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# Road to disaster : how the United States suffered a psychological defeat in the aftermath of the Tet offensive

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**ROAD TO DISASTER: HOW THE UNITED STATES  
SUFFERED A PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFEAT IN  
THE AFTERMATH OF THE TET OFFENSIVE**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of History**

**San Jose State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**by**

**Craig Christopher Flores**

**May 1996**

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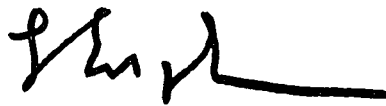
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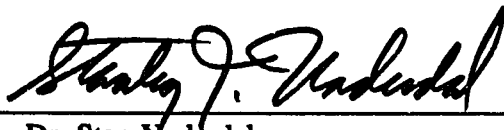
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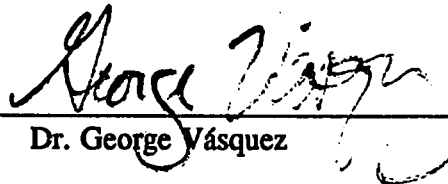
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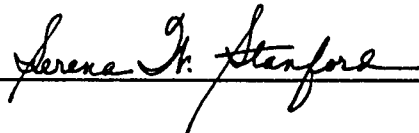
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## ABSTRACT

### ROAD TO DISASTER: HOW THE UNITED STATES SUFFERED A PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFEAT IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

by Craig Christopher Flores

This thesis addresses the topic of how the United States reacted to the Tet offensive launched by North Vietnam and the military arm of the National Liberation Front (commonly known as the Viet Cong) in late January 1968. In particular this thesis addresses the reaction of the Johnson administration, the print media, the U.S. Senate, and the American public.

Many observers have concluded that the Tet offensive was the Vietnam War's "turning point." Research on this subject suggests that when the events of Tet 1968 are put into the context of growing unrest with the war in the period 1965-1968, Tet's significance has been exaggerated. Doubts about the war, among the print media, the U.S. Senate, and the American public, had been increasing *before* Tet. Tet only accelerated previous trends. It was this doubt (rather than media distortion) that led to America's psychological defeat.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Larry Engelmann and Dr. Stan Underdal for their guidance and help. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. George Vásquez for his encouragement, friendship, and support.

*Mil gracias, espíritu querido. Nunca te puedo olvidar.*

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

The Tet offensive of 1968 has been called “the turning point” of the Vietnam War by politicians, newspaper columnists, government officials, and among those who have even heard of it, the man on the street. It is more accurately thought of as *a* turning point rather than *the* turning point. However, since metaphors are meant to enhance rather than obscure understanding, this metaphor will be abandoned in favor of more accurate metaphors--for “turning point” wrongly implies a vertex, the point on a parabola in which movement suddenly shifts in the opposite direction, or again, it implies a pivot, or to use classical terminology from the stage, a reversal of the previous action.

Tet was none of these. Tet was an important but hardly decisive moment in the Vietnam War. Put simply, it was far from the war’s “turning point.” Rather, Tet was the beginning of a long endgame, the period immediately after Tet revealing the high watermark of the American effort in Vietnam. But this metaphor, too, will be discarded in favor of one which more accurately shows Tet for what it was--part of a process, a road with many twists and turns but sloping ever downward--a road that led to disaster.

Tet did change the opinions of some members of the media, of Congress, and of the American people; but the changes were not overwhelming and are more precisely viewed as an acceleration of previous trends. Only in terms of the President's political fortunes and the changes in official policy toward the Vietnam War can Tet correctly be assessed as "the turning point." Yet even here one must make caveats: President Johnson probably would not have been re-elected even in the absence of the Tet offensive, and his successor, whether Richard Nixon or someone else, would have faced the same constraints on policy--a lack of support for an expanded ground war and mounting pressures for gradual withdrawal.

Tet, by itself, did not cause the changes in policy initiated by the Johnson administration--in particular its greater emphasis on achieving a negotiated settlement. The events that went before Tet were equally responsible for these changes. Tet made the journey we were on more apparent; like a flash of brilliance that burst into America's consciousness, and then was gone, it showed that we were travelling on a road that led to a precipice. The following pages will chronicle the highlights of this journey, although for purposes of narrative focus the first steps of American involvement will be ignored: America's experience with totalitarian governments in World War II, American aid to anti-Japanese resistance fighters in Indochina, and Truman's funneling of aid to the French-supported government of Bao Dai in 1950, in addition to the "containment" doctrine and the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty

Organization (SEATO).<sup>1</sup> This narrative will focus in particular on the years 1965, when U.S. regular forces arrived in Vietnam for the first time, to 1968, the year of the Tet offensive.

The first part of this essay will demonstrate the puzzling theme of military victory, for the United States and its allies, but psychological defeat. Part one will also highlight communist strategy and the official 1968 reaction to Tet on the part of the White House, Hanoi, and Saigon. The first section will conclude with an exploration of the print media's *immediate* reaction to the events of Tet 1968, and with an exploration of the print media's supposed role in obscuring the scope of America's victory; for some, including Johnson himself, have blamed the media for distorting the public's perception of Tet--a distortion which (according to this view) inflicted on America a needless psychological defeat.

The second section--the heart of this essay--will begin with a sampling of various opinions on the historical importance of Tet, and will go on to demonstrate that Tet's importance has been overstated. In particular, the final section will seek to put the war *into context* by examining attitudes toward the Vietnam War during the period 1965-1968 in the following broad areas: the print media, public opinion, and the U.S. Senate. The evidence will suggest that Tet was not "the turning point" of the Vietnam War. A second major conclusion will be that America's psychological defeat

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<sup>1</sup>Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 23.

was not due to media disinformation but to war weariness brought on by the tragedies of gradual escalation, attrition, limited mobilization, and limited war.

**PART ONE**

**TET 1968: A CLOSE-UP VIEW**



CHAPTER 2  
OVERTURE TO DISASTER

Nineteen sixty-eight was an unsettling year. Even after the passage of so much time the images from that year remain painful. One can still see them, those angry faces--of blacks rioting in the streets during a tumultuous April, of anti-war activists clashing with police in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. One is also haunted by a more personal image--that of the lifeless, crumpled bodies of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.

And then there was Tet.

But all of that was in the future as January of 1968 drew to a close, and despite the humiliating seizure of the *USS Pueblo*, President Lyndon Johnson still retained hopes of securing his party's nomination in the upcoming elections. In South Vietnam, peasants and city dwellers alike were celebrating the first night of Tet, the lunar New Year. It was already January 31 in that part of the world; early morning revelers were still igniting firecrackers in the streets of Saigon.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1973), 518-519; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 710.

Then, as if from nowhere, the American Embassy was attacked by the military arm of the National Liberation Front (PLAF), commonly known as the Viet Cong, initiating a wave of attacks throughout Saigon. At the same time, the Viet Cong assaulted nearly every important town and city in South Vietnam. Approximately eighty-four thousand soldiers--including soldiers from North Vietnam--were involved in the initial assaults. Five of South Vietnam's six major cities, thirty-six of forty provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals were invaded by enemy forces. Eleven VC battalions entered Saigon itself;<sup>3</sup> attacking in small-scale units, their targets included American and South Vietnamese command and army headquarters, an air base, a radio station, and even the Presidential Palace.<sup>4</sup> The families of some South Vietnamese army (ARVN) officers were captured and executed.<sup>5</sup>

The communists had broken the Tet New Year truce, and both the South Vietnamese and their American allies had been caught off guard. Nearly 50 percent of ARVN soldiers were on holiday leave, though it was they, rather than the Americans, who had been assigned the duty of protecting the cities.<sup>6</sup> Allied forces nevertheless fought back heroically, and within a few days the communists had been driven back

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<sup>3</sup>FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 518-520.

<sup>4</sup>Department of State, "The Viet Cong Attack That Failed," February 1968 newsletter by Joseph L. Dees. Available at the Indochina Archives, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley.

<sup>5</sup>See e.g., *Time*, 9 February 1968, 33; *New York Times*, 6 February 1968, 14. This and all subsequent references to the *Times* are to the late edition.

<sup>6</sup>FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 520.

from all of the cities, with the exception of Hue.<sup>7</sup> By February 24, even Hue was liberated.<sup>8</sup>

We know now that the Tet offensive, which lasted from January 31 to March 31, was phase two of General Vo Nguyen Giap's Winter-Spring campaign of 1967-1968.<sup>9</sup> We also know that the Tet offensive was, from a military standpoint, a communist disaster. Fewer than four thousand American soldiers died in Tet, along with approximately 5,168 South Vietnamese and other allied soldiers. In contrast, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces (PAVN) lost 58,373 soldiers.<sup>10</sup> If one includes the entire Winter-Spring campaign, the communist death toll is even more astounding: eighty-five thousand soldiers were either killed or permanently disabled.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the Viet Cong was crippled for years to come, forcing the North Vietnamese to

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<sup>7</sup>Don Oberdorfer, "Tet: The Turning Point," *Washington Post Magazine*, 29 January 1978, 10.

<sup>8</sup>Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: Strategy of Terror* (n. p., n. d.), 26. This circa 1970 monograph, prepared for the United States mission in Vietnam, is available at the Indochina Archives and at Stanford University.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>10</sup>Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), dedication page; Keith B. Richburg, "The Victory That Led to Defeat," *Washington Post*, 1 February 1988, 17-18. Oberdorfer's figures are for the period between January 29 and March 31, 1968.

<sup>11</sup>Pike, *Strategy of Terror*, 24-25. Approximately 236,000 communist troops were in South Vietnam in February 1968.

shoulder more of the war's burden.<sup>12</sup> In return for these losses, the communists achieved none of their major military objectives.

But far from celebrating a stupendous military victory, President Johnson felt compelled, in the aftermath of Tet, to commit political suicide by announcing that he would not seek re-election to the office of the Presidency of the United States. How does one explain this anomaly? The facts will show that the Tet offensive, though an allied victory, was interpreted by many Americans as a psychological and political defeat. As will be seen, Johnson would blame the media for this defeat. Before this issue is pursued in the following section, this chapter will briefly investigate another possibility: To what extent had communist strategy *consciously* strived to create the conditions for psychological defeat? The remainder of this chapter will demonstrate that the communists' psychological victory was accidental; their real aim had been to demoralize the South Vietnamese government and win over the South Vietnamese people.

#### Official Assessment and Communist Strategy

The official South Vietnamese response to the commencement of the Tet offensive was both predictable and surprising. The Vietnamese Embassy in

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<sup>12</sup>Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986), 49; Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 329. Indeed, during Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive South Vietnam incurred only minor Viet Cong resistance in its rear. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, vol. 1 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977), 572.

Washington, D.C., released trenchant communiques chronicling citizen resistance to Viet Cong agents and enumerating the latter's atrocities.<sup>13</sup> President Nguyen Van Thieu indicated that the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese were "tired" and "would like to get into negotiations." The communists, he explained, were only attacking so as to improve their bargaining position. But then, while calling for increased mobilization, Thieu himself betrayed a sense of exasperation: "The communist attacks have enabled us to realize more clearly the urgent problems that must be resolved."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the view on Tet from the White House seemed more impassive and less strident--at least before Johnson began talking about the misconceptions of the American people. Johnson felt certain that the communists had suffered a major military defeat. As he noted later in his memoirs, by the end of February forty-five thousand communists had already been killed, including some of the enemy's most seasoned cadres. Thousands more were wounded or taken prisoner. "The Tet offensive was, by any standard, a military defeat of massive proportions. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

Johnson believed that the communists' Tet offensive had three basic goals: to knock out the South Vietnamese army, to foment a popular uprising, and to undermine

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<sup>13</sup>Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam, Washington, D.C., February 1968 documents. Available at the Indochina Archives.

<sup>14</sup>"Thieu Outlines His Steps to Mobilize 65,000 More Vietnamese," *New York Times*, 10 February 1968, 12.

<sup>15</sup>Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 383.

the will of the American people--just as the French will had collapsed in the aftermath of their loss at Dien Bien Phu. He wrote, not without a touch of bitterness, "I wish I could report that the enemy failed as decisively with that goal as it did with the others."<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to a discussion of communist strategy. To fully assess the nature of the communists' victory or defeat, one must examine the gains which the communists sought to achieve as a result of the Tet offensive. On this point, the official Hanoi version of what happened during Tet, though clouded by ideological smoke and rhetoric, is quite revealing. It suggests that the communists had hoped to engender massive popular support, and had even harbored the illusion that the South Vietnamese army and government would disintegrate.

Nguyen Duy Trinh, North Vietnamese Foreign Minister at the time, claimed a spontaneous uprising of "millions" of South Vietnamese citizens had aided the communists in their attacks. As a result, the "puppet regime is collapsing--the puppet army is disintegrating."<sup>17</sup> *Scenes of the General Offensive and Uprising* (1968), a North Vietnamese book published for mass consumption, told its readers that the Tet offensive was a spontaneous attack by the Viet Cong in conjunction with the people, which began as outrage spread over the fact that the allies had canceled the Tet

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in *New York Times*, 9 February 1968, 1; also see a February 3, 1968, dispatch from a Hanoi correspondent to *Prensa Latina*. Available at the Indochina Archives.

ceasefire in the northern sector of South Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> In Saigon, the people had been “wonderful,” the book exulted. They stood guard, carried food and ammunition for Liberation troops, and “put their vehicles of whatever kind at our disposal.” (Highly recommended for bedtime reading, this book also told the tale of how, in Hue, eleven girls defeated an American battalion.<sup>19</sup>)

It is possible of course that some members of the North Vietnamese politburo only used the idea of a popular uprising as a convenient fiction to keep up morale. Nevertheless, the idea of a popular uprising had been widely circulated,<sup>20</sup> and approximately one political cadre had been put in the field for every five soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the lack of any assistance from the South Vietnamese people during Tet must be counted as a significant failure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>PLAF communique, 31 January 1968. Available at the Indochina Archives.

<sup>19</sup>*Scenes of the General Offensive and Uprising* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1968), 24-25, 313-314.

