subsisted on bark and roots. Learning as he went along, Giap taught his soldiers to wade through streams or move during rainstorms to deter pursuit, to store supplies, to communicate secretly, and to ferret out informers. Despite his constant fear of failure, the movement grew.

Still he remained an intellectual, writing theoretical articles for his followers. Once, after scanning them, Ho sniffed, “No peasant will understand this stuff.”

The Japanese had invaded Vietnam after entering World War II, and the Vietminh guerrillas resisted them as well as the French — thereby enhancing their nationalist image. By 1944 Ho was certain that America would win the war and back him. Not only had President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounced French colonialism, but the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency, was also then helping the Vietminh in exchange for information on Japanese troop deployments. Ho, calculating that a show of strength would boost his movement, ordered Giap to form larger “armed propaganda teams” and to attack isolated French garrisons.

Giap assembled a team of 34 guer-

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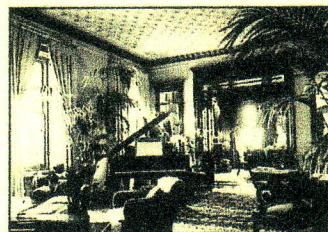
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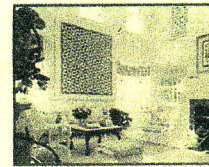
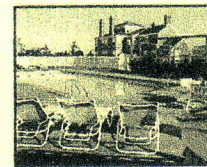
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rillas, among them three women. Resembling ordinary peasants in their conic hats and indigo pajamas, they attacked two tiny French posts on Christmas Eve, 1944, killing their French officers and seizing their arsenals. The skirmishes are commemorated to this day as the birth of the Vietnamese army. Beaming as he recalled these episodes, Giap said: "Recently I read an old French report on the engagements. It stated that our troops were brave and disciplined — and that their leader displayed a mastery of guerrilla tactics. *Quel compliment!*"

The victory swelled Ho's ranks. In September 1945, following Japan's surrender, he declared the independence of Vietnam. Named commander of the Vietminh armed forces, Giap assumed the rank of general. Ho also appointed him Minister of Interior, a position Giap reportedly used to liquidate a number of non-Communist nationalist parties — and, some sources allege, even his Communist rivals. Unlike Ho, who wore an ascetic cotton tunic and rubber-tire sandals, Giap affected a white suit, striped tie and fedora, perhaps to advertise his Western tastes.

Ho offered to remain affiliated with France, but the French rebuffed his compromise, and war broke out in 1946. Giap preserved his teams and built up popular sympathy. By late 1949, the Chinese Communists had conquered China and begun to send him heavy weapons, which enabled him to enlarge his guerrilla bands into battalions, regiments and ultimately divisions. Giap opened the path into Vietnam for Chinese arms shipments by destroying the French border posts in a series of lightning attacks.

Stunned, France sent out its most distinguished general: Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. Giap gallantly announced that the Vietminh now faced "an adversary worthy of its steel." But de Lattre died of cancer amid plans for an ambitious French offensive. Both sides sparred for the next three years as Gen. Henri Navarre, now the French commander, forecast victory in a statement that would be his unofficial epitaph: "We see it clearly — like light at the end of the tunnel."

By 1953 Ho was considering negotiations with France. But he knew he had to win on the battlefield to win at the conference table. The arena would be Dien Bien Phu, which was to equal Waterloo and Gettysburg among the great battles of history.

"At first I had no idea where — or even whether — the battle would take place," he recalled. Then, a veteran recounting his war, he reconstructed the scene by moving the cups and saucers around the coffee table in front of us.

Navarre, ordered to defend nearby Laos, chose the site by placing his best battalions at Dien Bien Phu, a distant valley not far from the Laotian border in northwest Vietnam — never imagining that Giap would fight there. He misjudged badly.

