How important was the Tet offensive of 1968 in changing US policy in Vietnam?

An answer given a mark in Level 5 of the published mark scheme

The Tet offensive which began at the end of January 1968 was the largest operation of the war in Vietnam to date. The Vietcong launched a massive attack on towns and cities throughout South Vietnam which stunned the US government and their commanders in Vietnam, especially as there was meant to be a two-day ceasefire for the Tet festival. Although the offensive was a military disaster for the Vietcong, who suffered massive casualties, it had major effects on US policy. The attacks on the south continued for many months and had the effect of dramatically changing US military and political policies towards the whole Vietnam war.

EXAMINER COMMENT
The introduction is focused on the question. It outlines briefly and effectively the nature of the Tet offensive and notes that it had military and political implications for the US government.

At first Tet was a great success for the North Vietnamese. In Saigon, they took over many important buildings, including the US embassy (though only for a few hours before being repulsed by US marines), many important government buildings, the presidential palace and the airfield. It took three weeks for the US and ARVN troops to remove the VC from Saigon. The largest battle of the entire war took place in Huế, which the VC held for a month. They executed over 5,000 civilians loyal to the South Vietnamese, and when the ARVN took the city they killed far more people who they thought had collaborated with the VC. By the end of the campaign Huế was almost completely destroyed. Although the Tet offensive was a military disaster for the North, with 45,000 dead and over 170,000 casualties, it turned out to be a political success because of the effects it had on US policy.

EXAMINER COMMENT
The answer provides relevant descriptive material on the offensive. The last sentence is an important link to the question, showing that a military setback became a political victory through the effects it was to have.

The Tet offensive had dramatic effects within the USA. President Johnson faced a major economic crisis in 1968. The dollar fell in value as the costs of the war escalated out of control. Politicians and the public were worried that the USA could not manage to finance the war for much longer. Johnson was also worried that the war was diverting resources from domestic policies and affecting his Great Society programme, which required massive spending on welfare reforms and help for the poorest people in America. This meant that America would have to reconsider its policy in Vietnam.

EXAMINER COMMENT
A precise and well organised paragraph on the economic effects of the war, especially on the Great Society programme.
The Tet offensive also led to growing opposition to the war among the American public. A famous journalist, Walter Cronkite, spoke on television and declared that the war could not be won. Cronkite’s views were respected by millions, and were one factor in producing growing opposition to the war. The anti-war movement became much stronger as the opinion polls showed almost 40% of Americans opposed the war. People saw events of the war on their televisions and read about them in their newspapers, and more people were convinced that the US should get out of Vietnam completely. The anti-war movement became much stronger. There were protests against the military draft, with thousands of men burning their draft cards and refusing to go to Vietnam. Martin Luther King and other leading politicians protested against the war and put a lot of pressure on Johnson. Johnson knew that he would have to change his policies, especially as 1968 was an election year.

EXAMINER COMMENT
Good reference here to the changing mood within US society linked to the Tet offensive.

General Westmoreland had commanded US troops in Vietnam since 1964. He had been fighting a conventional war of ‘search and destroy’ which he thought would wear the VC down. He also used his technological superiority with helicopter gunships and Agent Orange, which destroyed vegetation in the countryside. However, Westmoreland’s policy had not achieved victory by 1968 and so after Tet he asked for a further 206,000 troops which he hoped would finish the VC off completely. Westmoreland was not granted these troops because Clifford, the Defence Secretary, argued that US involvement in Vietnam would never succeed and that the US should go back to the policy of giving assistance to the ARVN. Johnson agreed to this change in policy, which was the beginning of ‘Vietnamisation’. He recalled Westmoreland and replaced him with General Abrams. Thus the Tet offensive led to a major change in US military policy in Vietnam.

EXAMINER COMMENT
This is a very well organised paragraph which highlights the major change in US military policy which followed the Tet offensive. There is a clear appreciation of the links between political and military strategies.

Finally, the Tet offensive had an effect on the President himself. He went on television in March and announced that the USA was ready to begin peace talks with North Vietnam. He then stunned America by declaring that he would not run for re-election in 1968, but would instead concentrate on dealing with the war in Vietnam. Johnson’s decision was perhaps the most important effect of the Tet offensive.

In conclusion, although the Tet offensive was a military disaster for the VC, it led to great changes in US military policy, including the sacking of Westmoreland, and in political policies too. Johnson had lost a lot of support for the war, and decided that the US had to reduce its operations in Vietnam for economic and political reasons.
EXAMINER COMMENT
These paragraphs tie up the answer very effectively. They are focused on the question, and show awareness of the military and political effects of the Tet offensive.