<sup>20</sup>Douglas Pike, “The 1968 Vietcong Lunar New Year Offensive,” in *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess. (2 March 1968), vol. 114, pt. 4, 4901-4904. A poll of approximately two hundred enemy prisoners captured between January 31 and February 9 showed that 40 percent had been told that their attack was part of a general uprising. Communist public statements also referred to the offensive as an uprising campaign. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 4901. In particular, cadres committed to the *dich van* program worked in GVN areas in an attempt to foment revolt and unrest. Other programs included *dan van* (work among the communists in South Vietnam) and *binh van* (work among the GVN civil service and in the ranks of ARVN).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 4902. Ninety percent of the ca. two hundred prisoners interrogated said they had received no aid at all. Only 2 percent said they had received unsolicited aid. A March 21 directive of the Central Executive Committee of the North Vietnam Lao Dong Party admitted that a popular uprising had not occurred. The directive is

Another aim of the Tet offensive was to end the military stalemate which was sapping communist morale. Stalemate had been the rule in South Vietnam ever since the failure of two American military offensives in the dry seasons of 1965-66. General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's Defense Minister and most important military leader, believed that this stalemate was fostering public discontent in the U.S. and increasing foreign support for the communists. The problem according to Douglas Pike, who would later chair the Indochina Archives at the University of California at Berkeley, was that the stalemate went both ways. Hanoi's leaders, including Pham Van Dong, Giap, and Ho Chi Minh, felt pressured to do something. Hence Giap's Winter-Spring campaign not only had a military component--to break out of the stalemate--but a psychological component--to increase morale by achieving some sort of progress.<sup>23</sup>

Giap's plan, in grossly simplified terms, was as follows. Phase one (October-December 1967) would be dominated by medium-sized "coordinated fighting methods"--i.e., moderately sized attacks which would employ regular as opposed to guerrilla tactics; these attacks would give the communists the opportunity to test new equipment and tactics. Such attacks occurred at Loc Ninh, Dak To, and Con Thien. The famous siege of Khe Sanh, beginning ten days before the Tet offensive, was

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available at the Indochina Archives.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 4901-4902. Pike's assessment of communist strategy is partly based on General Vo Nguyen Giap's *Big Victory, Great Task* (New York: Praeger, 1968). The original version was published in Hanoi newspapers in September 1967.



probably a diversionary effort, at least if General Giap is to be believed. Phase two (Tet: January-March 1968) would be dominated by “independent fighting methods”-- that is to say, small-scale guerrilla assaults against the major cities and towns of South Vietnam. Finally, in phase three (code-named “Second Wave”) the reserve force at Khe Sanh would be released and the methods of phases one and two were to be combined, culminating in the demoralization of the South Vietnamese people.<sup>24</sup>

In more concrete terms, the communists hoped to weaken the allies’ “pacification” efforts in the countryside--where most South Vietnamese lived--by causing American troops to withdraw to the highland and border areas. The communists would then unleash the Tet attacks on South Vietnam’s towns and cities; communications and transportation networks would be decimated, as would the ARVN, and appeals for the demoralized South Vietnamese people to revolt would result in the “general uprising” of the South Vietnamese people against their government. With luck, the war would all but be wrapped up by the middle of 1968.<sup>25</sup> Douglas Pike hypothesized that the communists were depending on the disintegration of ARVN to help achieve these goals: at worst, ARVN would not fight;

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<sup>24</sup>Pike, *PAVN*, 226, 232 n. 8. Even in 1986, Pike maintained that Khe Sanh was a primary rather than a diversionary target. His analysis has been updated here by Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1993), 262-263, 268-269, 290.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* and Pike, “The 1968 Vietcong Lunar New Year Offensive in South Vietnam,” 4902.

at best, it would fight on the side of the communists.<sup>26</sup> Yet ARVN did not disintegrate.<sup>27</sup> Not only were the communists unable to seriously damage the American military's ability to carry on the war, but they had lost so many men that they were incapable of beginning phase three. And the initiative which the communists had assumed in February was seized back by the Americans in March.

Colonel Tran Bach Dang, head of the NLF assault against Saigon, later boasted: "The attacks were designed to make the U.S. understand that it cannot [*sic*] stay in Vietnam. We wanted to combine a people's uprising with military attack. We anticipated the impact on U.S. public opinion."<sup>28</sup> The communists, undoubtedly, were willing to sacrifice a large number of men in order to hurt the Americans or destroy a militarily important target. Yet it is implausible that the communists planned *in advance* to lose so many men, to kill so few of ours, to fail in all of their major military objectives, while at the same time hoping for some kind of psychological victory. North Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach confessed in 1988 that Hanoi had been surprised by the impact of Tet on the American public: "The military victory may have been limited, but the political and strategic victory

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<sup>26</sup>"Viet Army Morale Seen Aim of Offensive," *Washington Post*, 13 February 1968, 10. This article relied on Dr. Pike's 1968 study (cited in the previous footnote). The attack order issued by the presidium of the Central Committee of the NLF mentioned as an important goal the disintegration of ARVN. This order, issued in January 1968, is available at the Indochina Archives.

<sup>27</sup>See Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 414, 417.

<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Clayton Jones, "Viet Cong Leader Recalls Blitz That Changed the War," *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 January 1988, 32.

was just tremendous. It held till the end of the war. We didn't expect that impact on the United States. Neither did the Americans."<sup>29</sup> General Giap likewise admitted that the Tet offensive's prime purpose had been the subversion of the South Vietnamese people rather than the American public. "But as it turned out it affected the people of the United States more. Until Tet they had thought they could win the war, but now they knew they could not. Johnson was forced to decrease military activity and to start to discuss with us around the [peace] table how to end the war."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Barbara Crosette, *New York Times*, 31 January 1988, 14.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Macdonald, *Giap*, 269.

CHAPTER 3  
DID AMERICA'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFEAT  
STEM FROM MEDIA DISTORTION?

The political repercussions of Tet were sudden and ominous. On March 12, President Johnson suffered a near defeat to Senator Eugene McCarthy in the Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire. On March 16, Robert F. Kennedy entered the race for the Democratic nomination. And on March 31, Johnson announced a partial bombing pause in Vietnam, and ended his political life by announcing that he would not again seek the Presidency. All of this might not have happened but for Tet. And yet, just as Johnson had claimed, Tet was a military disaster for the communists.

This brings us to a complex question, which will be addressed in this chapter and at a deeper level in part two of this essay: Was media misinformation during Tet responsible for America's psychological defeat? This question is logical because if it is true that Tet was a military debacle for the communists, then--seemingly--declining public support for Johnson and increasing criticism of the war could only have resulted from media distortion. Such, at any rate, had been the conclusion of President Johnson himself:

The media seemed to be in competition as to who could provide the most lurid and depressing accounts. Columnists unsympathetic to American involvement in

Southern Asia jumped on the bandwagon. Some senatorial critics and numerous opponents of America's war effort added their voices to the chorus of defeatism. The American people and even a number of officials in government, subjected to this daily barrage of bleakness and near panic, began to think that we must have suffered a defeat.<sup>31</sup>

Implicit in this tirade are many accusations, but only one need detain us here: Was the media's outlook on Tet "bleak"?

An impressionistic survey of Vietnam-related articles from page one of the *New York Times* on February 10 and March 11 (the dates were chosen at random) certainly suggests so. One does not get a sense of unbounded optimism by reading stories such as these:

(February 10) "G.I.s Enter Saigon to Help Eliminate Enemy Holdouts: Move Seen As Sign of U.S. Dissatisfaction at Pace of Government Effort"--"U.S. Girding at Khesanh to Avoid a Dienbienphu: Washington Mood Tense; President Urged to Clarify Draft"--"Wilson Sees Hope of Reconciling Stands of Washington and Hanoi."

(March 11) "North Vietnamese Shells Batter Chain of U.S. Posts: Stockpiles of Ammunition and Fuel Blown Up; Khesanh Hit Anew. . . ."--"Rusk Will Confront His Senate Critics on Vietnam Today."

Peter Braestrup, who has conducted perhaps the most extensive study of the media's performance during Tet in his two-volume work *Big Story*, confirms that the *New York Times'* reaction to Tet was largely negative. ("Negative" is alternately defined as a statement running counter to the administration's assessment or as a

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<sup>31</sup>Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 384.

statement depicting allied performance in a bad light.) Braestrup reaches the same conclusion in his study of the reportage of the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the three major television networks. For example, Braestrup examined Tet-related articles in the Sunday and Monday editions of the *New York Times* between February 1-March 31 and found that 334 “statements” were “negative,” 32 were “neutral,” and only 30 were “positive.” Similarly, the *Post* had 224 negative statements, 17 neutral, and 151 positive.<sup>32</sup>

One might quibble with Braestrup’s methodology, but there is no doubting his overall conclusion: The media portrayed the Tet offensive as some kind of American defeat. On March 18, for instance, *Newsweek*, noting the need for “a searching reappraisal of the U.S. role,” called for a U.S. pullback to more secure lines and reminded its readers that South Vietnam would ultimately have to be responsible for its own fate.<sup>33</sup> *Newsweek*’s March 18 issue was entitled “Agony from Khe Sanh.” Likewise, Walter Cronkite of CBS, heretofore a Cold War warrior, announced that we were “mired in stalemate” and negotiations were “the only realistic yet unsatisfactory” way out.<sup>34</sup> *U.S. News & World Report* similarly concluded, “[The] war appears in

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<sup>32</sup>Braestrup, *Big Story*, 2:302-321.

<sup>33</sup>*Newsweek*, “Needed: The Courage to Face the Truth,” 18 March 1968, 39-40.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Harrison E. Salisbury, ed., *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 93.

greater disarray than ever. A satisfactory conclusion for the U.S. is nowhere in sight.”<sup>35</sup> And on it went. The *New York Times* called for “escalating our peace efforts” rather than escalating the war.<sup>36</sup> Even the *Wall Street Journal*, that bastion of conservative economic orthodoxy, warned: “We think the American people should be getting ready to accept . . . the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed. . . .”<sup>37</sup>

Again: How does one explain the discrepancy between an American victory on the battlefield and the media’s negative portrayal of Tet? Is the charge of media distortion the only viable answer? The research in this essay will suggest that the answer to the latter question is “no.” The context surrounding the Tet offensive showed a mosaic of frustration and fatigue, while the Tet attacks revealed that the communists were stronger than believed and that they would not be giving up any time soon; hence, America’s psychological defeat. However, before developing the evidence in less general terms, it will be necessary to point out the obvious: at least some of these “negative” statements were true. For example, is it not a fact that America was locked in stalemate? Though allied forces went on the offensive in

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<sup>35</sup>“A Showdown in Vietnam,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 19 February 1968, 35-36, 38.

<sup>36</sup>“Escalation, U. Thant Style,” *New York Times*, 28 February 1968, 46.

<sup>37</sup>“The Logic of the Battlefield,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 February 1968, 14. This and all subsequent citations of the *Journal* refer to the eastern edition.

March,<sup>38</sup> subsequent history has shown that this initiative was not sufficient for victory. Hence the initiative the allies enjoyed was comparable to the advantage one side has in a game of chess when playing with a King and Knight against the opponent's King: It is well known that King and Knight alone cannot force checkmate.

This is not to say that the media did not distort the issues present in Vietnam--both during the war in general and during Tet in particular. To name one rather startling example, nearly five thousand civilians were executed by the communists at Hue--some were even buried alive<sup>39</sup>--yet their murder remained one of the biggest non-stories of the war, even after the reoccupation of the city by allied forces.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, the execution of a single Viet Cong officer at the hands of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Chief of South Vietnam's national police, received world-wide attention. Without context this execution, captured on film and in a famous AP photo, seemed nothing more than a brutal act. The context was that during Tet ARVN families and

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<sup>38</sup>Braestrup, *Big Story*, 2:323.

<sup>39</sup>See Pike, *Strategy of Terror*, 23, 27-31, 33, 35, 37-38. A more conservative but not necessarily more accurate estimation of the death toll (2,800 executions) is provided by Oberdorfer, who merely counts bodies exhumed from various mass graves (Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 282). In contrast, Pike adds unaccounted civilians to this figure. He does not include those killed accidentally as a result of battle.

<sup>40</sup>A rare but pitifully brief and inaccurate exception was the page-two article of March 10, 1968 ("Foe Killed 400 Citizens," *New York Times*, 2). Reed Irvine later stated in a letter to the editor that film footage of bodies being exhumed at Hue was not aired on the three major networks until 1985. "Hue Massacre of 1968 Goes beyond Hearsay," *New York Times*, 22 September 1987, 34.



officers had been specifically targeted and murdered by the Viet Cong. Thus General Loan said truthfully, "They killed many Americans and many of my people." Yet some in the media refrained from providing even this perfunctory explanation, let alone a complete analysis of the brutality of the Viet Cong.<sup>41</sup>

Peter Braestrup's *Big Story* does an excellent job of chronicling much of the Tet distortion. To mention just some of the highlights of his research, he finds that the media wrongly assumed that the pacification program had been seriously set back (the *New York Times*, for example, claimed that the program was "in shreds").<sup>42</sup> The media also erred in its portrayal of Khe Sanh as the next Dien Bien Phu, in its negative assessment of ARVN performance, and in its estimates of the extent of urban destruction.<sup>43</sup> Some reporters also contentiously suggested that General Westmoreland sought 205,000 additional troops, not to go on the offensive, but to

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<sup>41</sup>*Time* (9 February 1968, 24-25) included Loan's quote and on page thirty-three provided pictures of VC atrocities in Saigon. The *Washington Post* (2 February 1968, 1) also included the quote, adding that many relatives of government officers had been murdered. In contrast, the *New York Times* (2 February 1968, 1) said only that the prisoner had been wearing civilian clothes, had been carrying a pistol, and was a suspected VC. *Newsweek* (12 February 1968, 29) ran a caption which read: "Instant Justice: General Loan executes a Viet Cong terrorist in the street." Finally, the Frank McGee Report of March 10, 1968, painted a picture of Wild West justice without even bothering to mention VC carnage. Cited in Braestrup, *Big Story*, 2:276.

<sup>42</sup>See Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, chapter 11 passim; *New York Times*, 28 February 1968, 46. In reality, it took only seven months to get back to a pacification level of 67 percent (Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:572). However, such statistics are questionable--for example, the psychological damage inflicted on the South Vietnamese, as a result of the Tet attacks, is difficult to estimate.