Giap brought a huge force into the area. His troops marched for weeks, carrying supplies on bicycles and their backs through jungles and over mountains. But no task was tougher than deploying the cannon that China had furnished them. Relying on sheer muscle, they dragged the howitzers up the hills above the French positions. "It was difficult, *n'est-ce pas*, very difficult," Giap recollected, adding that only truly "motivated" men could have performed such a feat.

He planned to launch his attack on Jan. 25, 1954, and at first heeded his Chinese military advisers, who proposed "human wave" assaults of the kind their forces had staged against the Americans in Korea. But, after a sleepless night, he concluded that it would be suicidal to hurl his troops against the deeply entrenched French, with their tanks and aircraft. His tone rose dramatically as he told me: "Suddenly I postponed the operation. My staff was confused, but no matter. I was in command, and I demanded absolute obedience — *sans discussion, sans explication!*"

Giap rescheduled the attack for March, and directed his men to creep toward the French through a maze of tunnels as his cannon pounded them from the heights above the valley. The battle dragged on for nearly two months and, one by one, the French positions fell.

At the time, President Dwight D. Eisenhower weighed and rejected the idea of United States air strikes. What if he had intervened? "We would have had problems," Giap allowed, "but the outcome would have been the same. The battlefield was too big for effective bombing."

The French surrendered on May 7, the day an international conference met in Geneva to seek an end to the war. The Vietminh failed to transform the battlefield victory into a full diplomatic victory. Under Soviet and Chinese pressure, its negotiators accepted a divided Vietnam pending a nationwide election to be held in 1956. Giap would only say that "we could have gained more." But Pham Van Dong, then the chief Vietminh delegate, had earlier told me: "We were betrayed."

With American approval, South Vietnam's President Diem reneged on the election and arrested thousands of southern Vietminh militants, executing many without trial. The Communist regime in Hanoi procrastinated. "Perhaps we should have acted sooner," Giap said, "but our people were tired after a long war, and they might not have responded to a call for yet another armed struggle. We would wait."

In 1957, however, Hanoi ordered its surviving southern activists to form armed teams, supplying them with weapons and cadres through the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail. Soon, again under Hanoi's direction, the teams started to attack Diem's officials. Posing as a home-grown insurgency, the Vietcong surfaced in 1960, in the guise of the

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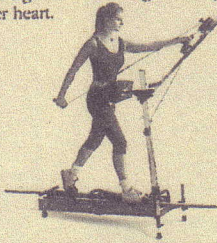
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National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. But it too was invented by Hanoi.

**I** PRESUMED THAT GIAP MUST have been frustrated, after years of fighting the French, to be beginning another war against the Americans and their South Vietnamese clients. But, as he tells it, his zeal never waned as he resumed the same slow process of rebuilding the forces in the south.

Initially stumped after President John F. Kennedy sent aid and advisers to Vietnam, the Communists quickly regained their momentum and were soon routing Diem's army. Their strength also increased as numbers of peasants, alienated by Diem's rigidity, joined their camp.

Late in 1963, acting with American complicity, Diem's own generals staged a coup against him. His assassination dismayed the Hanoi regime. The new junta in Saigon promised reforms, prompting many Vietcong supporters to switch sides. Nor did it seem likely that President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had succeeded Kennedy, would withdraw from Vietnam. Giap, now seeing a protracted struggle ahead, concluded that he would eventually have to commit his own regular forces to the war. By the end of 1964, the first northern regiment was operating in the south.

The large Communist units gravely threatened the Saigon regime, which was now tottering amid internecine rivalries. Early in 1965, alarmed by the situation, Johnson unleashed air attacks against North Vietnam and sent United States combat troops to Vietnam. Surprisingly, Giap displayed a measure of sympathy for Johnson's predicament. "Of course he would have been wiser not to esca-

late the war," he mused. "But throughout history, even the most intelligent leaders have not always been masters of their fate."

By late 1967, however, Giap also faced a hard choice. The half-million United States troops then in Vietnam were chewing up his forces, and his hopes of an early victory seemed dim. But, as he wrote at the time, the Americans were stretched "as taut as a bowstring" and could not defend the entire country. He also detected growing antiwar feeling in the United States and rising unrest in South Vietnam's urban areas. Thus he gambled on a campaign that would break the deadlock. Later known as the Tet offensive of 1968, it would be a coordinated assault against South Vietnam's cities.

