CounterPunch

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TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES VOLUME 24 NUMBER 4 2017

"Believing that house prices would rise for ever, and that even if they faltered the Bank of England would cut interest rates to reinflate the bubble, the banks began to lose any sense of financial risk, and started to relax credit standards and lend irresponsibly. Private-equity firms were allowed to borrow huge multiples of their real assets. Banks started to hide their lending in off-balance-sheet devices such as structured investment vehicles.

"As house prices fall, this all turns into reverse. Loans de-leverage, derivatives degrade, margin calls are missed. The total value of British residential property is about £3trn. Nearly £1trn of this will now disappear over the next few years if prices fall by 30 per cent."

Thatcher and her followers were determined to fight a class war, albeit under such disingenuous slogans as "putting the 'great' back in Great Britain". Her party continues this war to this day.

In 2017, one in three Tory MPs are private landlords.

72 Tory MPs, including Theresa May's new Minister for Policing and Fire Services Nick Hurd (himself a landlord), voted against recent legislation requiring that rental properties be "fit for human habitation".

The U.K.'s housing market is one colossal racket, providing an enormous trough at which bankers, commercial landlords such as Nick Hurd, and Tory politicians such as the self-same Nick Hurd, gorge themselves while the inadequately housed and homeless look on.

When it comes to the U.K.'s housing crisis, and the dreadful Grenfell Tower fire, there is a royal road leading from Margaret Thatcher (whose mansion in Dulwich was registered offshore so she didn't have to pay tax on it), via Tony Blair (himself a multimillionaire landlord) and Gordon Brown, to Theresa May and her shameless sidekick Nick Hurd.

Why, oh why, do so many Brits continue to vote for these self-serving bastards? **CP**

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The Bloodbath in Vietnam Was Us

Hue Back When

By Michael Uhl

For Mark Bowden, author of *Hue 1968*, the pivotal battle of the War in Vietnam did not follow the script most Americans were used to scanning in their newspapers or visualizing on the evening news. The war Americans followed at home was like a humongous hunting expedition. U.S. forces seemed engaged in an endless chase over a lush boondocks inhabited by peasants and dotted with rice paddies or trailing the rugged forested highlands in search of the Viet Cong, a cunning and elusive enemy whose tactics were hit and run, not stand and fight.

When an atypical fixed battle developed, it was typically well-removed from the population centers that hugged the coastline off the South China Sea. Vietnam was, after all, a guerrilla war, or more broadly understood, a people's war fought to reunite a nation, artificially divided into North and South by fiat of the United States in the service of geopolitical brinksmanship. Accused of fermenting the southern insurgency, North Vietnam was mercilessly bombed, but spared the carnage of a ground war. Not so the south where, by whatever foul means, the idea was "to isolate the population from the Viet Cong," notwithstanding that, as Mark Bowden readily concedes, "in most instances they were one in the same." The resistance was popular and widespread, and its idea was to drive the American invader out, and overthrow a despised ruling clique of Vietnamese compradors which survived only because the invader had committed hundreds of thousands of its own troops and billions of its taxpayers' dollars to sustain it.

Americans were consistently assured that bit by bit the tumultuous countryside was being pacified, and the guerillas attrited, both politically and as a fighting force. In late 1967 Americans were told they were winning the war. When Tet —the Luna New Year—dawned on January 31, 1968, that illusion was irreparably shattered. The vastly superior forces of the United States and its southern catspaw, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), were caught virtually flat footed when thousands of regular troops of the People's Army of North Vietnam seemingly materialized from thin air, and in coordination with local units of the southern resistance, launched up and down the length and breath of South Vietnam what was quickly branded the Tet Offensive. The most stunning blow for Americans, war managers and citizens alike, was an assault on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon taken right to the walls of the American Embassy.

For several weeks thereafter, media attention in the U.S. and throughout the world focused primarily on the shock of Saigon's vulnerability, overplaying its significance. A thousand kilometers north, at first scarcely noticed, even by the Commander of U.S. forces, General William Westmoreland, a battle had commenced that would become the "longest and bloodiest" of the war, not waged over the—till then—familiar rural topography, but house to house, street by street, culminating in one of the most intense chapters of urban warfare in the annals of American military history. Observers today might liken it to a more recent urban free-for-all entangling American troops in Fallujah, Iraq. Or, better yet, recall a U.S. military fiasco in downtown Mogadishu that Mark Bowden had crafted into an earlier best seller. To the extent comparisons hold, the Battle of Hue was like Black Hawk Down on steroids.