<sup>43</sup>See, respectively, Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, chapters 9, 10, 7 passim.

avert military disaster.<sup>44</sup> Even the media's hasty assumption that South Vietnam's people must have received a severe psychological shock was premature because unsupported.<sup>45</sup>

Braestrup explains that the physical and psychological milieu which the media encountered in Vietnam in itself engendered distortion. The journalists by and large didn't understand the Vietnamese language; few had seen combat, and most didn't understand military jargon. The struggle in Vietnam was also particularly difficult to comprehend, for the war was far from conventional. In addition, the American media was encouraged to rehash the same type of story rather than break new ground, and its coverage was ethnocentric. (During Tet, the almost exclusive preoccupation with American soldiers left the impression that we were doing all the fighting.)<sup>46</sup>

The scope of the media's coverage was also limited with respect to place. Ninety percent of the press' direct coverage during Tet focused on Saigon, Khe Sanh, and Hue. (Television's breadth of coverage was not much better.) Yet these areas accounted for a mere 15 percent of U.S. troop placements and 20 percent of U.S. casualties.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the media's penchant for sensationalism meant, just to cite one example, that more than 60 percent of *Newsweek's* action photos from Khe Sanh

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., vol. 1, chapter 12 passim.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., vol. 1, chapter 5 passim.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 1:13-14, 25; 2:323.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 1:xxviii-xxix; 2:314.

portrayed American or ARVN soldiers as dead, wounded, or under fire. Not one of these pictures showed allied troops returning fire.<sup>48</sup>

Braestrup also notes that as allied forces regained the initiative in March, the media's earlier negative statements were not (in most cases) counterbalanced by new, more positive statements. And earlier mistaken reports were forgotten rather than corrected:

. . . the overall pattern of events in Vietnam in February 1968 were for a time obscure. But the commentators and many reporters did not wait. By the time the fog of war began to lift later that month, the collective emanations of the major media were producing a kind of continuous black fog of their own, a vague conventional "disaster image," which few news managers at home sought to question. . . . The record was not set straight. The hasty assumptions and judgments of February and early March were simply allowed to stand.<sup>49</sup>

One can accept Braestrup's premises that America won a military victory, and that the media distorted the scope of this victory, without accepting his implication that all negative reporting about Tet was ipso facto tantamount to distortion. Such an implication must fall because the media did not always evaluate victory or defeat solely in terms of a body count or other military objectives. On the contrary, the idea of psychological defeat was a ubiquitous message. Among the major magazines, *Time's* coverage was typical. It stated that although pacification had been set back, the communists had incurred massive losses and no popular uprising had transpired.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 2:323.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 1:706. A few, more responsible publications, such as *Time* and the *Washington Post*, did attempt to correct some of their earlier misstatements. Ibid., 1:571-572; 2:303, 308-309.

However, *Time* also echoed the theme of psychological defeat. The enemy, the magazine wrote, had taken us by surprise, had embarrassed us, and had demonstrated an uncanny ability to strike anywhere. Although its gains may have been “pyrrhic,” the enemy had “undeniably won a victory of sorts. . . . Some psychological success can hardly be denied the attackers.”<sup>50</sup>

*Newsweek* likewise rued the “shock value” of Tet, concluding that the communists’ penetration of the cities, the provincial capitals, and even the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon had resulted in a “major psychological blow.”<sup>51</sup> “After years of escalation,” it added five weeks later, “the enemy can still match the U.S. step for step. . . . The war has no end in sight.”<sup>52</sup> Said *U.S. New & World Report*: The enemy holds the initiative, and the “U.S. got a jolting reminder that the war is far from over.” Though paying a “terrible price” in casualties, the communists had demonstrated the helplessness of the cities, had shown that their numbers were far greater than believed, and had revealed that the South Vietnamese people would actively support their cause. (This last statement is demonstrably false, contradicted as

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<sup>50</sup>“The General’s Gamble,” *Time*, 9 February 1968, 22-23, 26.

<sup>51</sup>“Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow,” *Newsweek*, 12 February 1968, 23-24.

<sup>52</sup>“Needed: The Courage to Face the Truth,” *Newsweek*, 18 March 1968, 39-40.

it is by internal communist documents.) During Tet, the communists had lost militarily “but . . . psychologically they won the first round.”<sup>53</sup>

The above passages reveal a further point: Despite some early skepticism about the extent of enemy casualties, a large segment of the media correctly reported that the allies had decimated communist forces. By February 25, for instance, Robert S. Elegant wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that ARVN had not collapsed, that many communist cadres had been killed, that even the figure of thirty-three thousand enemy dead did not now seem unreasonable.<sup>54</sup> In a *Washington Post Magazine* article, Don Oberdorfer, author of *Tet!*, summarizes that certainly by late March attentive Americans should have been able to realize the truth about the military situation in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>“As Climax Mounts in Vietnam,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 12 February 1968, 23; Wendell S. Merick, “And Now What in Vietnam?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 19 February 1968, 39. Merick’s statement that “in Saigon, Quang Tri and Hue, guerrillas got help openly from city dwellers” is a distortion which is disproved by internal communist documents. For example, on January 31, 1968, the NLF’s Current Affairs Committee (COSVN) and Military Affairs Committee jointly concluded: “In the political field we failed to motivate the people to stage uprisings and break the enemy’s oppressive control.” This assessment was reached in a circular dated February 1, 1968. A March 21 directive of the Central Executive Committee of North Vietnam’s Lao Dong Party reached the same conclusion. Both documents are available at the Indochina Archives.

<sup>54</sup>“Lessons of Red Offensive: The Enemy Can Strike Too,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1968, sec. G, p. 20. *The New York Times* remained skeptical about the U.S. military’s claims that twenty-eight thousand enemy troops had perished: That “figure [is] considered extravagant by many observers here.” *New York Times*, 25 February 1968, 1.

<sup>55</sup>Oberdorfer, “Tet: The Turning Point,” 11.

In short, one must examine more than just media distortion in order to understand why journalists (and others) viewed Tet as a psychological defeat. To this end, it will be necessary to examine American expectations before Tet, to see how those expectations were changed by Tet, and to see if any such changes were simply a product of media distortion or perhaps of something else.

**PART TWO**

**TET IN CONTEXT, 1965-1968**

CHAPTER 4  
THE VIEW ON TET: A SAMPLING OF HISTORICAL  
ATTITUDES TOWARD THE TET OFFENSIVE

Part one has demonstrated that America suffered a psychological defeat in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. But it is one thing to demonstrate an injury, quite another to assess the extent of the damage--assessing the seriousness of the damage will be the purpose of the final section. Context will therefore be essential. With the purpose of supplying necessary context, the U.S. Senate, the print media, and public opinion will be examined for trends in the years 1965-1968.

Part two will begin with a retrospective look at Tet, citing various authors who believed, or believe to this day, that Tet was the turning point of the war. This section will go on to outline the attitudes toward the Vietnam War of various organs of the national print media, in particular the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. Whereas earlier coverage of the media used a zoom lens to establish the fact that Tet was viewed as a psychological defeat, this section will use a wide-angle lens, putting Tet's effect on the print media into the context of the years 1965-1968. Before-and-after photos will show that Tet, far from being the war's turning point, merely accelerated trends already in progress. Similar techniques will then be used regarding public opinion and



the U.S. Senate--the chapter on the U.S. Senate beginning one year earlier, in 1964, when Congress signed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized President Johnson to "take all necessary measures" to protect American interests in Southeast Asia.<sup>56</sup> In each case, the context provided by a wide focus will suggest that Tet was hardly "the turning point" of the Vietnam War. This context will also amply demonstrate that frustration and doubt about the war existed long before Tet--thus putting into question the hypothesis that media distortion was responsible for America's psychological defeat.

The following opinions will establish the fact that many have viewed Tet as a major "turning point" in the Vietnam War. All of these authors concur that the U.S. gained some sort of military victory but suffered a psychological defeat. Yet many of these authors go on to exaggerate Tet's importance, their major failing being a lack of historical context. One of the most balanced judgments on Tet's significance is offered by Stanley Karnow; writing a compendium of the war, he was able to assess Tet against the backdrop of America's entire involvement in Vietnam. Other authors either ignore, or diminish the importance of, this backdrop.

In 1988, on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the Tet offensive, Peter Grier of the *Christian Science Monitor* reminded his readers of the bitter legacy of Tet in his article, "Tet for U.S.: A Battle Won on the Road to Defeat." The subtitle was

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<sup>56</sup>Quoted in John Galloway, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Press, 1970), 167.

even more lurid: "Shocking Image of Embassy under Siege Lost 'Hearts and Minds' of America." The subtitle suggested a dramatic turnaround in public opinion. Grier went on to explain the mechanism for this turnaround: ". . . by graphically demonstrating the extent of their commitment, they [the communists] raised a specter of endless bloodshed that daunted the U.S. public."<sup>57</sup> William G. Blair likewise wrote a Tet anniversary article for the *New York Times*, "Tet Offensive: Turning Point in Vietnam War," citing as reasons for this "turning point" setbacks to pacification efforts in the countryside and widening pessimism about the war.<sup>58</sup> Allan Goodman of the *Los Angeles Times* offered a similar assessment: "The offensive symbolized the hopelessness of the American cause in Vietnam and made a mockery of U.S. government claims that the 500,000-man American troop presence had brought security to the countryside." Politicians and officers in the Pentagon, he continued, had determined after Tet that the war was unwinnable.<sup>59</sup>

Newspaper columnists were not alone in their retrospective assessments of Tet's importance. Henry Kissinger opined in 1969 that the Tet offensive "marked the watershed of the American effort." He alleged that for the first time the Johnson administration put a "ceiling" on American troop levels and that our military strategy

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<sup>57</sup>Peter Grier, "Tet for U.S.: A Battle Won on the Road to Defeat," *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 January 1988, 3.

<sup>58</sup>William G. Blair, "Tet Offensive: Turning Point in Vietnam War," *New York Times*, 31 January 1988, 14.

<sup>59</sup>Allan Goodman, *Los Angeles Times*, "Tet's Lesson Still Rings True Today: Victory Is Hollow without the Will to Win," 29 January 1988, sec. II, p. 7.

shifted toward defense as we became committed to a political settlement.<sup>60</sup> George McGovern, the once senator and Democratic nominee from the 1972 presidential campaign, wrote five years after his defeat at the hands of Richard Nixon that Tet was a “lethal blow to the American public’s already declining faith in the war.”<sup>61</sup>

As will be shown later, McGovern’s conclusion about Tet’s importance is simply wrong; Kissinger’s statement (except for his contention that an official ceiling had been put in place) is more or less correct as far as it goes, but lacks context and therefore balance.

Two prominent authors offer equally unbalanced opinions of Tet’s significance. Frances FitzGerald, in her Pulitzer-prize winning *Fire in the Lake*, argues that Tet had an “electric effect” on popular opinion in the United States. “For the first time the major news magazines, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* (*sic*) began to criticize the war policy overtly; television commentators such as Walter Cronkite now questioned whether or not the war could be won.”<sup>62</sup> Although it is not the purpose of this section to offer extensive critiques, as will be shown later the statement about *Time* and *Life* is demonstrably false, while the point about *Newsweek* suffers from a lack of

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<sup>60</sup>Henry Kissinger, “The Viet Nam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs* 47 (January 1969): 216. Actually, Johnson did not designate a *permanent* ceiling. See Herbert Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 284-285, 314-317.

<sup>61</sup>George McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York: Random House, 1977), 108.

<sup>62</sup>Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 394.

both context and balance--*Newsweek's* pre-Tet reportage in fact reflected growing disillusionment with the war.

FitzGerald should have known better, but she is not the only author who, through a lack of context, exaggerates Tet's significance. Neil Sheehan in *A Bright Shining Lie*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1989, argues that the Tet offensive "exposed" the war of attrition as a debacle, "the inevitable result [being] a psychological collapse and a domestic political crisis of historic proportions."<sup>63</sup>

One cannot fail to notice the grand statements, the sweeping brush strokes:

"psychological collapse" . . . "domestic political crisis of historic proportions."

Sheehan would have served the cause of truth better if he had avoided such overblown language and instead paid more attention to the background details, in particular rising doubts about the war.

Don Oberdorfer's *Tet!*, first published in 1971, is regarded by many as the definitive text on the Tet offensive and is frequently cited by other authors, including Stanley Karnow, author of the companion volume to PBS' "Tet: A Television History." Although Oberdorfer, too, seems guilty of exaggerating Tet's significance, he does mention several caveats which are ignored even by authors who draw heavily on his book. (One such author concludes--whereas Oberdorfer does not--that "the war for the support of the American people was lost on January 30, 1968."<sup>64</sup>)

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<sup>63</sup>Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 717.

<sup>64</sup>Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 24.

Oberdorfer's own view is that Tet "shocked" America--proving to be the "final blow to the sagging credibility of the Johnson administration and to the waning patience of the American people with this remote and inconclusive war." Like Kissinger, he refers to the "reversal" of our military policy in Vietnam. He goes on to make this grating generalization: "In bewildering and awkward fashion, the people and private leadership [presumably he's referring to the media, businessmen, lawyers and the like] of the United States made up their minds about the war at Tet. . . ." This sweeping statement is then followed by a welcome caveat: "It would be an exaggeration to maintain that the Tet Offensive alone turned a great nation around, deposed a President and brought sweeping changes in military policy. Tet was the final ingredient in a process involving many other elements. . . ."<sup>65</sup>

Despite this caveat, Oberdorfer calls Tet the "turning point" in the Vietnam War,<sup>66</sup> and at times he seems to get so caught up in the sensational nature of Tet that his conclusions go beyond the data--for example, when he argues that Tet had a crucial role in the supposed turnaround of the media and public opinion.<sup>67</sup> Karnow, in his *Vietnam: A History*, produces a more sober account of Tet. His analysis of the Congress' and media's reaction to Tet is scanty, reflecting his belief that the American

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<sup>65</sup>Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), ix-x, 334. For Oberdorfer's definition of "private leadership," see pp. 280-281.

<sup>66</sup>A 1978 Oberdorfer article showed that Oberdorfer had not changed his mind about Tet's significance. See "Tet: The Turning Point," 10-11, 17-18.

<sup>67</sup>See *ibid.* and the preface of *Tet!* ix-x.

public was at the forefront of dissent against the war.<sup>68</sup> Tellingly, he argues that Tet represented a turning point for President Johnson, but was not a turning point in public opinion toward the war.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Ronald Spector, author of the much more recent *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (1993), offers this critical assessment: “In a sense, then, we have no real history of Vietnam. Instead we have controversy, myth, and popular memory.” This is especially true with regard to Tet. Spector notes the dramatic Tet 1968 attacks were quickly followed by LBJ’s announcement, on March 31, of a partial bombing pause and his withdrawal from the presidential primaries--these developments followed by peace talks. “Ever since that time, it has become commonplace to refer to Tet and 1968 as ‘the turning point,’ ‘the year of decision.’ . . .”

Spector, unlike all too many, goes on to ask the critical questions: In what way was 1968 any different from 1966 or 1967? Why did the war drag on for five additional years if Tet was “the turning point”? Spector believes that the period after Tet had much greater importance in determining the outcome of the next five years, one of the biggest factors being the “continued stalemate.”<sup>70</sup> One might add that this stalemate existed before Tet.

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<sup>68</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 20, 488, 490, 548.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 545-546.

<sup>70</sup>Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), xv-xvii.

Was Tet “the turning point”? The evidence in the succeeding chapters will suggest that when Tet is assessed in the context of the years 1965-1968, the answer must be “no”--with the important exception of Johnson’s Presidency and official policy toward the Vietnam War.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PRINT MEDIA AND VIETNAM, 1965-1968

In February 1965, as news reports across America flashed accounts of American retaliatory air raids in Vietnam amidst the sounds of distant thunder, *Newsweek* published a so-called "representative sampling from the nation's editorial pages" concerning the direction of American policy in Vietnam. *Newsweek* noted that although most of the newspapers in the survey believed the air strikes against North Vietnam were justified, many were confused by a perceived drift in U.S. policy--"and this was true both of those advocating stronger action and proponents of a negotiated settlement." The *Atlanta Journal*, by way of example, applauded the air strikes but, in an indirect jibe at past U.S. policy, called them a "refreshing change of pace. It is true that it could lead to a real war. It is also true that it could lead to victory." The *Kansas City Star*, employing a similar one-two punch of praise and criticism, wondered, "Do we have a specific, unwavering policy or are we improvising from crisis to crisis?" The *Chicago Tribune* complained that the air strikes would not be enough, and were part of an unhealthy policy of limited responses to communist aggression.<sup>71</sup> On the other side of the fence, the *New York Times* fretted that "events are occurring with the inexorability of a Greek tragedy. . . . President de Gaulle . . .