"For us, *vous savez*, there is never a single strategy," Giap explained. "Ours is always a synthesis, simultaneously military, political and diplomatic — which is why, quite clearly, the offensive had multiple objectives. We foresaw uprisings in the cities. But above all, we wanted to show the Americans that we were not exhausted, that we could attack their arsenals, communications, elite units, even their headquarters, the brains behind the war. And we wanted to project the war into the homes of America's families, because we knew that most of them had nothing against us. In short, we sought a decisive victory that would persuade America to renounce the war."

Giap prefaced the drive in late 1967 with a diversion, striking a string of American garrisons in the Vietnamese highlands. Johnson, who viewed Giap's siege of Khe Sanh as a replay of his showdown against the French, pledged Westmoreland to hold the base — say-

## Solutions to Last Week's Puzzles

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ing. "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo." The Communist troops, bombed by B-52's, took ghastly losses. But Giap had lured the American forces away from the populated coast.

On the night of Jan. 31, 1968, the Lunar New Year, some 70,000 Communist soldiers attacked South Vietnam's cities. A suicide squad stormed into the United States Embassy compound in Saigon, and American troops fought for weeks to rescue Hue. The televised scenes shocked the American public, which was already souring on the war. His ratings plummeting as antiwar sentiment spread, Johnson abandoned the race for re-election. Vietnam, coupled with civil rights protests, threw America into turmoil.

Looking back, Giap maintains that Tet was a "victory" that showed "our discipline, strength and ardor." But, he

admits, it was not "decisive." Another seven years of war lay ahead and, he concedes, they were "difficult." Still, he added with typical bravado, "no obstacle, nothing the Americans could do, would stop us in the long run." This was a reality, he emphasized, that Westmoreland failed to perceive. "He was a cultivated soldier who had read many military texts," Giap said. "Yet he committed an error following the Tet offensive, when he requested another 206,000 troops. He could have put in 300,000, even 400,000 more men. It would have made no difference."

But the aftermath of Tet was bleak for the Communists. According to one of Giap's aides, their casualties during the drive had been "devastating." American bombing of the South Vietnamese countryside further crippled their forces as their peasant supporters

## Like many Vietnamese of his generation, Giap embraced French culture and struggled against French colonialism.

fled to urban refugee camps. They were also ravaged by the Phoenix program, devised by the C.I.A. to destroy their rural sanctuaries. The Communist structure retreated to Cambodia, where it was again uprooted by President Richard M. Nixon's incursion in 1970.

As Nixon withdrew United States troops, however, Giap had only to wait until he faced the inept Saigon army. The climax, he figured, would involve big units. Early in 1972, he staged a massive offensive intended to improve Hanoi's hand for the final negotiations. It failed as American aircraft crushed his divisions. But Nixon, eager for peace before the United States Presidential election in November, compromised on a cease-fire. Signed in January 1973, it would gradually erode. The Communists rolled into Saigon two years later.

"I was delirious with joy," Giap said. "I flew there immediately, and inspected the South Vietnamese army's headquarters, with its modern American equipment. It had all been useless. The human factor had been decisive!"

A typical retired general, Giap now devotes much of his time to revisiting battlefields and addressing veterans. "If I had not become a soldier," he reflects, "I probably would have remained a teacher, maybe of philosophy or history. Someone recently asked me whether, when I first formed our army, I ever imagined I would fight the Americans. *Quelle question!* Did the Americans, back then, ever imagine that they would one day fight us?"

He gripped my hand as we parted, saying: "Remember, I am a general who fought for peace. I wanted peace — but not peace at any price." With that he walked off briskly, leaving me to contemplate the cemeteries, the war monuments and the unhealed memories in France, America and Vietnam, and the terrible price their peoples paid. ■

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