Hue 1968 is a comprehensive account of that battle written

in the page-turning style of popular narrative non-fiction. The author has assembled a cast of eyewitnesses who participated in the action, Vietnamese and Americans, and the battle unfolds in recollections mined from their interviews, and, for the departed, from other primary sources at his disposal, such as lengthy wartime correspondences. Bowden has properly set the strategic stage for his action in the context of the war's two most relevant contemporaneous developments. There was the very fact of Tet, simultaneous attacks with varying degrees of effectiveness on virtually every population center and military base in the South. The Year of the Monkey came in like Armageddon, catching General Westmoreland, for one, completely off guard even though he later claimed he knew those crafty commies were planning something.

To draw attention away from their true intentions, the North Vietnamese had executed a feint, keeping a remote Marine encampment under heavy bombardment at Khe Sanh near the border with Laos, and just below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Taking the bait, and just two weeks before Tet, Westmoreland weakened his coastal enclaves by detaching troops to reinforce the beleaguered camp. The American general believed he was luring the North Vietnamese into a repeat of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which in 1954 brought French colonial control of Vietnam to an end but inadvertently opened the door to an American invasion. This time, Westmoreland fantasized, "he was determined to prevent history from repeating itself." That battle never developed, and several months later, Khe Sanh was abandoned by the Americans.

Westmoreland's obsession with Khe Sanh apparently prevented him from fully grasping that Hue, South Vietnam's third largest city, and former Imperial capital, had fallen to the Liberation Front in less than twenty-four hours. This pattern of disbelief was moreover pervasive up and down the American chain of command. At Phu Bai, a Marine base less than fifteen miles south of Hue, the commanding general, with improbable symmetry named Forster LaHue, repeatedly ignored reports on the size of the force his counterattack would face, and insisted that, instead of thousands, their number couldn't possibly exceed more than a few hundred. Could a force as large as the one being reported enter and occupy the entire city that quickly and virtually undetected? Through some of his most original reporting Bowden reconstructs exactly how that occurred.

Shifting the action in his account from one adversary to the other, Bowden begins with the attack, describing how four regiments totaling roughly four thousand uniformed NVA soldiers managed to infiltrate the border between North and South Vietnam, rendezvous with local guerrillas in a force of equal size, and ultimately bivouac on the outskirts of Hue. "It was the kind of troop movement," comments Bowden, "that could remain secret only if the citizenry supported it, or didn't care enough to sound the alarm."

Certainly in Hue there were many Catholics who, in general, were partisans of the Saigon regime, not to mention a contingent of elite ARVN soldiers stationed there, who would have sounded the alarm if they'd been aware of any imminent threat. On another side was a strong current of anti-Americanism among the Buddhists and the student body at Vietnam's prestigious Hue University, who two years earlier had combined and rioted against the repressive South Vietnamese government, and burned the library of the United States Information Service. But by early 1968, Hue was being little frequented by the war's violence, and hopes were stoked that the city's rich stock of architectural treasures, not least the palace of Vietnam's last royal dynasty, might avoid destruction. Compared with the rest of the country, life in Hue was reasonably good, and reasonably safe. A degree of political complacency had set into what remained a functional commercial entrepot where trade and traffic on Hue's iconic Perfume River remained brisk.

Even though a majority of Hue's population of 140,000 could not be considered pillars of the revolution, an underground resistance network was well-entrenched in the city and highly motivated. And Bowden, having tracked down a small cast of survivors, gives us affecting sketches of, among others, the Village Girl who guided the troops through the darkness and pointed them toward their targets; the VC commander who stood up to the hero of Dien Bien Phu, General Vo Nguyen Giap, and revised the battle plan; the college boy who worked with his fisherman landlord to smuggle arms into the city by sampan; the Buddhist poet turned what we would call 'information officer,' and Bowden—who holds many conventional opinions—calls "propagandist;" but my favorite was the balsy little guy who was given the task to create a giant new flag for the victors to raise once they'd taken the city.