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<sup>71</sup>"U.S. Reaction: Talk or Fight?" *Newsweek*, 22 February 1965, 20-21.



was right in saying that the war cannot be won no matter how much air and naval power the United States commits. . . . There may be a choice: talk or fight. If everybody waits too long, the chance to talk will be gone."<sup>72</sup>

The common theme in the sampling taken by *Newsweek* was that the administration seemed to be reacting to events rather than leading them. Foreshadowed in 1965, this theme of confusion and doubt over exactly where we were headed in Vietnam would repeat itself in the following years. In a bitter November 1967 article, *Newsweek* noted that in 1964 and 1965 the focus of reporters was on the U.S. buildup. Even through 1966 "reporters were moderately receptive to the government's insistent claim that it 'could see the light at the end of the tunnel.' " By the spring of 1967 these hopes were gone. The U.S. military countered that nothing was wrong, only negative reporting. At the daily news briefing--dubbed the "follies" by critical reporters--the military announced ARVN victories, but not its mounting losses.<sup>73</sup> This theme of disillusionment, so common to the periodicals studied here, will be revisited.

#### *New York Times*

The *New York Times*, as has just been demonstrated, seemed disillusioned and wary of our adventure in Vietnam from the beginning of the buildup. Peter Braestrup, that fierce critic of the media's coverage of Tet, opines that no other major newspaper

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<sup>72</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

<sup>73</sup>"Whose Benefit? Whose Doubt?" *Newsweek*, 13 November 1967, 73.

gave as much coverage to the anti-war movement in 1966-1967, thus suggesting a dovish tilt. Although the *Times* did not have an official policy on the war, editorials on Vietnam tended to be dovish.<sup>74</sup>

Braestrup was not the only person to notice this dovish streak. Senator Bourke Hickenlooper criticized *Times*' assistant managing editor Harrison Salisbury after the latter had gone to Hanoi at the end of 1966 and sent back critical reports of the damage inflicted by American bombing on civilian areas--waggishly suggesting that Johnson might be purposefully targeting civilians. Hickenlooper complained that North Vietnam let "a New York Times (*sic*) reporter in but not objective reporters."<sup>75</sup>

Regarding a 1967 Senate Preparedness Subcommittee report calling for an escalation in the air war against North Vietnam, a *Times* editorial in late summer branded the report "demagogic and misleading . . . a disservice to the nation and, more specifically, to all those who support the war."<sup>76</sup> The editorial went on to state that "a reasonable case can be made" for our continuing the war, but an air war alone would not bring victory; the war could only be won on the ground, with more troops and more time. The editorial concluded that President Johnson was getting "desperate."

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<sup>74</sup>Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:48.

<sup>75</sup>"Flak from Hanoi," *Time*, 6 January 1967, 13-14.

<sup>76</sup>William V. Shannon, "The Hawks Fly Off-Course," *New York Times*, 3 September 1967, sec. IV, p. 10.

The lead editorial of the same date talked of stalemate and hoped for a bombing pause and negotiations.<sup>77</sup> Two weeks later, C. L. Sulzberger called for an unconditional bombing pause and for the President to go to Switzerland to reconvene the Geneva Conference with the purpose of arriving at a settlement for Indochina. If unsuccessful, something “more drastic” would have to be done--“drastic surgery to rectify a condition threatening to become cancerous and a menace to our national health.”<sup>78</sup> The following day, yet another *Times* editorial called for a negotiated settlement.<sup>79</sup>

In short, it is obvious that the *Times* opposed the war, or at least the way it was being waged, before Tet. It did not call for unilateral withdrawal but for negotiations. The President’s so-called “progress” campaign in late 1967 did not change matters. On November 17, James Reston penned a testy editorial: “Every day the news from Vietnam proclaims another victory, and the enemy is down to his last 300,000 men. Every other day there are new claims of ‘steady progress’ but the support for the President’s conduct of the war drops in the polls.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>“The Politics of Peace,” *New York Times*, 3 September 1967, sec. IV, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup>C. L. Sulzberger, “Foreign Affairs: The Dove-Hawk Approach,” *New York Times*, 17 September 1967, sec. IV, p. 14.

<sup>79</sup>*New York Times*, 7 October 1967, 3.

<sup>80</sup>James Reston, “Washington: Communique from the Home Front,” *New York Times*, 17 November 1967, 46.

After Tet, nothing had changed--editorials continued to lament the rising price America was paying for the war, in addition to requesting a negotiated settlement introduced by a bombing halt.<sup>81</sup>

*Wall Street Journal*

Superficially, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* represent studies in contrast in their editorial positions on Vietnam--until February 1968, when the generally conservative *Journal* made a supposed about-face on the war: "We think the American people should be getting ready to accept . . . the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed. . . ." Stanley Karnow and Don Oberdorfer, among others, emphasize this shift. This article, which assumed the lead position in the *Journal's* editorial section, argued that although our original objective in South Vietnam was laudable, that objective--to save South Vietnam from communism--seemed to be slipping away, and was, perhaps, unattainable. American withdrawal might become necessary--resulting in a "stunning blow" to America at home and abroad. But such a withdrawal might ward off an even "worse disaster."<sup>82</sup>

Was Tet then "the turning point" in the *Journal's* editorial policy on the war?

In fact it was not--the *Journal's* post-Tet editorials merely clarified and refined previous trends--these trends being the prevailing currents of frustration and doubt that

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<sup>81</sup>"Escalation--To What End?" *New York Times*, 12 February 1968, sec. IV, p. 12.

<sup>82</sup>"The Logic of the Battlefield," 14.

gradually stripped away the topsoil of illusion. 1967 was a pivotal year in this process, and if one insists on the misleading term “turning point,” 1967, more than 1968, merits this designation.

The new year seemed to foretell an era of hope. Selwyn Feinstein wrote on January 5, 1967, that despite the continuing stalemate, a “new gleam of hope” for American troops in Vietnam had arisen because of a decline in peasant support for the communists. Also, communist defections in 1966 had doubled in comparison to a year earlier. “Time,” therefore, “may be switching to the government’s side. . . . The disenchantment is a crack, an opening to be exploited, that could impose some limits on how long the Communists will be able to wage their war.”<sup>83</sup>

In February, the *Journal* was in a less sanguine mood, warning that a mood of “peace at any price” was settling upon America. Although the *Journal* argued that our initial involvement in Vietnam was questionable (“we aren’t at all sure the U.S. should have gotten into it in the first place”) and although it was not inherently opposed to peace talks, the paper went on to warn against large and unwise concessions in any such talks: “What we don’t think any American should want is to see the war ended through the kind of U.S. concessions that would make a mockery of the whole

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<sup>83</sup>Selwyn Feinstein, “Vietcong Morale: It Sags, Prompting Hope That Time No Longer Favors Hanoi,” *Wall Street Journal*, 5 January 1967, 14.

involvement.’<sup>84</sup> An April editorial expanded on this idea, saying it hoped the war would end--“so do we all”--but remonstrating that negotiations should not be pursued at the cost of South Vietnam’s existence independent of communist control.<sup>85</sup> An editorial in late May warned that both “fruitless negotiation or dangerous escalation offer [*sic*] even less comfort than the current policies.” Longing for tangible reasons for optimism, the author concluded that at present such optimism seemed “foolish” in light of the disappointment of past expectations. The *Journal’s* grim solution: “Hang on and hope.”<sup>86</sup>

A follow-up editorial on the same theme appeared the next day, again questioning our initial entrance into the war--a war which we had stumbled into “more through inadvertence than through conscious policy. They [the *Journal* mentions presidents Kennedy and Johnson, ignoring Truman and Eisenhower] never weighed the probable cost. They apparently gave no consideration to whether South Vietnam was the proper place for an anti-Communist stand in Asia.” The *Journal* went on to note this important reservation: “To point this out forcefully is not to argue we should withdraw now. . . .”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>“Once More, Peace at Any Price,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 1967, 16.

<sup>85</sup>“Confusing the Enemy,” *Wall Street Journal*, 5 April 1967, 16.

<sup>86</sup>“Vietnam, a Democratic Temptation,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 1967, 16.

<sup>87</sup>“Vietnam, a Republican Temptation,” *Wall Street Journal*, 26 May 1967, 14.

What this editorial complained about most, aside from our initial involvement, was the Johnson administration's lack of forcefulness. This is not to say that the editorial had adopted a "superhawk" position on the war; on the contrary, it agreed that limits on this war were necessary--including a moratorium on the use of nuclear weapons and on an invasion of North Vietnam. The problem, rather, was that within its own parameters of limited war the administration had sputtered haphazardly, without a plan. "Its idea of commitment has been and remains, try another division and see if that ends the war."<sup>88</sup>

One senses a frustration here--a frustration, and a war weariness, which could easily turn against the war given the right combustible materials. Those materials were not the newsreels and dispatches that followed Tet, but the onward sweep of casualties and time. In 1967, indeed, the *Journal's* bitterness against the war seemed to worsen markedly with the passage of time. On July 14, the *Journal* snidely remarked, "The familiar talk of progress in the war is emanating from Washington and Saigon in the wake of Secretary McNamara's latest visit to Vietnam. Yet Americans are probably wise to take it with at least as many grains of salt as they have previous protestations of the same kind." Other reports, this article pointed out, continued to talk of stalemate. The author went on: Abandoning the struggle is not what is being asked for here, but "the longer the war goes on and the wider it gets, the greater the danger that it may work against, rather than for, U.S. interests. The nation may be

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

depleting its human and material resources out of all proportion to any conceivable gain, while the real enemy, Red China, sits on the sidelines.”<sup>89</sup>

The doubts multiplied. In August, a Princeton professor lamented the economic costs of the war in an editorial-page article.<sup>90</sup> Later in that month, Vermont Royster cataloged other types of costs--the sense of insecurity and doubt besieging the American people, the war dead, the siphoning of money that could be used to fix problems at home. Though the costs of leaving Vietnam, too, would be serious, “We seem to have stepped into a bottomless pit. . . .”<sup>91</sup>

In the middle of December, a *Journal* editorial echoed many of these same themes, contending that the problem with the Vietnam War was not its morality, but its cost to the U.S., and possibly this “cost . . . is becoming exorbitant. . . . The nation may be weakening itself and hence actually giving an advantage to the Communists in Moscow and Peking.”<sup>92</sup> A late December editorial, written with the Tet new year now little more than a month away, reacted vehemently to the comments of fourteen scholars on Asia who had argued that a communist victory in Vietnam would only lead to more war. The *Journal* attacked their smug sureness, saying that the future

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<sup>89</sup>“A War’s Progress,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 July 1967, 8.

<sup>90</sup>Harley L. Lutz, “Taxes and Problem of Financing a War,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 August 1967, 10.

<sup>91</sup>Vermont Royster, “Thoughts on a War,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 1967, 6.

<sup>92</sup>“McCarthy’s Moral Imperative,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 1967, 18.



and past were uncertain. Our entrance into Vietnam may have been mistaken; what should be done at the moment was questionable.<sup>93</sup> The following day, the *Journal* described the twin ills of American society: The war in Vietnam and “the war in America’s cities. . . . The citizenry would gladly forgo the privileges of watching, day after day, a wretched Asian war in living color”--all of this played out against a “miasma of vulgar discontent on the part of students, unions, anti-war types, and assorted other dissenters. . . .”<sup>94</sup>

In sum, Tet did not cause a radical shift in the *Journal’s* editorial policy toward the Vietnam War. The much cited post-Tet editorial of February 23 argued that our original goals in Vietnam were “commendable” although our entrance into the war might have been mistaken--argued that our goal of preserving South Vietnam might be slipping away--argued that withdrawal would be a “stunning blow” to America, but that staying put might prove even worse.<sup>95</sup> Yet these statements--all of them--had already been made *before* Tet, a little less boldly, perhaps, but the doubts and the frustrations were all there. Tet caused no “turning point” in the *Journal’s* editorial policy; the views expressed in the editorial of February 23, 1968, were merely the logical extension of previous trends. To point this out is not just an exercise in

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<sup>93</sup>“On Roads Not Taken,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 December 1967, 8.

<sup>94</sup>“Time of Trouble, Time of Hope,” *Wall Street Journal*, 29 December 1967, 6.

<sup>95</sup>“The Logic of the Battlefield,” 14.

pedantry--it is, rather, a matter of a proper reconstruction of cause and effect in the history of the Vietnam War.

*Newsweek*

*Newsweek* has also been widely cited for its supposed turn-around against the Vietnam War in the wake of the Tet offensive. In February 1968, South Vietnam banned *Newsweek* due to its allegedly slanted reporting.<sup>96</sup> And its March 18 issue, "The Agony of Khe Sanh," depicted a U.S. marine watching a helicopter burst into flames. One of the accompanying articles, "Needed: The Courage to Face the Truth," urged a withdrawal to more secure lines, an end to search and destroy missions (with their costly toll on American lives), and a bombing halt after our troops had been made more secure. It also warned that South Vietnam would ultimately be responsible for its own fate.<sup>97</sup> In the same issue, the editors explained that only once before had the magazine taken an official stand on an issue--on the problems besetting America's Negro. It had declined to take an official stand on Vietnam--until now. Previously, its editorial board had been divided and there were too many unresolved questions. Now the time had come, Tet having produced "something of a consensus." The magazine called for negotiations and a "searching reappraisal of the U.S. role."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>"Saigon Bans Newsweek," *New York Times*, 24 February 1968, 7.

<sup>97</sup>"Needed: The Courage to Face the Truth," *Newsweek*, 18 March 1968, 39-40.

<sup>98</sup>*Newsweek*, 18 March 1968, 3.

The preceding demonstrates that Tet was a significant event which proved decisive in settling some--though not all--of the editors' minds. But the editors themselves stated that the editorial board had previously been divided in its opinions on Vietnam; this equally telling point suggests that Tet alone did not cause the magazine to change its policy: even before Tet, some had doubts while others were hoping for de-escalation. Tet was only a "turning point" for *Newsweek's* editorial policy if by that term one means a point in time in which historical trends began to coalesce into clarity. But all too many use this loaded term to create, by their omission of historical context, an exaggerated canvas that would place Tet as the central point in the drama that was the Vietnam War--rather than giving it an important but peripheral role. To add historical depth and perspective, the following section will depict the doubts widely portrayed in the pages of *Newsweek* before the Tet offensive.