The answer is a sustained analytical response to the question. It is focused on the impact of Tet, and is aware of the military, economic and political effects of the offensive. There is plenty of accurate and relevant detail in both range and depth. The standard of written communication is high. There might have been a more detailed discussion of the effects on the anti-war movement and the economic impact of the war, but there is sufficient here to justify a mid-Level 5 award of 28 marks.
How important was the Tet offensive of 1968 in changing US policy in Vietnam?

An answer given a mark in Level 3 of the published mark scheme

The Tet offensive was a military campaign by the Vietcong which took place in 1968 in South Vietnam. Tens of thousands of VC moved from their positions and attacked cities, airfields and military bases all over the south. Although the main period of the offensive came to an end by April, the fighting continued for most of the year.

EXAMINER COMMENT
This is not a strong opening to the essay. The Tet offensive is outlined, but the points made are not linked to the title, and there is no attempt to consider Tet’s influence on American policy in Vietnam.

The VC launched major attacks on cities like Saigon, Da Nang and Hué. US and South Vietnamese troops were not prepared for the offensive because a ceasefire was supposed to be in place for the festival of Tet, which was a celebration of the first day of the year. In Saigon, the communists attacked the president’s palace, the radio station, the US embassy and other important buildings such as the police station. 4,000 VC troops carried out their attacks, although many of them were killed or captured within 24 hours. It took three weeks in all for American and ARVN forces to push the VC troops from the city.

EXAMINER COMMENT
This paragraph contains relevant, accurate and detailed material on the early stages of Tet, but once again no links are made to the question.

The biggest battle of the Tet offensive came at Hué, which was in the north of the country. The NVA and the VC gained control of the city and held it for a month. They carried out reprisals against the civilian population, executing around 6,000 people who they believed had collaborated with the US and ARVN. US marines and ARVN troops bombarded the city and after a month succeeded in retaking it. About 5,000 VC were killed along with over 200 US troops. Hué was one of the longest and most costly battles of the whole war.

EXAMINER COMMENT
Once again the answer consists of narrative material only.

There were two more phases to the Tet offensive. Phase 2 took place in April and was timed to coincide with the Paris peace talks. 50,000 men were sent down the Ho Chi Minh trail as reinforcements, but they suffered massive losses and many had to retreat. Phase 3 happened in August. Saigon and Da Nang were attacked, but the communists were easily defeated and withdrew quickly. Overall the North Vietnamese had lost about 45,000 men and had 170,000 casualties, but they had not made any major gains or advances.
Although the Tet offensive had been a military disaster for the North Vietnamese, it did lead to changes in US policy in Vietnam. The commander of the American forces was General William Westmoreland. His methods in Vietnam were based on traditional ways of fighting a war. He thought that the US superiority in numbers and in technology meant that the communists would ultimately be defeated. All the US forces had to do was to carry on a war of attrition, seeking out the enemy and destroying them. Westmoreland also used new technology such as helicopter gunships and chemicals such as Agent Orange which was used to destroy forest cover. Over 50 million kilos of chemicals were used in the war. In 1964 Westmoreland asked for over 200,000 extra troops to be sent to Vietnam. He believed that Tet was failing, and wanted a final surge of US troops to finish the communists off once and for all.

Back in Washington President Johnson asked his Defence Secretary Clifford to assess Westmoreland's proposal. Clifford decided that Westmoreland's strategy would pull the USA too far into the war. He felt that the policy of search and destroy would not succeed, and that the US should instead go back to its policy of simply supporting the South Vietnamese with money and military advice. This would allow many American troops to come home. Johnson accepted Clifford's ideas, sacked Westmoreland and put General Abrams in command of US troops. This led to a reversal of US policy and the development of ‘Vietnamisation’, which meant that the ARVN would now fight the communists alone.

In March Johnson went on television and explained what was going to happen in Vietnam in the future. He also said he was ready to begin peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese, and he amazed everyone by announcing that he would not run in the Presidential election later that year. Johnson was worried about the growth of the anti-war movement, especially the draft dodgers, and his Great Society policy was being undermined because the Vietnam war was costing so much money.
There is some appreciation here of the difficulties which Johnson faced, and an awareness of the motives behind his changed policies. There might have been more development on the anti-war movement and the economic problems which had developed by 1968.

In conclusion, the Tet offensive was a very bloody and bitter campaign which had heavy losses of life on both sides, but especially for the North Vietnamese. However, it did lead to changes in American policies and paved the way for President Nixon to make peace in 1972.

The changes in American policies are stated only, though there is an interesting but undeveloped point about Nixon's subsequent success in ending the conflict in 1972.

The answer fits the mark scheme’s description of a Level 3 answer. There is an attempt at analysis, though this is found after a long but accurate description of the military operations of the Tet offensive. A large amount of factual material is offered, though with some lack of depth in places. However, communication skills are good, allowing for a mark at the top of Level 3 of 18 marks.