The flag detail merits a special nod to illustrate the contrast between the high tech m.o. of the Empire's war machine, and the endless improvisation of those in the Front who used gumption, imagination and stealth to their advantage in the face of overwhelming fire power from air, land and sea. The task to create a flag to be seen, not as "an invasion or occupation, but rather as a liberation," fell to Sargent Cao Van Sen, an old war horse who'd fought with the Viet Minh against the French, joined the northern Army, and was then ordered back to his native Hue to organize among the Viet Cong. The idea of the flag, Bowden says "was to recognize real political differences between North and South," with a design that represented, not only the liberation forces, but also "the intelligentsia and the city's religious factions—Buddhists and Catholics." Hanoi's political objective at that stage was transitional, "to establish a neutral, independent South Vietnam," leaving reunification to future negotiations." Sgt. Sen's job was to line up the material, a sewing machine and a seamstress to produce a single flag, which, when completed, required two

men to carry it. After being "run up the 123-foot flagpole… that stood just outside the royal palace before the Citadel's southern wall… it was visible all over Hue" when the city's denizens awoke January 31st on the first morning of Tet.

Metropolitan Hue spread over both sides of the Perfume River, and the Front's objective was to occupy the zone on the south bank called the Triangle, and, on the north, the Citadel, an "enormous fortress that enclosed nearly two square miles… its walls twenty-six feet high and impenetrably thick," and enclosing the neighborhoods of Hue's most affluent residents. Primary targets, included the air strip inside the Citadel, the province headquarters, the treasury, the post office, the prison, the radio station and "the sole American base, the [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] MACV compound."

The Commander of the Front, General Dang Kinh watched from high ground to the west, anxiously awaiting the assault to begin. Finally, "throughout the city arose the sound of gunfire… scattered at first, and then as if touched off by a fuse, it rose rapidly to a din." By the time the shooting stopped, the attacking force, having "suffered only a few casualties, had dealt Hue's defenders a crushing surprise blow." The only major targets not overrun were a fortified redoubt occupied by the 1st ARVN Division inside the Citadel, and the MACV compound on the opposite side of the river, both heavily under siege.

Notwithstanding the loud cheerleading from Hanoi for Tet to unleash a "popular uprising," it was General Kinh's opinion, according to Bowden, that no such uprising would occur, not even in subdued and occupied Hue, given the certainty of an overpowering American counter-attack. Kinh knew his forces "could take the city, but… not hold it for long. Achievable goals… were to destroy the ARVN division, and… round up… those who represented the Saigon regime… who were marked for arrest and punishment."

The subsequent executions of many of these Saigon officials is thematic in Bowden's text, an overly eager retailing of the ex post facto justification among the war's apologists for the American decision to rescue their allies by destroying their city. More informed observers might counter that for an

Battle of Hue. Photo: DoD/National Archives.

American writer of Bowden's stature to lay charges of mass murder at the Vietnamese resistance—in this instance taking blood retaliation on enemies considered legitimate military targets—demonstrates a highly hometown cast of mind, and a failure to do the math on the infinitely less selective assassination orgy of the U.S. Phoenix Program, not to mention the war's vastly unbalanced human death toll perpetrated upon the Vietnamese population by the invader.

Kinh's prediction proved correct. And much of what Bowden encapsulates in Hue 1968 is devoted to a ground level view on just how the city was retaken. Bowden fully examines first January 31st, the day Hue fell, from a variety of vantage points including civilians and combatants on both sides, then moves the battle forward in week long blocks until the

Front, faced with annihilation, is forced to withdraw. Had the U.S. command acted more swiftly, the lives of many marines might have been spared, but the city faced devastation in every scenario as long as the occupiers remained. The initial counter-thrust came from the nearby Marine base at Phu Bai when General LaHue, still doubting his adversary's vast numerical superiority, initially dispatched so few marines that, on one of few occasions during the war, the U.S. was seriously out-gunned. When a marine captain already in Hue called for air and artillery strikes to dislodge the entrenched enemy, General LaHue told him "rather strikingly that he was overreacting." LaHue "saw no reason on earth why the more than four hundred men in the [MACV] compound, reinforced with well over three hundred U.S. marines," assorted tanks and heavy weaponized vehicles, "should not be able to flatten anything between them and the fucking Citadel." Bowden aptly titles this episode An Idiotic Mission.