Every week, the readers of *Newsweek* could enjoy the diverse views of multiple columnists who shared their insights on the world, including (quite frequently) their perspective on the sordid spectacle of Vietnam. The essays of these columnists did not necessarily reflect official policy;<sup>99</sup> writers in the period under review included influential syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann as well as Kenneth Crawford, Raymond Moley, and Emmet John Hughes.

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<sup>99</sup>*Newsweek*, 25 December 1967, 76.

These four analysts gave their readers a split view on the war. Crawford and Moley both supported the war during the years before Tet; after Tet, Crawford continued to support our involvement yet fretted that the war was being lost, not due to reverses on the battlefield but due to the erosion of the confidence of the American public. Moley's interests generally carried him to fields far removed from Vietnam, but in late 1967 a series of editorials alluded to his support for the war, his last editorial for *Newsweek* appearing on Christmas day, 1967.<sup>100</sup>

In contrast, Hughes and Lippmann were doves well before Tet. Hughes, in a moving 1966 Christmas essay entitled "Silent Night, Uneasy Night," advised America to be more humble in its attempt to remake the world in its own image. He also questioned the sanity of America's struggle: "Shall we drink the heady dream of a holy cause of ten years, when most villages may be pacified--albeit eternally--yet saved by their Western redeemers from a Communist purgatory?"<sup>101</sup> Lippmann, for his part, was an influential dove and a constant critic of administration policy from the beginning.<sup>102</sup> His position against the war was so well known that Senator Frank

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<sup>100</sup>On Crawford see e.g. Kenneth Crawford, "The Third Bird," *Newsweek*, 22 February 1965, 32; "We Don't Have It?" *Newsweek*, 11 September 1967, 26; "Vietnam: All Is Lost?" *Newsweek*, 7 October 1968, 44. On Raymond Moley see "The GOP Mainstream," *Newsweek*, 13 November 1967, 126; "Romney the Incredible," *Newsweek*, 11 December 1967, 116.

<sup>101</sup>Emmet John Hughes, "Silent Night, Uneasy Night," *Newsweek*, 26 December 1966, 13.

<sup>102</sup>Walter Lippmann, *Conversations with Walter Lippmann* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), vii, 167-168, 203-204.

Church, a critic of Johnson's policies, tried to defend himself once by remarking that he had been no more outspoken than Lippmann.<sup>103</sup>

*Newsweek's* columnists offered fairly static views of the war. The general news pages, in contrast, offered a somewhat more "evolutionary" bent, with a notable trend toward pessimism--though not opposition--to the Vietnam War. This trend was especially noticeable by the summer of 1967.

In February 1965, as U.S. war planes broke the still horizon over Vietnam like droning insects, *Newsweek* brooded that a small local war might "flare up into a holocaust"; it also quoted unnamed, confidential U.S. officials who doubted our ability to win a war in Vietnam--if war should come--if victory meant not only destroying the Viet Cong but creating a strong South Vietnamese government. Outlining three alternative policy options for the U.S. in Vietnam, the article found fault and danger in all of them--withdrawal, for example, would result in a "devastating blow to U.S. prestige" as well as Chinese conquest of Southeast Asia. A fourth policy--the actual U.S. policy of escalation--seemed aimed at achieving a negotiated settlement. But, it added prophetically, the U.S. seemed fated to go on spending more blood and more treasure at an ever expanding rate in pursuit of its goal.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>*U.S. News & World Report*, 29 August 1966, 43-44.

<sup>104</sup>"Pleiku and Qui Nhon: Decision Points," *Newsweek*, 22 February 1965, 32-35.

A somewhat more sanguine article, on March 15, 1965, seemed cheered by high U.S. morale and the performance of the ARVN.<sup>105</sup> Yet in July 1966, after regular marine and army divisions had already been embroiled in South Vietnam for more than a year, *Newsweek* showed its frustration with the tentative, limited war of President Johnson: "Never before has a major power prosecuted a minor war against a tiny enemy with quite so much painstaking calculation about each step, quite so many self-imposed restrictions--and quite so many changes of mind." The article nevertheless remained uncertain about the war's outcome and retained some hope.<sup>106</sup>

A December 1966 article concerning the impressive array of anti-guerilla technology now entering the U.S. arsenal implied that the tide could turn as the U.S. became better prepared to fight guerilla warfare.<sup>107</sup> And after returning from a Vietnam tour in 1967, Arnaud de Borchgrave, a *Newsweek* senior editor, filed an optimistic report on the war. Emphasizing the dangers inherent in all hawk/dove strategies, including a bombing halt, de Borchgrave concluded that Johnson's "middle course is leading to unspectacular but impressive gains," including a rise in the defection rate of communist soldiers, gains in the pacification program, and the seeds of a truly representative government.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>*Newsweek*, 15 March 1965, 15.

<sup>106</sup>"Target: Hanoi," *Newsweek*, 11 July 1966, 21-22.

<sup>107</sup>"Technology vs. the VC," *Newsweek*, 19 December 1966, 108, 111-112.

<sup>108</sup>Arnaud de Borchgrave, "Seeing It Through," *Newsweek*, 17 April 1967, 52, 55.

To summarize, the years spanning the spring of 1965 (which marked the beginning of large-scale involvement of regular land forces) to the spring of 1967 formed a sort of up-and-down drawbridge of frustration and hope.

The summer of 1967 demarked a transition period, with a notable increase in frustration veering toward pessimism. On July 10, 1967, *Newsweek* released a special issue entitled "The Vietnam War and American Life." The editors of *Newsweek* wrote broodingly:

. . . the nation stands divided by a bloody jungle war whose beginnings are lost in controversy and whose final outcome is unpredictable. In the summer of 1967, many Americans have become resigned by a dirty distant war they do not fully comprehend. Many are torn by doubt. But however they may view the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, there are few who are not profoundly affected by it. And there are fewer still who do not find this year's fourth of July somehow clouded by the frustrations and agonies of the battle, somehow dulled by a new understanding of a nation's powers--and its limitations.<sup>109</sup>

The inside cover stories included this montage of frustration and doubt:

" . . . the U.S. finds itself trapped--inadvertently or not . . . in a momentous gamble to rescue its prestige."--Resigning themselves to hopes for a negotiated settlement, the American people have numbed their "awareness of the distant war--to escape the painful complexities of *realpolitik* in a spasm of hedonism unknown since the "20s."--Some dissenters, it is true, are simply "anti-American" but others are "thoughtful," admitting to our responsibilities in the world but contending that we should exercise our will only when it "might do more good than harm." *Newsweek* added that the war was draining resources from the poor and from other domestic problems, but stopped

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<sup>109</sup>*Newsweek*, 10 July 1967, 5.

short of asking for withdrawal. While victory would require even greater sacrifices, “repudiation of [America’s] commitment would unleash shock waves that would rock the country.”<sup>110</sup> Another article in the same issue noted that enemy supplies were plentiful and the enemy did not appear ready for negotiations.<sup>111</sup> In contrast the ARVN lacked a fighting spirit, was sick and venal.<sup>112</sup>

All too often the words “turning point” are bandied about theatrically, ignoring (or underestimating) the historical context. The context here suggests that the changes in *Newsweek* brought about as a result of the Tet offensive are more accurately portrayed as the acceleration and crystallization of previous trends. *Newsweek* itself raised the touchstone issue--the U.S. should involve itself in the world only when that involvement would lead to “more good than harm.” After Tet, in the face of the growing toll on U.S. resources and of the nation’s mounting unrest, *Newsweek* decided that striving for a military victory was doing “more harm.”

#### *Time and Life*

*Time* and its cousin *Life* turned against administration policy well before Tet, arguing for de-escalation, negotiations, and a bombing pause. This had not always been the case. In 1965, *Time* applauded the administration’s new firmness as the U.S.

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<sup>110</sup>“A Nation at Odds,” *Newsweek*, 10 July 1967, 19-20.

<sup>111</sup>*Newsweek*, 10 July 1967, 10.

<sup>112</sup>Merton D. Perry, “Their Lions--Our Rabbits,” *Newsweek*, 9 October 1967, 44, 49.



began systematic bombing of the north, acknowledging the dangers but arguing that “the perils of pulling back or showing a lack of resolution are greater.”<sup>113</sup> In January of that year *Time* had underscored the importance of our involvement in Vietnam by referring to it as the “gate of Asia.” South Vietnam may not have been democratic, but *Time* believed it deserved a chance to work out its problems. In general, the article’s tone was optimistic, though it warned with more prescience than it knew that the American public might find it difficult to support a long war and that the President could find himself squeezed between pacifists and those advocating escalation. In a claim that would one day haunt Johnson’s Presidency, it also criticized the President for a lack of candor on the war.<sup>114</sup>

Several articles in 1966 evoked a mood of cautious optimism, though doubts rankled below the surface.<sup>115</sup> A more noticeable change began in late 1967. Although a May 1967 article, “Arrow of Death,” exulted over crippling losses suffered by the communists,<sup>116</sup> August 1967 saw a critique of the ARVN,<sup>117</sup> and the dying

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<sup>113</sup>“A Look down That Long Road,” *Time*, 19 February 1965, 21.

<sup>114</sup>“Man of the Year,” *Time*, 7 January 1966, 15, 20-21.

<sup>115</sup>“New Realism,” *Time*, 22 July 1966, 17-18; “America’s Permanent Stake in Asia,” *Time*, 23 September 1966, 28-29; “Moving Forward,” *Time*, 23 September 1966, 23-24; “Which Way?” *Time*, 14 October 1966, 31-32; “Seeing Things Through,” *Time*, 30 December 1966, 9.

<sup>116</sup>“Arrow of Death,” *Time*, 12 May 1967, 24-25; also see “Efficient Thunder,” *Time*, 12 May 1967, 25-26.

<sup>117</sup>“Building Up the ARVN,” *Time*, 4 August 1967, 24-25.

days of summer saw the publication of a bitter September article, eerily reminiscent of the July issue of *Newsweek*, portending the onset of a season of paralysis in which hopes were slipping away:

Between Independence Day and Labor Day, a profound malaise overcame the American people. A kind of psychological Asian flu, it has as its overt symptoms bewilderment about U.S. aims in Viet Nam, impatience with the pace of the war and, increasingly, an unmistakable if still inchoate tide of opposition to the entire U.S. involvement in that costly, ugly, not so far-off conflict. The pervasive sense of frustration over the war has been nourished, through a summer of smoke and savagery in America's cities, by the apprehension that the U.S. is faced simultaneously with a frightening and largely unforeseen trauma in its own national life.<sup>118</sup>

In the following issue of *Time*, one article pointed out almost parenthetically that the war was "complex and bewildering,"<sup>119</sup> while a second article provided a sobering synopsis of a recent book, *Beyond Vietnam*, by former U.S. ambassador to Japan and Harvard Orientalist Edwin O. Reischauer. *Time* called his analysis on the war "perceptive," yet claimed his prescription for U.S. action in Vietnam--namely, that we eventually "force" the enemy to accept a negotiated settlement--was as inadequate as the other options which Reischauer rejected: escalation or withdrawal. Regarding Reischauer's recommendation, *Time* interjected critically: "But how? Under unremitting pressure from advocates of both the quick win and the fast fade[,] Johnson has hewed to this middle course all along." *Time's* disturbing conclusion: "Lyndon

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<sup>118</sup>"A Question of Priorities," *Time*, 8 September 1967, 13.

<sup>119</sup>"The Brainwashed Candidate," *Time*, 15 September 1967, 22.

Johnson can only hope that if, indeed, something has to give in the next 14 months, it will be Hanoi's refusal to negotiate rather than U.S. patience and resolve."<sup>120</sup>

Clearly exasperated by the course the war had taken, *Time*--in an October 6 issue subtitled "Rising Doubt about the War"--called the siege of the U.S. Marine base at Con Thien "a symbol of cumulative frustrations in a complex war." Not only was the war scoffed at by the young, intellectuals, and the clergy, *Time* told its readers; now it was opposed by "apolitical businessmen" and "uneasy politicians" as well. The war had become an unfortunate scapegoat for the nation's ills, but the fighting was dragging on in behalf of a corrupt nation while in America war-weariness was increasing and patience was running out. *Time* did not believe we were losing on the battlefield nor did it call for unilateral withdrawal, and it emphasized that all policy options--even a bombing pause--were not without their risk; though it believed the risk of a bombing pause was justified, in the hope it would lead to negotiations and a coalition government with safeguards to keep the communists from seizing absolute control.<sup>121</sup>

*Life* showed a similar metamorphosis, mirroring, in part, the outlook of Hedley Donovan, editor-in-chief of *Time, Inc.* *Life* believed that America needed to proceed with determination in Vietnam in 1965. In 1966, Donovan wrote in *Life* that the "war

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<sup>120</sup>"A Paucity of Choice," *Time*, 15 September 1967, 19-20.

<sup>121</sup>"Thunder from a Distant Hill," *Time*, 6 October 1967, 21-22, 25-26.

is worth winning" and would begin to wind down as early as the end of the year.<sup>122</sup> In June of 1967, Donovan wrote another *Life* article: "Vietnam: Slow, Tough but Coming Along." Despite noting some progress and a string of "tactical" victories, he observed that military success did not necessarily translate into victory in the "third war"--the struggle to create a cohesive society free from guerrilla intimidation. Pacification of the countryside, however, was slowly increasing. He forecast that Vietnam would "dominate" the race for the Presidency in 1968, in the absence of marked and tangible progress. But he held out hope: "There are in fact some grounds--a mixture perhaps of hunch, faith, impression, information--for thinking that our Vietnam policy 9 or 10 months hence could be looking like a success."<sup>123</sup> Two weeks later, at a commencement address at NYU, Donovan said that what would happen in Vietnam was not yet clear but would soon become apparent. If he had been wrong all along, he said, "I hope that I . . . will be prompt to admit that we had attempted something beyond our powers."<sup>124</sup>

That admission came soon enough. On October 20, *Life* made a definitive plea for de-escalation. Calling the progress that was being made "maddeningly slow," it wrote that the fighting was being conducted on behalf of a nation which might not be

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<sup>122</sup>Hedley Donovan, "Vietnam: The War Is Worth Winning," *Life*, 25 February 1966, 27.

<sup>123</sup>Hedley Donovan, "Vietnam: Slow, Tough but Coming Along," *Life*, 2 June 1967, 68, 76A, 76C, 77.

