

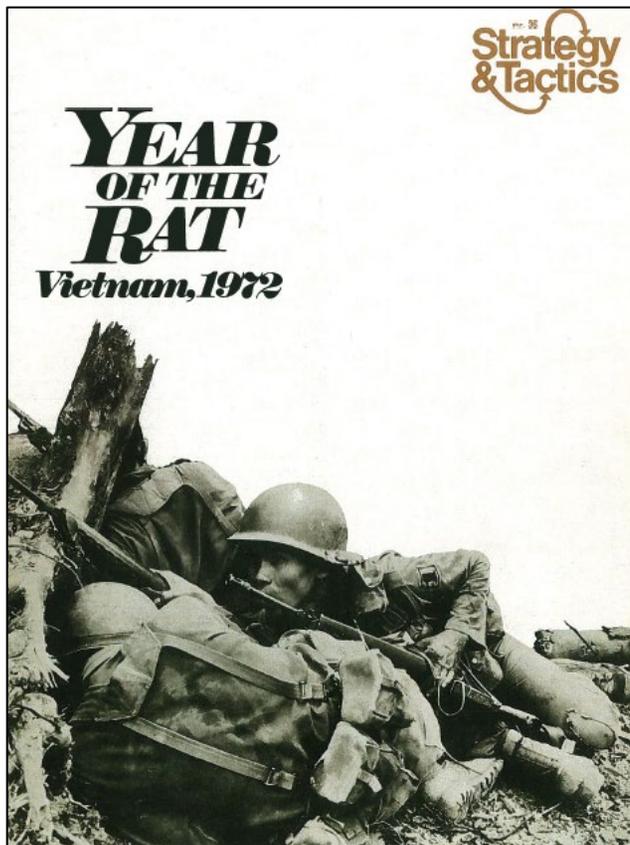
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# Year of the Rat, SPI 1972

*by Joseph Godbout*

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## Year of the Rat – SPI Publications



**Year of the Rat** is the game featured in *Strategy & Tactics* #35 from 1972. It is designed by John Prados, with James F. Dunnigan listed as the "game-system" designer, whatever that means (perhaps co-designer), and Redmond A. Simonsen as the "physical systems" designer, meaning he designed the components. The game features what is, for me, the most interesting and fascinating part of the Vietnam War: the 1972 Easter Offensive by the Communist forces into South Vietnam. That the South "won"--one slippery word when dealing with COIN--though "survived" is perhaps the better description, is a tribute to the courage and resilience of the South Vietnamese and the enormous support provided by American airpower and naval power, as well as the Army and Marine advisors who were very much, like the South Vietnamese, in harm's way.