Three hundred men represented one understrength marine battalion, but only a single unit, Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion of the 1st Marine Division was dispatched at first to test the enemy strength. This proved a disaster, and the best account of the action on the ground I've found was not Bowden's, but in Vietnam-Perkasie, a memoir by W.D. (Bill) Ehrhart. When Alpha Company left Phu Bai just as the sun was coming up, Bill Ehrhart was given the option of staying behind. He was short, meaning only a few days remained on what had already been a harrowing thirteen month tour. But since the unit was just going to check things out, and were told they'd be back by evening, Bill threw caution to the wind.

Alpha Company, moving to relieve the assault on the MACV compound passed a gas station on the city outskirts, and then, Ehrhart writes, "all hell broke loose... The shock of the ambush caught the whole column completely by surprise… We knew the compound lay straight up the road… seven blocks ahead… We fought our way up the [first] block. And the one after that. All day long we inched up the street. Casualties were appalling. Wounded and dead Marines lay everywhere." Ehrhart, wounded in action, was in the thick of it the whole time. His memoir is a compelling, heart wrenching read.

From there Bowden covers the fighting chapter and verse. And if battle action is your genre, it's a read that's hair raising enough to fix your attention. The killing went on for 26 days, and by the end, 80% of the city lay in rubble. Bowden devotes a last chapter to Hue's human toll. "Two-hundred and fifty American marines and soldiers were killed, and 1,554 wounded ... The Front's losses are estimated at between 2,400 and 5000 ... A conservative guess at those executed would be two thousand… [which] brings us to a combined civilian death toll of about eight thousand ... not an exact figure, but to the degree it's off, it's off by being too low."

That the civilian death toll was enormous, cannot be doubted, and is by most accounts I've read over the years attributed to the terrible pounding the city took from naval off-shore guns, and from American and ARVN air power and artillery intent on expelling the Front whatever the human cost. As for "those executed," it appears as if Bowden may have that figure "off" by a factor of ten. Writing in *The New York Times* in October 1972, Richard Barnet, a former State Department official and co-founder of the Institute for Policy Studies, quotes what the Hue Police Chief told a correspondent of The Times of London in March 1968 just days after the battle. The Chief, "Doan Cong Lap estimated the total number of executions at 200." Moreover, "the local Catholic priest reported that none of his clergy or parishioners were harmed by the N.L.F. [National Liberation Front]," who had been given instructions to be on their best behavior. Even if these two eyewitnesses under-counted the reprisal deaths, it's still unlikely that Bowden's figure holds water, given his reliance on official U.S. sources.

Richard Barnet took up this topic at a time when voices in the Nixon administration were claiming that mass executions at Hue were proof there would be a bloodbath if the U.S. withdrew and the communists came to power. When questioned on this in Hanoi, Premier Pham Van Dong retorted, "There is nothing in recent Vietnamese history to suggest that a government bent on killing hundreds of thousands of people in South Vietnam can keep peace." In any case the bloodbath was us. As Barnet dryly quipped, "In the Orwellian age, the daily saturation bombings of Indochina are defended as missions of mercy."

Mark Bowden seems to bend over backwards throughout this voluminous and valuable book to provide a two-sided perspective on a particularly tragic moment in the Vietnam War. But there's something distastefully familiar in his throwaway rhetoric of the Cold War bias that got us into Vietnam in the first place. Bowden demonstrates how truth is betrayed by the words he chooses, for example, that "antiwar activists in the States romanticized Ho Chi Minh, and his cause, emphasizing his nationalist character… [but] Hanoi was Communist, authoritarian to the core… ruthless and doctrinaire." Yet even this phobic reflex to honor the thought police in the mainstream where he prospers doesn't cause Bowden to ignore that it was the Stalinists who hoped to come to power though the ballot box and the Americans who made war to prevent that.

By consensus in the school of conventional wisdom the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the Vietnam War, after which the American war aim was not to win, but how to get out. Mark Bowden makes an excellent case that the fulcrum of that turning point was the Battle of Hue. But what if there was no turning point? In Vietnam the protracted war to expel a powerful foreign invader had its roots in millennia past; the American invasion was just another bump in the road. **CP**

Michael Uhl is the author of *Vietnam Awakening*.