<sup>124</sup>Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 90.

viable. Although we were in Vietnam for “honorable and sensible reasons,” the stakes in the war were important but not crucial to the welfare of America and the non-communist world. All in all, “this is a tough combination to ask young Americans to die for.” Meanwhile, enthusiasm for the war was waning. *Life's* prescription: a bombing pause--first, because there was a “remote possibility” such a pause might lead to negotiations; second, because even if the pause failed it would help the U.S. recapture domestic and international support.<sup>125</sup>

*U.S. News & World Report*

*U.S. News & World Report*, arguably the most conservative of the periodicals covered here, never did “turn against” the war, in the modest sense of calling for a bombing pause and negotiations. But one detects a building frustration, a frustration which only accelerated incrementally after Tet.

David Lawrence, whose editorial appeared prominently at the end of each issue, was very much a “cold warrior” who railed against the perils of international communism. Although his views did not necessarily reflect official policy at *U.S. News*, like the magazine as a whole his editorials demonstrated continued support for the war in the face of frustration and, after Tet, bewilderment. On February 5, 1968--in what was actually a pre-Tet editorial because the magazine was distributed a week before its publication date--Lawrence complained of the strangeness of the war, of an enemy not easily identifiable, of demonstrations against the war, and of doubts even in

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<sup>125</sup>“The Case for Bombing Pause Number 7,” *Life*, 20 October 1967, 4.

the august halls of Congress. He also lamented that the doves were prolonging the war due to their incessant cries for peace.<sup>126</sup> On March 25, well after the Tet offensive had begun, Lawrence brooded in an essay entitled "The Curse of Defeatism" that we were not learning "the lessons of history" (he had in mind Munich, appeasement, and the like). He decried America's "defeatism," its lack of backbone and patriotism. We stood "at the crossroads"--and Lawrence was not at all sure that we would take the right road that led to a firm stand against communist aggression in Vietnam and across the globe.<sup>127</sup>

Like Lawrence, *U.S. News* was staunchly anti-communist in the years leading up to Tet. A sampling of articles on the issue of communism includes titles such as these: "Reds' Next Target in Asia" (March 22, 1965); "Castro's Turn Next" (May 17, 1965); "Where Reds Are Busy on the Campuses" (June 7, 1965); "Campus Communists--America's Time Bomb?" (November 1, 1965); and in the same issue, "Communist Gains among Youths--J. Edgar Hoover Reports."<sup>128</sup> Given this emphasis on the Communist threat, a less than whole-hearted effort for victory would have seemed inexcusable, and a frustration on this account erupted early on. As our

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<sup>126</sup>David Lawrence, "The Doves Cry Peace but Prolong the War," *U.S. News & World Report*, 5 February 1968, 92.

<sup>127</sup>David Lawrence, "The Curse of Defeatism," *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 March 1968, 100.

<sup>128</sup>The respective page numbers of these articles are as follows: 69-70, 72; 44-47; 53-54; 42-43; 46.

involvement in Vietnam deepened in March 1965, one article quoted anonymous "top officials in the Pentagon" who excoriated our "piecemeal" approach to selecting bombing targets.<sup>129</sup> A similar critique, this time coming directly from the magazine, appeared in August 1965: "President Johnson, caught up in a losing war in Vietnam, decided against using U.S. power to press for a clear-cut military victory against the war." Johnson had decided to wage a defensive war instead. In so doing, "Mr. Johnson once again searched for the middle course--or the 'consensus,' as his aides liked to call it. [The result is] . . . the prospect of a slow, draggy war in which losses will mount slowly, but with a decision that may be elusive."<sup>130</sup>

Despite this criticism, by late 1965 several articles expressed more sanguine sentiments--for example, an article of October 4, "Now Reds Must Fight--Or Run," stated with confidence, "U.S. military might is beginning to pay off in Vietnam. Communists are hurting, losing the initiative. . . . U.S. victory is not yet in sight, but [the] pattern of war is changing."<sup>131</sup> An interview with a staff member of *U.S. News*, in the same issue, yielded this prediction: "We ought not to be surprised to find the war slackening off, with the communists going back to hit-and-run guerilla

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<sup>129</sup>"Pentagon Argument against 'Piecemeal' War," *U.S. News & World Report*, 22 March 1965, 30.

<sup>130</sup>"What Next in Vietnam?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 August 1965, 33.

<sup>131</sup>"Now Reds Must Fight--Or Run," *U.S. News & World Report*, 4 October 1965, 43.

tactics.”<sup>132</sup> An October 11 article, detailing the success of the air war, was entitled simply, “ ‘Havoc’ in North Vietnam.”<sup>133</sup> Yet doubts persisted. By the end of 1965 several articles puzzled over why the communists did not sue for peace, although they were “clear[ly] . . . losing the war.”<sup>134</sup>

This was not the only conundrum. In the spring of 1966 an anti-American riot in South Vietnam moved Sol W. Sanders to review the entire rationale behind the U.S. commitment. Although he found our presence necessary--in order to stop the slow spread of communism and to protect our prestige--the riots were disturbing to him and “brought a puzzled reaction in the United States.”<sup>135</sup> A companion article complained about the political crisis in South Vietnam, concluding that the war “tends to move from crisis to crisis, with each crisis more grave than the last.” Despite Saigon’s continual political crises, the article suggested that military successes would keep South Vietnam from hemorrhaging. But an accompanying cartoon, “Fighting against the Tide,” was not quite so optimistic, depicting an American soldier wading waist-

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<sup>132</sup>“Asia out of Control?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 4 October 1965, 41.

<sup>133</sup>“ ‘Havoc’ in North Vietnam,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 11 October 1965, 52.

<sup>134</sup>“Reds Don’t Talk Peace--What’s Holding Them Up?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 November 1965, 44; also see Sol W. Sanders, “Why Vietnam’s Reds Scorn Peace Talks,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 29 November 1965, 50-55.

<sup>135</sup>Sol W. Sanders, “What If U.S. Gets Out?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 18 April 1966, 34, 36.



waist-deep and surrounded by three concentric circles labelled: "Shaky government," "Demonstrators," and "Viet Cong."<sup>136</sup>

As 1966 led into 1967 optimistic forecasts were replaced by more negative predictions, in a sort of yo-yo effect. In July 1966, one article said flatly, "[The] U.S. has now turned the military corner in Vietnam."<sup>137</sup> This was followed later in the year by a more doubtful assessment--namely, that while there were some signs of progress, North Vietnam showed no signs of breaking under the pressure.<sup>138</sup> Like a bad fortune cookie, early 1967 then revealed this unwelcome prognostication: "Bigger War in the New Year--And No End in Sight."<sup>139</sup> A follow-up in the middle of the year featured an interview with Israeli General Moshe Dayan, victor over the Egyptians in the Sinai, who, after a recent tour of Vietnam, advised the U.S. that it could not win: Although it was true that North Vietnam couldn't carry on a "regular war" for long, the Viet Cong, aided by suitable terrain, could sustain a guerilla war indefinitely, nullifying American "technological superiority."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>"The New Crisis in Vietnam War," *U.S. News & World Report*, 18 April 1966, 33.

<sup>137</sup>"Is End of Vietnam War in Sight?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 July 1966, 25.

<sup>138</sup>"Is North Vietnam Weakening?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 12 December 1966, 52-54.

<sup>139</sup>"Bigger War in the New Year--And No End in Sight," *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 January 1967, 26-27.

<sup>140</sup>"What Dayan Says about Vietnam," *U.S. News & World Report*, 26 June 1967, 58.

Despite such pessimism, the pages of *U.S. News* rode a fresh wave of optimism in late 1967. Its September 11 issue featured an interview with General Harold K. Johnson, Army Chief of Staff. ("We are very definitely winning in Vietnam. . . .")<sup>141</sup> A more sober analysis in November reminded its readers of our "deep responsibility to Asia"; U.S. withdrawal would invite a disaster.<sup>142</sup> This was followed, two weeks later, by two up-beat articles: "The Coin Has Flipped Over to Our Side," and "Vietnam: War Tide Turning to U.S.?" The former article exulted that "Ho's military apparatus in the South is showing signs of coming apart." Americans, misled by overoptimism in the past, were now "wary"; yet the enemy's attacks were deemed "desperate," akin, in the judgment of some military leaders, to the "suicide *Kamikaze* raids mounted by the Japanese after they knew they were losing in World War II." Some captured documents suggested "desertions . . . illness . . . war-weariness" on the part of the communists.<sup>143</sup>

The latter article observed that "after months of stalemate and gloom, American officials are pouring out a flood of good news about Vietnam. . . . The tide is pictured as turning in U.S. favor [*sic*]-and this time it looks real and lasting."<sup>144</sup> A January

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<sup>141</sup>"End of War in Sight," *U.S. News & World Report*, 11 September 1967, 44.

<sup>142</sup>"Why the U.S. Can't Quit Vietnam," *U.S. News & World Report*, 13 November 1967, 46.

<sup>143</sup>Howard Handleman, "The Coin Has Flipped Over to Our Side," *U.S. News & World Report*, 27 November 1967, 52-53.

<sup>144</sup>"Vietnam: War Tide Turning to U.S.?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 27 November 1967, 50.

8 article by Wendell S. Merick effused: "There is good reason to believe, as 1968 starts, that this year really is going to see the beginning of the end of the war here in Vietnam."<sup>145</sup>

In summarizing *U.S. News'* editorial direction in the pre-Tet period, one can draw several broad conclusions. First, unlike some of the other periodicals under review, *U.S. News* never questioned the wisdom of our initial involvement. Second, what it did question was Johnson's strategy of gradual escalation and limited war. Third, the frustration over a lack of progress in the war did not increase in a strictly linear fashion but, when graphed as a function of time, would have revealed a series of valleys and peaks, of alternating lows and highs: the profile of a manic depressive. In the face of such a profile one could predict that any significant setback, real or imagined, would plunge the patient's spirits into a serious depression.

And depress Tet did. Yet in the spring of 1968 *U.S. News* didn't so much turn against the war as acquiesce in the obvious--the U.S. faced a stalemate in Vietnam and probable de-escalation. Such an admission did not come without bitterness. Said James Wallace: Vietnam is a "revolutionary war," a "dirty war," one which we've fought with "kid gloves" and the wrong tactics, all in behalf of a corrupt government. "The U.S. is paying dearly for years of illusion in the . . . [belief] that a revolutionary struggle could be handled with conventional warfare, that firepower could win back a

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<sup>145</sup>Wendell S. Merick, "How and When the War May End," *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 January 1968, 21.

countryside where an enemy political infrastructure was firmly entrenched, that grim present realities could be made to go away with rosy predictions about the future.”<sup>146</sup>

*U.S. News* added one week later: “[The] war as fought to date . . . has failed to yield anticipated results.” Popular support for the war was “eroding”; the South Vietnamese government “could not last 24 hours” without the Americans. In an eerie echo of the destruction of Ben Tre--“we destroyed it in order to save it”--the article reached this disturbing conclusion: “South Vietnam, instead of being saved, may be in the process of being destroyed. [The] war itself remains a stalemate.”<sup>147</sup>

Despite this gloom, *U.S. News* issued no summons for withdrawal; and the possibility of hope, no matter how theoretical, was still dangled before its readers.<sup>148</sup>

#### Tet: A Turning Point for the Media?

In conclusion, this brief survey has suggested that, for important organs of the so-called “national” print media, Tet played a significant--though hardly pivotal--role in their disenchantment with the war. To ignore the context of the changes in their editorial positions between 1965 and 1967 sensationalizes and overdramatizes the importance of Tet. To put the argument more bluntly: Tet was no “turning point.” The *New York Times* had long doubted the war, even before Tet, and had called for

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<sup>146</sup>James N. Wallace, “Why U.S. Isn’t Winning a ‘Little’ War,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 April 1968, 43, 48.

<sup>147</sup>“De-escalation in the War?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 April 1968, 37.

<sup>148</sup>See e.g., Wallace, “Why U.S. Isn’t Winning,” 48 and “Truce or More War,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 3 June 1968, 60-66.

negotiations. Both the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek*, though widely cited for their supposed turn-arounds against the war in the aftermath of the Tet offensive, changed only in an incremental rather than a revolutionary way. *Time* and *Life* had become seriously disenchanted with the war by 1967, well *before* Tet--the term "disenchantment" being substituted for the less precise "opposition"; for neither magazine suggested a unilateral withdrawal either before or after Tet. Finally, *U.S. News & World Report* never turned against the war per se, but after Tet it accepted the obvious: we were mired in stalemate. Though it retained some hope, its disillusionment marked a sharp turn from its previous opinion, perhaps because it, more than any other of the periodicals under review here, had increased its hopes in late 1967 regarding U.S. progress in Vietnam.

In his influential *Tet!*, Don Oberdorfer argues that the Tet offensive of 1968 was "the turning point" for both congressional and media attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Insofar as this hypothesis extends to the print media, the above analysis suggests that Oberdorfer is in error, though a larger analysis of the nation's magazines and newspapers would be necessary in order to corroborate this conclusion. Oberdorfer himself mentions a number of caveats regarding his hypothesis--but at times seems to be carried away by the melodramatic. Perhaps like a scientist who does not want to let go of a pet theory in the face of contradictory data, Oberdorfer felt compelled to defend his initial presumptions. Whatever the case, Oberdorfer points out that four major newspapers, more or less conservative in their editorial slant, changed their positions on Vietnam *before* Tet, expressing increasing doubts about the war and

urging changes in administration policy or a review of the issues. He also cites a *Boston Globe* survey of the nation's most important newspapers just prior to Tet. It found that four major newspapers were calling for an "all-out win policy" in Vietnam, sixteen supported the Administration's policies "with no major reservations," while nineteen supported the U.S. presence but desired de-escalation, a bombing halt, and/or increased diplomacy.<sup>149</sup>

Significantly, those who supported the status quo were in the minority. Thus, although there was widespread support for our presence in Vietnam, this support was an uneasy one and, in the absence of progress, could be expected to erode over time. According to the same survey, seven of the thirty-nine papers surveyed had changed their positions on administration war policy, moving from a position of general support to one critical of recent escalations, while four other papers had changed in the opposite direction and were now criticizing the President for not being sufficiently bellicose.<sup>150</sup> Hence support for the status quo had eroded well before Tet. Time--time was the central player in the drama: time, even more than the Tet offensive.

Finally, a few words about television are in order, since at that time 58 percent of the public was estimated to get the majority of its news from television. (Walter Cronkite of CBS and NBC's Huntley-Brinkley Reports were together watched by 30

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<sup>149</sup>Quoted in Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 86.