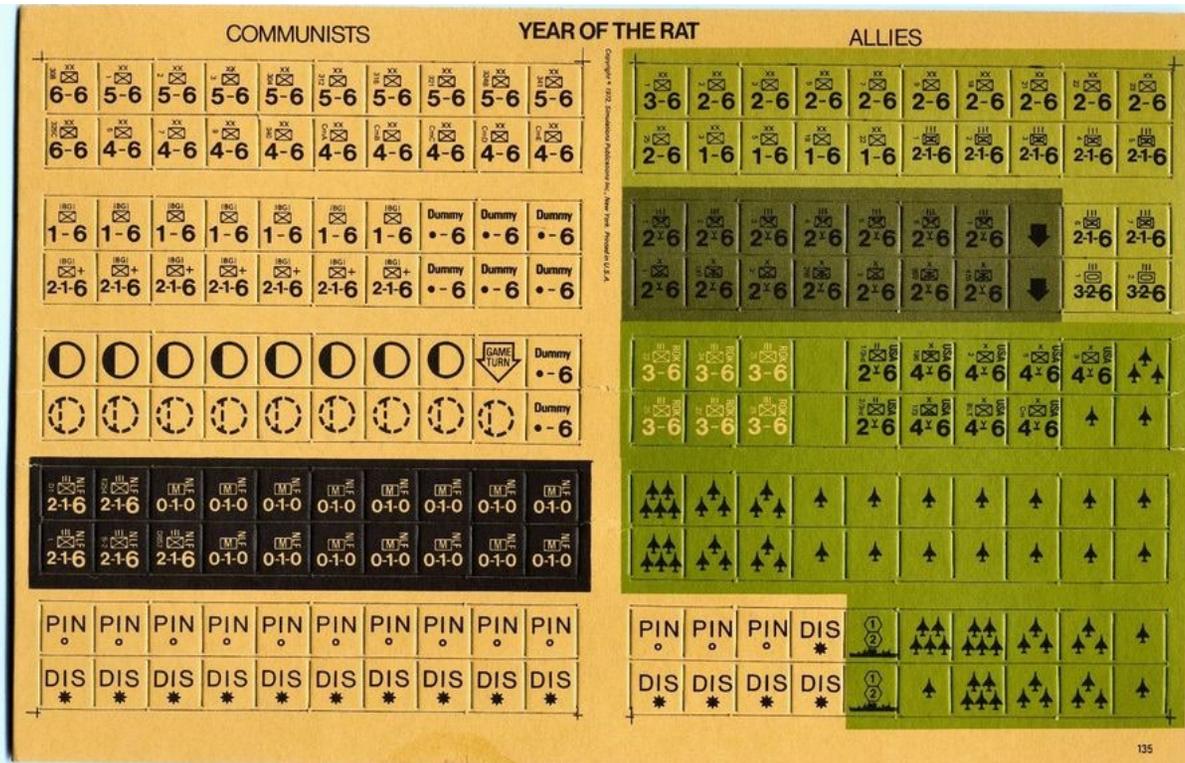
### **Components:**

The map is the standard, for its day, size 24 x 36 inch variety, artfully done by the venerable, and much missed, Redmond Simonsen. The map is clear, functional, and attractive, even in the absence of much colour. All the charts necessary to play the game are present on the map except for the Terrain chart, which, given the differences between the various sides--North Vietnamese Army, Viet Cong, American, Korean and South Vietnamese--needs to be consulted frequently by those who, like myself, find their short-term memory skills are a long-time gone.

The rules are but 8 pages in length, with one of those pages taken up for the Terrain chart. These were written before John Prados became obsessed with cases, sub-cases, subwoofers and sub-basements. All this means that they are clear and make sense,

unlike pretty much everything Prados puts out these days, including his lengthy tome on Vietnam, which puts the meander in meandering; but I digress. The counters are done in such a way that it is easy to distinguish the types of forces that will be set up on the map.





Returning to the rules, there are various Order of Battle and Setup options. Though I have only soloed the historical OB and setup (though just how much "history" is actually involved in the placement of forces is questionable, and to which I will return later on), the options allow for free deployment, a stronger Communist effort, a much more powerful American ground response (as in the addition of 5 or 6 combat units), and more besides. One option, the Pacification Deployment, forces ARVN units to be placed in every town and base hex on the map, which will surely lead to disaster, based on the challenges I faced in defending the historical setup. These options strike me as inherently plausible, rather than some of the silly stuff packed into other designs. However, the armchair experts--I am not one of those, as I sit at a table, hence tablechair expert--who have read two or three books, may want to weigh in here.

