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Vietnam '67 – **Dec. 23, 2017**

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Why Did No One See the Tet Offensive Coming?

Shelling in Saigon in 1968.Tim Page/Corbis, via Getty Images

When the Tet offensive ignited South Vietnam on Jan. 30, 1968, American forces were taken by surprise. Every one of the country's 44 provinces was hit in a stunning, coordinated attack that changed the course of the war. With so many American resources in Vietnam focused on intelligence-gathering, why was the United States so clueless? My own experience with the United States Agency for International Development might shed some light on this lapse.
The weekend of Dec. 15, 1967, promised to be an interesting one. I had been invited by my French friend, Serge, to accompany him on an inspection trip to a rubber plantation in Hau Nghia province that was part of the Société des Plantations de Terres Rouges network, a huge French holding an hour north of Saigon. For decades Terres Rouges, along with the Michelin chain, had been jewels in the crown of French colonial agricultural exporters. Now with the intensification of the American war in Vietnam, the plantation was in rapid decline, having suffered from physical destruction wrought by herbicidal chemical defoliation – Agent Orange – as well as the bulldozing of large stands of rubber groves that the American military claimed had served as convenient camouflage for Communist insurgents and the North Vietnamese Army. Serge had been tasked with determining whether the plantation should continue operating and, if so, what measures could be taken to reverse its deterioration.

My interest in the plantations was both personal and professional. As a French speaker and a member of the provincial pacification team in neighboring Binh Long province, I had been tasked with liaising with the French on issues of mutual interest, matters that were unfortunately overwhelmingly negative: the sudden appearance on the plantation of huge numbers of American military personnel and the disruption and destruction their presence wrought – red-light huts sprouting up, the plantation hospital being thrown into disarray, a military airfield extending into the rubber groves and, most significantly, the wholesale destruction of those precious trees that produced latex, the "white gold" so prized in world markets.

My trip with Serge to Hau Nghia was strictly off the record. The French position in Vietnam was dicey. Barely tolerated by the South Vietnamese regime, the planters walked a tightrope of neutrality, since the rubber plantations were in rural areas controlled by the Communists. It was an open secret that the plantation paid "taxes" to both the government and the insurgents. Our destination, Hau Nghia, was particularly insecure. While the government maintained a heavily fortified but very tenuous presence in the provincial capital, the Communists owned the countryside and the allegiance of the people. Their antigovernment position could be seen in the

sullen faces that peered at us. Usually playful and talkative, children in the street were silent and unfriendly.

With the Hau Nghia plantation in the hands of the insurgents, Serge said that extra precaution was necessary to preserve my “cover” for the trip. Dispensing with my usual American-style khakis and denim shirt, I donned the French plantation manager’s “uniform” of white linen shirt and shorts. As we approached the plantation office in our rickety Citroën, Serge cautioned me to keep my speaking to a minimum lest my American-accented French give me away to the plantation labor union staff who were Communists. The day was spent touring the damaged rubber groves and hearing the demands of the labor union for a greater say in the running of the plantation. At midday, we were feted with an elaborate French meal in the plantation club house. Even though they were operating in crisis mode with their plantation about to collapse, a two-hour French lunch was de rigueur. We were told that N.V.A. elements were bivouacked throughout the plantation, poised for attack at any time.

Thinking that the American mission, remote from the realities of the field, would be interested in an on-the-spot report of grim conditions in a key province near Saigon that the Americans had labeled mostly secure, I wrote up a detailed report of my visit to Hau Nghia and submitted it to my boss, the senior province adviser, a seasoned Foreign Service officer who had encouraged me in my pursuit of “deep” reporting activities.

In retrospect, I should have known better. My earlier efforts to put American intelligence operatives in touch with the savvy French planters, a group of tough, intelligent types who included a fair share of battle-hardened former French Foreign Legionnaires, had fallen on deaf ears. Barricaded in their compound with the noise of earsplitting generators blocking them from the real world outside and fed fabricated “intelligence” by paid informers, the American intelligence team scorned any effort to provide real information as “tainted” and “French.”

But being ignored was not the end of it. Several weeks after my trip to Hau Nghia and the filing of my trip report with the embassy, I visited Serge, who had not contacted me since our trip. Obviously upset, he told me that he had been informed by the political section of the American Embassy that I had filed a report on the trip, that I was not authorized to engage in such reporting and that I should not be taken on trips in the future. My cover had been blown, and my relationship with my French contact totally compromised. My boss and I were speechless when we learned about this professional breech caused by petty jealousy on the part of an embassy bureaucrat who felt upstaged by what my boss thought was creative undercover reporting.

Weeks later, I was in Saigon headed back to the States when the Tet offensive exploded, shattering the relative quiet of the status quo in Saigon and changing the outcome of the war. Everybody in the American community seemed so surprised. I wasn’t. The United States had reached that point of delusion in the Vietnam War where “seeing the light at the end of the tunnel” and listening to its own voice was easier and more reassuring than facing the hard reality that “victory” was not possible.