<sup>150</sup>Min S. Yee, *Boston Sunday Globe*, "Vietnam: The U.S. Press and Its Agony of Appraisal," 18 February 1968, 2A. Also of great significance, not one of the papers surveyed was calling for immediate withdrawal.

million Americans, 70 percent of whom were adults.)<sup>151</sup> The television reportage of the Tet offensive was rather sensational. On the night of January 31, the Huntley-Brinkley Report aired unedited footage of the battle raging at the U.S. embassy in Saigon. NBC and CBS showed half hour specials titled, respectively, "Viet Cong Terror: A Guerrilla Offensive" and "Saigon under Fire."<sup>152</sup> Cronkite, heretofore a "Cold Warrior," announced wearily that we were "mired in stalemate" and negotiations were "the only realistic yet unsatisfactory" way out.<sup>153</sup> Twelve days later NBC's Frank McGee claimed the U.S. was losing the war.<sup>154</sup>

Was Tet a "turning point" in television's attitude toward the war? A full answer to that question can be found only by comparing film footage of the time with news reports before Tet, in order to put any changes in historical context. Since full coverage of television lies beyond the scope of this paper, this essay can only provide tantalizing vignettes that suggest that Tet was not the formative event which caused television reporters and commentators alike to sour on the war. To cite one example of historical context: In August 1965, after hours of deliberation, Walter Cronkite and his producer decided to air what *Time* called a "now-famous film sequence" depicting marines burning the Vietnamese village of Cam Ne. CBS' Morley Safer narrated on

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<sup>151</sup>"The Most Intimate Medium," *Time*, 14 October 1966, 56.

<sup>152</sup>Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 218.

<sup>153</sup>Quoted in Harrison E. Salisbury, ed., *Vietnam Reconsidered*, 93.

<sup>154</sup>Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:xxxvii.

the scene: "This is what the war in Viet Nam is all about." He reported that marines, "in retaliation for a burst of gunfire," had burned the village, destroying 150 homes. The camera meanwhile scanned sobbing women. Safer went on: Marine activities also "wounded three women, killed one baby, wounded one Marine and netted four prisoners--four old men who could not answer questions put to them in English."<sup>155</sup>

Some, including Chet Huntley of NBC, lamented that reporters concentrated on obtaining such footage to the detriment of real journalism; ABC's Howard K. Smith complained during the Buddhist crisis that "television gave the impression that the whole country was rioting, instead of 2,000 out of 17 million."<sup>156</sup> These criticisms were, certainly, partly valid, but this is not to suggest, alongside of Johnson, Nixon, and others, that television can be held responsible for either America's psychological defeat in the wake of the Tet offensive or for popular disillusionment with the war.<sup>157</sup> Television, like the print media, may have distorted events--but it did not create the stalemate, the disappointments, the body bags, the broken promises, the wasted years, or the mounting losses in Vietnam.

Whatever their merit, such film footage must have had a long-term insidious effect on the judgment of commentators such as Walter Cronkite. In December 1967, Cronkite showed a three-minute "essay" on a body count after a battle near the

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<sup>155</sup>"The Most Intimate Medium," 58.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., 58, 63.

<sup>157</sup>On Nixon's critique of the media, see Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner, 1980), 102, 114-115.



Cambodian border. The newsreel showed Viet Cong dead being heaped onto a helicopter net, faces peering out, mouths agape, eyes still open, caught in the cords of the net. The field reporter was saying plaintively, "In combat, there are no niceties. . . . These had been living, breathing men yesterday. Today, they are just a sanitation problem." He went on to explain that some ears were missing from the dead because they had been cut off as souvenirs.<sup>158</sup>

A little more than a month earlier the *New York Times* had deemed a two-part review of the war, also by CBS, as "a realistic analysis of the first order, one that made the war seem a futile undertaking in a great many respects." The series portrayed South Vietnam as a poor nation, beset by an unmotivated army, widespread corruption, pacification problems, and an apathetic people. Charles Collingwood, the program's narrator, starkly concluded--in the words of the *Times*--that we had "stumbled into the whirlpool of violence."<sup>159</sup>

None of this is to argue that Tet was not important. Regarding the print media at least its effect was not pivotal or formative, only causing the acceleration of previous trends; for the print media, Tet was not "the turning point." On the other hand, a fuller analysis of television and its relation to the Tet offensive would be necessary before a tentative hypothesis could be ventured; it is possible that Tet was

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<sup>158</sup>"How Bloody Can It Be?" *Newsweek*, 25 December 1967, 75.

<sup>159</sup>Jack Gould, "TV Review: Part 2 of 'Where We Stand in Vietnam,' " *New York Times*, 8 November 1967, 96; also see George Gent, "TV: C.B.S. Examines U.S. Involvement in Vietnam," *New York Times*, 25 October 1967, 95.

not the turning point for television either. Whatever the truth of these arguments, the events that followed Tet cannot be accurately assessed without the historical context that has all too often been underappreciated or ignored.

## CHAPTER 6

### PUBLIC OPINION AND THE VIETNAM WAR, 1965-1968

As will be seen in the concluding chapter, the Tet offensive's effect on LBJ's plummeting popularity is clear and pernicious; on the other hand, its effect on the popularity of the war is more debatable and, in this view, negligible.

How does one assess public opinion? What sectors of the population does one study? For the most part, this analysis will ignore the so-called "anti-war movement"--it has been covered elsewhere and its splashy sensationalism does not necessarily reflect the view of the common citizen, or, to borrow a phrase from Richard Nixon, the "silent majority." For similar reasons, the opinions of the "establishment" and out-of-government "elites" will be ignored--presumably these vague terms refer not only to members of the media, but to intellectuals, labor leaders, the clergy, businessmen, lawyers, and the well-to-do. It is taken for granted by some--Oberdorfer for example<sup>160</sup>--that Tet polarized these groups. Dramatic changes are posited without the slightest proof. A study of these groups in *historical context* might reveal a different verdict.

Assessing the views of the common man is difficult--of necessity this survey must partly depend on polls. Words of caution are necessary regarding the

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<sup>160</sup>See Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 280-281, 334 and "Tet: The Turning Point," 10.

interpretation of *any* poll. Slight changes in wording frequently result in remarkably different results. Personal interviews can lead to a corruption of the data, due to the respondents' desire to please the interviewer with what is perceived to be acceptable answers. Put more baldly--people lie, even to themselves, and sometimes don't even know the truth themselves. For example, one might be asked, "Are you racially prejudiced?" No, he might answer. But does one truly have *no* prejudice; and, to turn to another matter, aren't these yes/no or multiple-choice answers crude? In terms of Vietnam, most of the questions only allowed for discrete rather than open-ended answers. Questions that required one to limit his or her answer to a single multiple-choice response were necessarily limited in their ability to arrive at a complex truth.

Despite these and other limitations, polls are quite useful when examining similar questions for trends over time. The following analysis, which will make use of polls and other data, will briefly examine public opinion in 1965-66; 1967 will then be examined in greater depth. The general trend was one of increasing disillusionment and war-weariness rather than a tidal wave of demands for unilateral withdrawal. If one insists on using the misleading "turning point" metaphor, 1967 seems as likely a candidate as 1968. The metaphor of a "road," however, is better suited to explain the data--a road which was sloping downward well before the Tet offensive of early 1968.

#### The Pre-Tet Period

1965 saw an increase in support for President Johnson's management of the Vietnam War against a backdrop of confusion and uneasiness. In January 1965, as

South Vietnam's plight became even more desperate and the possibility of even deeper U.S. involvement in the war began to increase, a Harris poll reported that only 41 percent of the public supported Johnson's war handling; by September his approval rating on the war had risen to 66 percent. *Newsweek* surmised that this change was a result of the American public's traditional support for our soldiers once they had been committed to battle;<sup>161</sup> some may have also believed Johnson's initial response to communist aggression was too docile, and may have welcomed his build-up.<sup>162</sup> Certainly, the number of those who wanted to leave Vietnam declined as regular American forces entered the battlefield: 38 percent wanted to leave in March, only 7 percent by December.<sup>163</sup>

Despite Johnson's 66 percent approval rating for September,<sup>164</sup> *Newsweek* predicted that more demonstrations against the war, on the one hand, and more pressure from those wanting a more aggressive military policy in Vietnam, on the other, could one day tighten a vice that would immobilize Johnson's Presidency.

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<sup>161</sup>"We Have to Finish the Job," *Newsweek*, 20 September 1965, 27.

<sup>162</sup>McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, Times Books, 1995), 108.

<sup>163</sup>"Vietnam: Still on the Escalator," *Newsweek*, 13 December 1965, 27. The poll results are per Harris.

<sup>164</sup>"We Have to Finish the Job," 27. The approval rating is per Harris.

*Newsweek* also wrote that many Americans were “profoundly disturbed by the napalming of villages and other tactics. . . .”<sup>165</sup>

Doubts and confusion persisted. *U.S. News* reported in August 1965: “There are many signs that the war in Vietnam is one that the American people have difficulty understanding.”<sup>166</sup> President Johnson sought to clear up such misunderstanding in a news conference. Reading from a letter, Johnson quoted: “Dear Mr. President: In my humble way I am writing to you about the crisis in Vietnam. I have a son who is now in Vietnam. My husband served in World War II. Our country was at war, but now, this time, it is just something that I don’t understand. Why?”<sup>167</sup>

Johnson, in his reply showing himself--like all of us--to be a captive of the past, mentioned the commitment of three presidents, the “painful lessons” of Hitler at Munich, two world wars, and Korea. The tide of communism needed to be stopped in Asia; to step away from the fight now would only lead to a bigger fight later, as history had shown that “retreat does not bring safety, and weakness does not bring peace.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>“The Demonstrators: Why? How Many?” *Newsweek*, 1 November 1965, 25.

<sup>166</sup>“What Next in Vietnam?” *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 August 1965, 34.

<sup>167</sup>Lyndon Johnson, “U.S. Goals in Vietnam As Set by the President,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 August 1965, 50. Transcript of July 28, 1965, news conference.

<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*

At the conclusion of 1965, the U.S. public solidly supported the administration's growing commitment. Yet *Newsweek* wrote testily that the war had "engendered a widespread malaise and uneasiness among influential sections of the populace over just where it may be heading, how long it will last, and what it will cost." The administration had also singularly failed to clarify its intentions.<sup>169</sup>

Uneasiness and a lack of patriotic fervor seeped through 1966, like discharge from an unattended wound. Senator Everett Dirksen, Republican Senate Minority Leader and a powerful spokesman for Johnson's war policy, confided in an interview that Vietnam

[was] a matter of deep concern to people everywhere. . . . I think, generally, they want this thing to proceed, and with vigor, to bring it to a successful and honorable end with a minimum loss of life. . . . The colossal sin is not that we're in Vietnam. . . . I have said that the real sin is that we've been there too long. It's become a war of attrition.<sup>170</sup>

Walter Lippmann, the prominent syndicated columnist, wrote in *Newsweek* that recent polling data had shown a marked loss of faith in the President's war policies. Lippmann--echoing the prediction made by *Newsweek* magazine in the late summer of the previous year--believed that the President was being squeezed from two sides: those who wanted to get out of Vietnam and those who wanted to fight harder. Both groups disliked the way the war was being fought and desired "a quick end to it and are opposed to a long war of attrition." But Lippman believed that a lack of support

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<sup>169</sup>"Vietnam: Still on the Escalator," 27.

<sup>170</sup>"A Look Ahead by the Republicans," *U.S. News & World Report*, 17 January 1966, 72.

for the draft was even more telling than the polls--for in the draft actual lives were at stake. Unlike World War I, World War II, or even Korea, Vietnam was "neither popular nor fashionable to volunteer for."<sup>171</sup> (*Newsweek*, in 1967, would argue further that the draft was perceived as unfair and that there was no stigma attached to escaping it via the National Guard.)<sup>172</sup>

Opposition to financing the war by means of a surcharge on income tax also indicated a lack of support. One polling question on this issue in 1966 found that almost three quarters of respondents would not support such a tax; a mere 9 percent said "yes."<sup>173</sup> Such data show that support for the war, though widespread, was "soft" and limited.

Vietnam festered. *U.S. News* reported in the summer of 1966 that the war was "the No. 1 concern of people in every section of the country. Nobody seems to be happy about what is happening in Vietnam or about the policies of the White House in that war."<sup>174</sup> *Newsweek*, agreeing that Vietnam was "one of the most pervasive issues in the country," said flatly: "The public is obviously discouraged by the course of the war." Support for President Johnson's war handling had slipped to 42 percent,

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<sup>171</sup>Walter Lippmann, "The Polls and the War," *Newsweek*, 4 July 1966, 13.

<sup>172</sup>"Among Vietnam's Victims: The Draft," *Newsweek*, 10 July 1967, 42.

<sup>173</sup>"Higher Taxes for War? Poll Result: 'No,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, 5 December 1966, 11. The poll results are per Gallup.

<sup>174</sup>"What's Bothering Americans--As Told to Congress," *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 August 1966, 56.



from a 65 percent approval rating in October 1965.<sup>175</sup> The public remained confused. A Stanford University poll, also in the summer, found that some 70 percent of Americans couldn't identify the Viet Cong as South Vietnamese communists.<sup>176</sup>

Impatience continued to grow as 1966 passed into 1967. A February Gallup poll revealed that two-thirds of Americans wanted to continue the bombing of North Vietnam, the most common reason given being a desire to end the war.<sup>177</sup> And the *Wall Street Journal*, in May 1967, wrote that "the cooing of the doves and the crying of the hawks are even louder now, as more Americans begin to abandon indecision and settle on one side or the other in the fierce debate over Vietnam." President Johnson found himself caught "in a cross fire" from both sides. Nevertheless, his war-handling approval rate had increased to 43 percent, up from March's 37 percent, but down from 50 percent a year earlier. The *Journal* speculated that these changes might reflect a nation which was becoming more hawkish.<sup>178</sup>

The *Journal* went on to argue that the poll numbers didn't show the "passions now generated by the war." Interviews conducted by the *Journal* showed that those

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<sup>175</sup>"How Much of the Way with LBJ?" *Newsweek*, 26 September 1966, 26-27. The poll results are per Gallup.

<sup>176</sup>"Saigon Follies," *Newsweek*, 15 August 1966, 56.

<sup>177</sup>"U.S. Bombing of North Vietnam Is Backed by 67% in Gallup Poll," *New York Times*, 27 February 1967, 2.

<sup>178</sup>"The Split in the U.S. over Vietnam Deepens As Conflict Intensifies," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 1967, 1. The statistics are per Gallup. Also see "Criticism of War Mounts: Survey Finds Discontent," *New York Times*, 8 October 1967, 1, 42.

who approved of Johnson's war policies were in fact "lukewarm" in their support--often "frustrated" and "uneasy"--whereas dissidents were "increasingly vociferous and open." The *Journal* believed that the unrest seen in academia and among the clergy was being "mirrored, to an increasing degree, among the public."<sup>179</sup>

Opening up the possibilities of a racial divide, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., excoriated the war in the spring of 1967, calling it "morally and politically unjust." Meanwhile, John Kenneth Galbraith, the prominent Harvard economist, predicted that divisions opened by the war might mean the death of the Democratic Party.<sup>180</sup>

#### Tet 'Before and After': A Comparison

To return to the main issue: Was the Tet offensive a turning point in public attitudes toward the war?