### **Victory Conditions:**

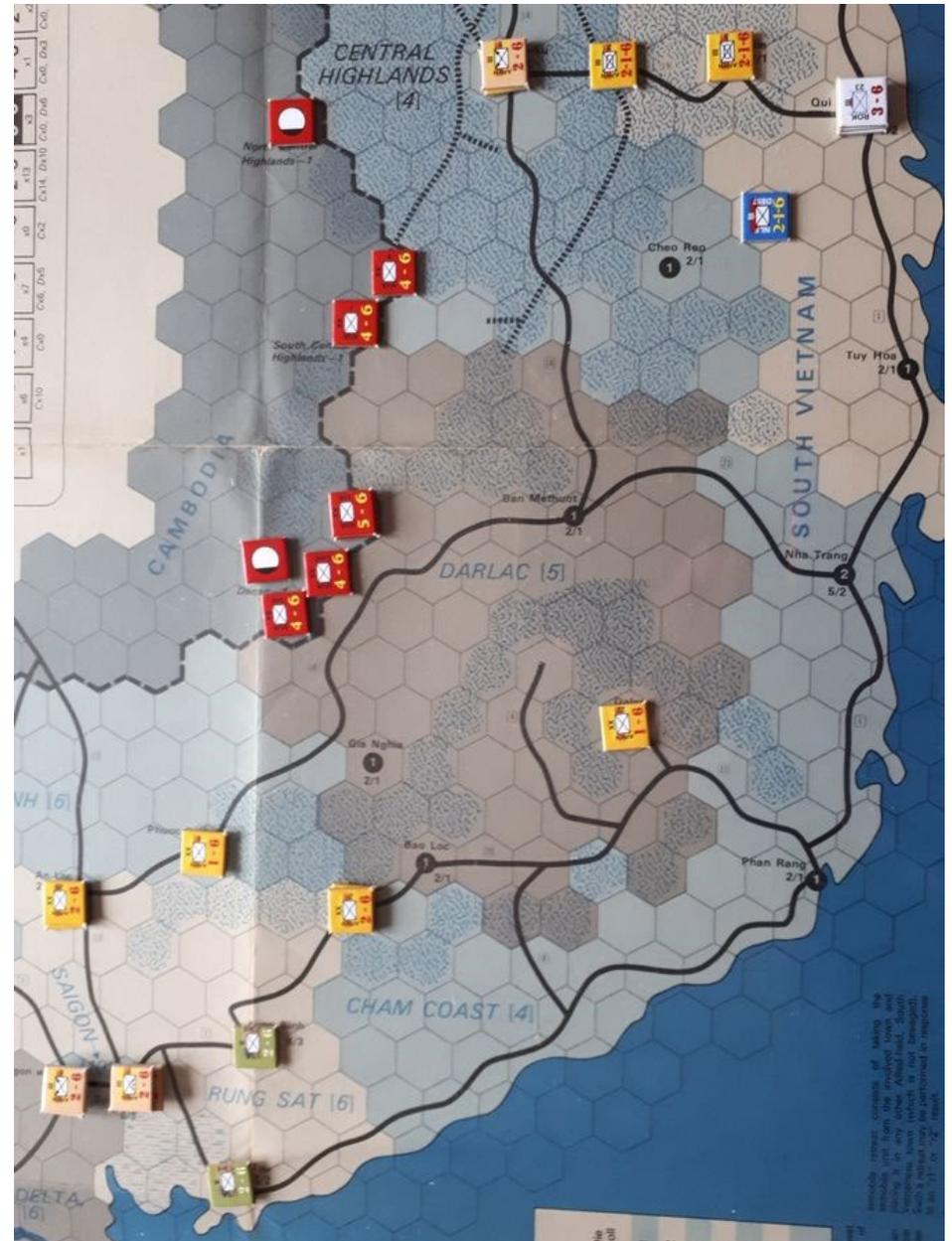
To win, the North needs to take towns, cities, bases, Saigon and the provinces, each more valuable than the next, though Saigon, at 8 victory points, is naturally worth more than some of the provinces. The South is always looking to counterattack and retake this valuable real-estate, but the return is often never as great. For example, the typical town is worth 2 VP's to the North; if the South retakes the town, the North loses 1 VP. The loss of units does not matter for the victory conditions, so the North can win even while losing most of its army. This is brilliant in its simplicity and historical accuracy, and all of this design effort was made in the year of the Easter Offensive, 1972.

### **Some thoughts on the Play of the Game:**

The setup of the game goes easily, which helped with my early misfires regarding the rules. For example, the NVA gets full supply for attacks on the first two turns, reflecting their preparation and the surprise of the attack; the Free World Force, henceforth called Allies, knew something was up, but because Chicken Little had been proclaiming that the sky was falling for months, the guard was mostly down. After those first two turns, the NVA must begin burning its limited number of supply units. I forgot this in my first two plays, leading to an Allied crisis, as the NVA blitzkrieg just kept rolling along. The Viet Cong's presence is much smaller in the game, but

dangerous nevertheless. The VC ignore zones of control--whether one designs ZOC's into a Vietnam game makes an enormous difference in everything--and they can maneuver to cut off Saigon by cutting the roads in and out of the city, earning victory points to the Communist side.

Here are some photos of the "historical" set up:



Top of map above. Bottom of map, to the right. Pictures by author.

# YEAR OF THE RAT

## Vietnam, 1972

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11	8-14 Jun
12	15-21 Jun
13	22-28 Jun



BOMBARDMENT STRENGTH AVAILABLE

### BOMBARDMENT RESULTS TABLE

Effective Number of Bombardment Points

Die Roll	1	2	3	4	5	6,7	8,9	10	Die Roll
1	P	D	D	D	D	E	E	E	1
2	P	P	D	D	D	D	D	D	2
3	•	P	P	P	D	D	D	D	3
4	•	•	P	P	P	P	D	D	4
5	•	•	•	P	P	P	P	D	5
6	•	•	•	•	•	•	P	P	6

Mean of Bombardment Results

Please forgive the shaky cell-phone images, as I do not own a digital camera.

Let's address the elephant in the room: Kerry Anderson, a BGG user, is the person responsible for the colorful counters. Kerry has created a veritable slew of counter sheets for long out-of-print games. This allows you, when you get hold of something OP, to use his counters and keep the original ones unpunched in case you decide to sell the game later on. I have purchased 3 or 4 sets of counters from Kerry, and he does fine work.

I placed quotation marks around the word "historical" because the rules and the design are not as tight as it seems when it comes to the OB placement. Units are placed into Provinces--the name and number which also appear to be, in some instances historically questionable in terms of strict accuracy--based on number of units and their strength points. My photos give you an idea of what is involved here. I would be interested in an actual historical setup; the danger is in placing the South in a straightjacket where the North can create an "idea" plan for the offensive; no fair, the North needs an historical setup too.

The esteemed and highly valuable work of the estimable Eric Bickford can be found on Consim--don't tell anyone on BGG about Consim, lest another flamewar breaks out--and he has a playthrough for YOTR. I quickly differed from Eric's opening script by not placing vulnerable ARVN forces--and they are all vulnerable in the early going--into lonely places like Khe Sahn because they will be surrounded and destroyed.

TERRAIN EFFECTS CHART				
TERRAIN TYPE	MOVEMENT POINT (MP) COST TO ENTER HEX		EFFECT ON DEFENSE STRENGTH WHEN DEFENDER IS IN TERRAIN	
	<u>Communist</u>	<u>Allied</u>	<u>Communist</u>	<u>Allied</u>
 Clear	1 MP	1 MP	Normal	Normal
 Swamp Rough	2 MP	2 MP (ARVN Prohibited)	Doubled	Normal
 Towns	NA	NA	Normal	Normal, add intrinsic strength
 Bases	NA	NA	Normal	Doubled, add intrinsic strength
 Supply Center	NA	NA	Normal, add intrinsic strength	Normal

Given that even the NVA and VC are slowed by rough terrain, one needs to take this into account in the opening placement of the ARVN forces. As ARVN cannot defend everything, and the American ground forces are few in number--3 units--and restricted in movement--they cannot leave the base unless the North provokes them--the ground game is all about the South Vietnamese forces. The Korean division is a good one, but is restricted to one province by the coast.

When it comes to the question of what allowed ARVN to push back the tide from the Easter Offensive, jingoism can air its hoary and ugly head here. I speak of the American air presence (though I would like to know just how many of the air units in the game represent the growing South Vietnamese air force). The South cannot win without the powerful effects of American might from the skies; they can still lose, even with American support. However, without ARVN's boots on the ground, there won't be an Allied victory. Given that most of the fighting and dying was done by ARVN, with American advisors being wounded and killed beside the ARVN fighting men--does John Paul Vann register with anyone?--perhaps the lion's share of the credit should rest with the South Vietnamese.

Perhaps this is all too political for a discussion of the game, and I mean not to offend; but as it all gets me thinking, I would like to get others to thinking as well. Returning to the use of airpower in the game, there is a Bombardment phase in the sequence of play. Here, the Allied player allocates air points, whose number increase throughout the game, to

attack the NVA; the VC are immune to bombardment. Enough airpower commitment will stop NVA units in their tracks, and, with enough muscle and a lucky roll of one on the d6, even destroy units. The most likely result is to Pin the NVA or, better, to Disrupt units. These effect attacking strength and movement points. The Pin effects are removed at the end of the NVA turn, but to remove Disruption, one must roll a one to three on a d6.

COMMUNIST REINFORCEMENTS		ALLIED REINFORCEMENTS	
Turn	Reinforcements	Turn	Reinforcements
1	30 Mar - 5 Apr Mx1 4-6 Cmt X X	1	USA 4-6 X X Fx2
2	6 - 12 Apr Mx1 4-6 Cmt X X	2	USA 4-6 X X Fx1
3	13 - 19 Apr Mx1 5-6 LTC X X	3	USA 2-6 X X Fx1
4	20 - 26 Apr Mx1 5-6 LTC X X	4	USA 2-6 X X Fx1
5	27 Apr - 3 May Mx1 5-6 LTC X X	5	USA 2-6 X X Fx1
6	4 - 10 May Mx1 4-6 Cmt X X	6	USA 2-6 X X Fx1
7	11 - 17 May Mx1 5-6 LTC X X	7	USA 4-6 X X Fx2
8	18 - 24 May Mx1 5-6 LTC X X	8	USA 4-6 X X Fx1

**TURN RECORD/REINFORCEMENT TRACK**

**COMMUNIST REINFORCEMENTS**  
Communist reinforcements may be placed at either the Phanrang or the Tchepone Supply Center.

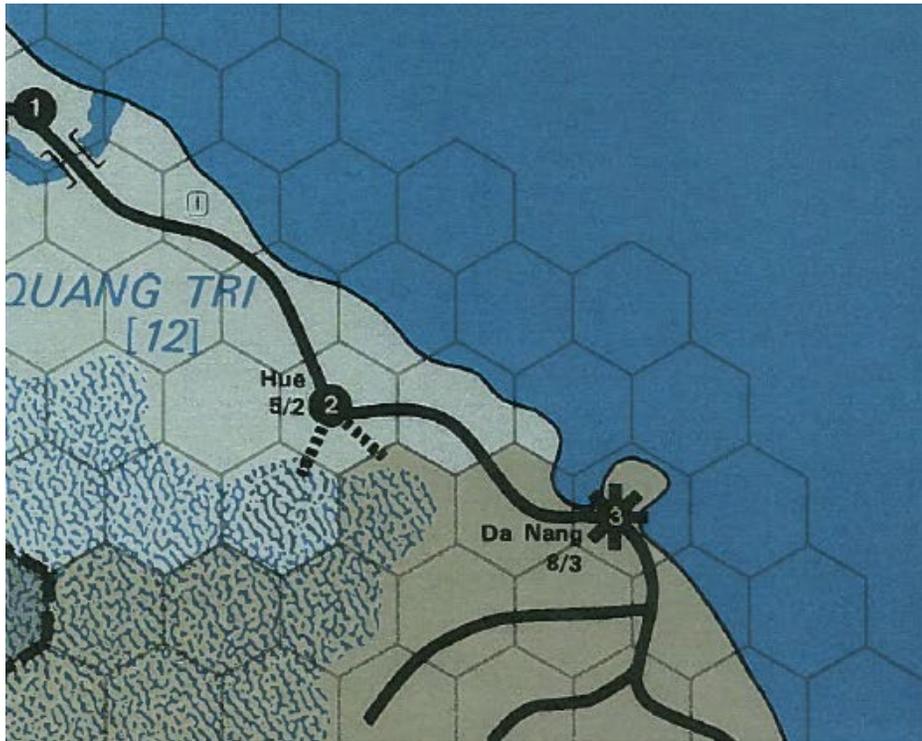
**ALLIED REINFORCEMENTS**  
Allied reinforcements may be placed at Hue, Danang, Long Binh, or Saigon, if the town-of-appearance is not under Communist control.

In the three solo games that I completed, after my early misfires--and, yes, I know there are Dummy units for both combat and supply--the results were: one NVA victory, one draw, one ARVN victory. Three full games doth not an expert make, but it allows me to see the potential strategies and tactics--where have I heard this before?--available to both sides.

Airpower is not likely to destroy enough units, though I got lucky in the third game by evaporating enough NVA in the central part of the map to allow me to retake real estate and squeeze to the southwest and north by--wait for it--northwest. Disruption basically freezes the NVA in place, and if the terrain is favorable, the South can surround the NVA and eliminate it in an attack because it won't be able to retreat through the ARVN zones of control. The ARVN side just does not have the muscle, on a unit-by-unit basis, to go toe to toe with the North. The ARVN forces are more like a hoard of angry bees who can hurt you when they surround you.

Coordination of airpower, zones of control, and terrain all come into play here. Unlike the NVA and VC, South Vietnamese forces are not allowed to move into rough terrain or swamp unless they are on a road. The ARVN side can attack into such areas, but they cannot move nor retreat into such areas. Because ARVN elite forces can be airlifted into and out of towns, cities and bases--oh my!--the Allied side can experience some lonely sieges in places not easily accessible by road.

I do wonder about this ARVN elite air mobility; yes, the Americans are supplying most of the hardware to make it happen, but the dysfunctional nature of the ARVN higher command, with all the petty jealousies between the Corps/Military Region commanders makes me wonder if they were going to be so free in helping out there fellow South Vietnamese in desperate need of reinforcements. I see that Joe Miranda's Winged Horse, next up on my playlist--I hope this is not another of Joe's half-baked potato designs--restricts ARVN units to their starting Corps areas. Perhaps some reading will shed light, but without the ability to move their paratroopers, rangers and marines in this fashion, there is no game.



Supply Condition	Effect on Combat Strength:		Movement Allowance
	Attacking	Defending	
COMMUNIST			
<i>Attack Supply</i>	Normal	Normal	Normal
<i>General Supply</i>	Halved	Normal	Normal
<i>Isolated</i>	Reduced*	Halved	Halved
ALLIED ARVN:			
<i>Supplied</i>	Normal	Normal	Normal
<i>Unsupplied</i>	Zero	Halved	Halved
non-ARVN:			
<i>Supplied</i>	Normal	Normal	Normal
<i>Unsupplied</i>	Halved	Normal	Normal

Now, about solo play and those Dummy units. Hidden movement in a face to face game will be a blast to experience unless you are the blasted away Southern side. I used the dummy counters by placing them with key NVA attacking units. The dummy units can absorb the effects of a bombardment, leaving the "real" unit intact and able to attack. As the game progresses, they are gradually withdrawn from the map (this is according to the rules), if have not already been obliterated in an Allied air attack, sacrificing their dummy selves for the greater good of the ghost of Uncle Joe. I think that this is a fair way to use them in a solo game.

### A sort of sum-up Conclusion, for now

This is a brilliant, old-school, hex & counter, I go/you go, design that feels remarkably fresh and resilient. I think that it is a good design for learning some the realities of the Vietnam War at this point in time, in so far as that is possible with cardboard and paper.

It is fun and interesting. The optional ideas provide more possibilities, though I generally prefer to stick as closely to the "history" as possible. I recommend this game to those interested in the Vietnam War, and in games that are not complex while being rich in flavor and gaming pleasure.

--- Bent Larsen, 11/11/2018, Boardgame Geek.

**Dummy**  
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## DUMMY COUNTERS

*GENERAL RULE:*

The Communist Player receives a certain number of Dummy Combat Counters at the beginning of the game, as indicated by the scenario he is playing. In all ways, except combat, these counters function as real combat units. They are placed initially, may block supply lines, have a Zone of Control, pay ordinary Movement Point costs, etc. Only in combat are Dummy Counters revealed.