The answer would seem to be "no." The preceding has sought to show the historical context of the years leading up to Tet. That context suggests rising discontent and uneasiness, though opposition still was limited if by "opposition" one means demands for a unilateral withdrawal. However, this opposition was increasingly outspoken whereas support for the war was "soft."

The following analysis will attempt to compare the pre-Tet period with the period immediately following Tet. One problem posed by the polling data is the

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid.

<sup>180</sup>"Sign of Erosion," *Newsweek*, 10 April 1967, 32.

difficulty in finding questions that show continuity over time; put more simply, all too often the wording of certain questions was altered, or the questions were dropped altogether. The statistical part of this analysis will therefore focus on questions that were not necessarily the most precise, in terms of measuring support for the war, but which were asked both before and after Tet.

Three categories of questions fit these criteria: first, the approval rate for Johnson's handling of the war; second, the percentage of respondents who believed America's initial entrance into the Vietnam War was mistaken; third, the ratio of hawks to doves. None of these three categories of questions, by themselves, can approximate a true understanding of public support for the war; but taken together, and when examined alongside other data, they support the contention that Tet was not "the turning point"--war weariness had been growing before Tet. Tet increased, but did not substantially alter, trends that were already in place.

1. Johnson's war-handling approval rate. When graphed, the approval rate for Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War as measured by the Gallup poll, much like a bad stock, shows a line that oscillates up and down but whose overall trend snakes downward. In September 1967, Johnson's approval rating reached a new low of 37 percent, followed by a 35 percent approval rating in November; by year's end, it had

rebounded to 40 percent. In January 1968, on the eve of Tet, his war approval rating stood at a meager 39 percent.<sup>181</sup>

Overall, Johnson's approval rating for his management of the war had eroded dramatically since 1965; the Tet offensive resulted in further erosion. His approval rate sank to 26 percent in March 1968,<sup>182</sup> a decline of 13 percent from his pre-Tet rating. This dramatic decline can only be understood fully in the context of the times: broken dreams of progress, the most recent being the Johnson administration's progress claims of late 1967;<sup>183</sup> Johnson's own problems with credibility (data on his so-called "credibility gap" could fill a volume);<sup>184</sup> and the mounting frustration with a limited far-off war that was confusing, increasingly costly, and seemingly endless. In October 1967 the *New York Times*, in interpreting various polling data, had said: "The word that appeared most often in explanations of declining Vietnam support was 'frustration,' a combination of shame that American military might was

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<sup>181</sup>See respectively *Gallup Opinion Index* 30 (December 1967): 29; 31 (January 1968): 3; 32 (February 1968): 3; 35 (May 1968): 2; and *U.S. News & World Report*, 26 February 1968, 19.

<sup>182</sup>*Time*, 5 April 1968, 19. The statistics are per Gallup.

<sup>183</sup>See e.g., the comments of General Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker cited in "Whose Benefit, Whose Doubt?" *Newsweek*, 13 November 1967, 68, 73.

<sup>184</sup>See e.g., Paul Martin, "If You Wonder How the U.S. Got into the War in Vietnam," *U.S. News & World Report*, 13 September 1965, 56-62; "The Affection Gap," *Time*, 23 September 1966, 21-22; Charles Roberts, "LBJ's Credibility Gap," *Newsweek*, 19 December 1966, 24-26; "Flak from Hanoi," *Time*, 6 January 1967, 13-14; Kenneth Crawford, "Gap Prone," *Newsweek*, 25 September 1967, 39.

unavailing, a feeling of helplessness to affect events and a growing conviction that the President had not been entirely frank about the war.”<sup>185</sup>

This excerpt from the *Times* aptly frames the Tet offensive in its historical context; however, the *Times*' use of the phrase “declining Vietnam support” was perilous and ambiguous. Did this term mean frustration? A loss of patience with current policies? Or a desire for unilateral withdrawal? As will be seen shortly, only the first two explanations were warranted by the data. Johnson's declining ratings for his management of the war reflected, above all, frustration over the administration's lack of progress in Vietnam.

2. The “Vietnam . . . mistake” trend line. Quite logically, pollster Burns Roper believed the best way to judge the long-term impact of Tet on public opinion was to put it into context--i.e., to examine how the nation perceived this setback in relation to the entire Vietnam War. More arguably, he held that the single best question ever devised to address this issue was the following: “In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?”<sup>186</sup> One problem with this question is that increasing frustration with the war did not necessarily translate into a desire for unilateral withdrawal. As one housewife said, “I want to get out, but I don't

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<sup>185</sup>“Criticism of War Mounts: Survey Finds Discount,” *New York Times*, 8 October 1967, 42.

<sup>186</sup>Burns Roper, in Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:678-679, 702.

want to give up.” Stanley Karnow correctly points out that a majority of Americans wanted escalation in late 1967<sup>187</sup>--a November 1967 survey revealing that while 44 percent wanted a complete or gradual withdrawal, 55 percent wanted escalation of the war.<sup>188</sup> Of course escalation did not necessarily mean an invasion of the north, although a separate poll found that a minority of Americans--39 percent--approved of that plan.<sup>189</sup>

It is true that Roper never *did* argue that those who agreed that Vietnam was a "mistake" necessarily supported immediate U.S. withdrawal. But then what exactly was the poll question measuring--aside from frustration? Whatever the case, Roper wrote that the "mistake" category rose from 45 percent in December of 1967 to 49 percent in March of 1968. This 4 percent rise was "noticeable" but only a small part of a 38 point increase between August 1965 and May 1971. It was thus but "a minor ripple in a steadily changing public attitude toward our involvement in the war." Like Peter Braestrup, Roper concluded that the true impact of Tet was on American elites--including the media, the bureaucracy, and the Congress--rather than on the American public.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam*, 488.

<sup>188</sup>Mueller, 90 cf. p. 88.

<sup>189</sup>William P. Hansen, ed., *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, vol. 3 (New York: Random House, 1972), 2094.

<sup>190</sup>Roper, in Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:691-2, 697-699, 703; Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:671.

3. The hawk-dove trend line. The third test of Tet's significance is the hawk-dove trend line. This poll asked if individuals considered themselves hawks or doves and defined these terms this way: "People are called 'hawks' if they want to step-up our military effort in Vietnam. They are called 'doves' if they want to reduce our military efforts in Vietnam." Unfortunately, the general public was not directly asked this question until December 1967--though the 55 percent who wanted escalation in November 1967 were hawks according to the definition given here. In December, 52 percent of respondents called themselves hawks, 35 percent doves, and in late January 1968, 56 and 28 percent, respectively, called themselves hawks and doves.<sup>191</sup>

The post-Tet numbers showed a drastic swing: An additional 3 percent labelled themselves hawks in early February, while the percentage of doves dropped by 5 percent--in response to what Burns Roper called the "rally round" effect. But then hawkish sentiment ran the other way, declining well below pre-Tet levels to a 41 versus 42 percent hawk-dove ratio in March 1968. Compared to late January levels, hawks had declined dramatically by 15 percentage points.<sup>192</sup>

The significance of this swing is controversial. John E. Mueller, author of *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, argues that these numbers deceive: after LBJ announced a bombing pause and then began intense peace efforts, he in effect became

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<sup>191</sup>John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973), 90, 107; cf. 87-89. The statistics are per Gallup.

<sup>192</sup>Roper, in Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:691-692, 703; Mueller, *Public Opinion*, 107. The statistics are per Gallup.

a “dove” in terms of the polling question. Thus (argues Mueller) the President’s followers now felt free to think like doves. The changes recorded by pollsters, therefore, came largely as a result of Johnson’s own shift in policy; Tet’s effect on the hawk-dove ratio was indirect and secondary rather than direct and primary.<sup>193</sup>

Certainly, this analysis helps explain the more-or-less permanent nature of the changes seen on the hawk-dove trend line; by November 1969, only 31 percent considered themselves hawks,<sup>194</sup> while even President Nixon could be considered a dove according to the wording of the polling question. Yet there are certain obvious problems with Mueller’s explanation. The March poll, which showed such a marked decline in hawkish sentiment, was in fact asked between March 16-20--*before* Johnson’s speech of March 31, which announced the bombing pause and his intention to seek a negotiated settlement. Moreover, before that speech Johnson had not evidenced any dovish tendencies; for example, on March 18, in an address to a convention of the National Farmers Union in Minneapolis, Johnson had called for a “total national effort to win the war.”<sup>195</sup>

This change in the hawk-dove ratio, recorded in March, was therefore primary rather than secondary. And it was a dramatic change--a “turning point” in the responses for this polling question. Yet the question is imprecise in terms of

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<sup>193</sup>Mueller, *Public Opinion*, 106.

<sup>194</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>195</sup>Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 350.



measuring support for the war. A decrease in hawks, and a concomitant increase in doves, only suggests that hopes for a military solution had been spoiled by Tet; hence a greater emphasis on ending the war (or at least U.S. involvement) through negotiations, de-escalation, or other peaceful means. The change in the hawk-dove trend line did *not* mean a sudden, massive upsurge in those advocating unilateral withdrawal. Rather, the change meant an acknowledgement of the reality of the battlefield: stalemate, with no military solution in sight.

Even in June 1969, more than a year after Tet, only 29 percent of Americans favored immediate unilateral withdrawal; in February 1970, 35 percent. A related question, which gave as a second option gradual withdrawal within approximately a year's time, was positively received by 41 percent of respondents in the February 1970 poll (19 percent chose immediate withdrawal, 22 percent, gradual). However, these numbers were "soft." Mueller notes that any supposed consensus for a quick withdrawal fell apart when the polling question was changed to add that South Vietnam would fall to the communists in the event of a pullout; and support for withdrawal vanished when the question mentioned possible harm to American prisoners of war. This, Mueller argues pointedly, highlights the effectiveness of the " 'support our boys in Vietnam' slogan" that was constantly thrown in the face of politicians who dared oppose the war.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup>Mueller, *Public Opinion*, 92, 94, 95, 99-100. The statistics are per Gallup.

How does one interpret all of this? The waters, like everything regarding the Vietnam War, remain murky. But if only a minority of Americans supported an invasion of North Vietnam *before* Tet, how did Tet change things? For an invasion was the only realistic (though foolhardy) way of breaking the stalemate. The data strongly suggest a rising tide of frustration against the war and a desire to gradually wind down our involvement--but that was true before Tet. Tet accelerated the frustration but was not alone responsible for it. Tet did not result in a sudden withering cry for an immediate unilateral withdrawal. Tet was merely part of a larger context--a road that led ever downward to an abyss of bitterness, division, anger, and despair. In sum, though Tet had a significant effect on public opinion, it was far from the war's "turning point."

CHAPTER 7  
THE TET OFFENSIVE: A TURNING POINT  
FOR THE U.S. SENATE?

Because of its smaller size, greater prestige, and enhanced opportunities for debate, the U.S. Senate, rather than the House of Representatives, offers the best opportunity to review changes in congressional attitudes toward the Vietnam War. This survey of the Senate's opinions and legislative actions on the war will suggest that the Tet offensive did not mark a turning point in the Senate's attitudes toward the war. Rather, Tet proved a stalking ground for venting frustration. Tet disturbed many senators--just as it disturbed many Americans. But the Senate was disturbed before Tet. Despite all the angry rhetoric, the avalanche of words, Tet did not result in cries for unilateral withdrawal; nor did it result in decisive legislative action against the war. For the Senate, Tet did not constitute "the turning point" of the Vietnam War.

Throughout his tenure in office, President Johnson felt free to invoke the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (more formally known as the Southeast Asia Resolution) as proof of the legitimacy of his administration's actions in Vietnam. The 1964 resolution, introduced and ushered to victory by Senator William J. Fulbright, Chair of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would later encounter bitter

opposition from its sponsor. In his book *The Crippled Giant*, Fulbright averred that despite the open-ended wording of the legislation, it was never his intent, or the intent of Congress, to authorize "commitment of the armed forces to full-scale war in Asia." Fulbright argued that the resolution's passage needed to be framed in the context of President Johnson's contemporaneous statements on Vietnam. Among them: "We are not about to send American boys 9,000 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."<sup>197</sup>

Fulbright also argued that the Senate believed its passage of the resolution, far from provoking a larger war, would actually forestall one (presumably by stopping aggression immediately; Fulbright did not make his point clear). Fulbright added that not only he, but Senators Frank Church, Kenneth Keating, and Gaylord Nelson, in addition to Senator Richard Russell of Georgia (Chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee), had all agreed that no "blank check" was being issued for Asia. Despite these protestations, Fulbright had scuttled a proposed amendment, sponsored by Senator Nelson, which sought to expressly prohibit military action-- Fulbright arguing that an amendment would make it necessary to reconcile differences in the resolution with the House, thus squandering precious time in an election year.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup>William J. Fulbright, *The Crippled Giant* (New York: Random House, 1972), 190-191. The term "blank check" is attributed to Senator Keating, although other senators also used this phrase during the debate.

<sup>198</sup>*Ibid.*, 189-191; McGovern, *Grassroots*, 103.

An examination of the Senate's proceedings on August 6 and 7, 1964, corroborates Fulbright's contention that several senators openly worried that the declaration would become the equivalent of an authorization of war. In addition to the five senators mentioned, Senators John Cooper, Daniel Brewster, Wayne Morse, and Ernest Gruening, among others, expressed anxiety on this point.<sup>199</sup> Fulbright responded that the resolution did give the President the authority to wage war, but that permission could always be withdrawn through another concurrent resolution. Others may have remained silent about their misgivings during the floor proceedings; Senator Albert Gore later concurred that the resolution was not an authorization of war.<sup>200</sup> Senator George McGovern wrote in his autobiography that although the resolution had made him "uneasy," he had been reassured by Fulbright, who had insisted that LBJ needed assistance against Goldwater, and that the resolution represented support for the President's more limited response to communist aggression--as opposed to Goldwater's calls for massive bombing.<sup>201</sup>

Whether these senators' fears represented a majority or minority view is not known--certainly most of the senators could not have predicted that the resolution

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<sup>199</sup>*Congressional Record*, 88th Cong., 1st sess. (6 and 7 August 1964), vol. 110, pt. 14, 18409-18410, 18458-18459, 18469; Galloway, *Tonkin Resolution*, 87-91.

<sup>200</sup>Albert Gore, *The Eye of the Storm: A People's Politics for the Seventies*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 9.

<sup>201</sup>Goldwater, *Grassroots*, 103-104.

would lead to a 500,000-man commitment. In the end, the resolution passed in the Senate by an 88-2 margin, only Senators Morse and Ernest Gruening opposing.<sup>202</sup>

One issue that arose in the proceedings, and would later rise again like the waves of a treacherous sea, was this: the idea that a vote for the resolution was a show of support for the President in a time of crisis, just as later votes for funding would be construed as a demonstration of support for the President and our soldiers in a time of war. Senator Russell, who had in fact opposed U.S. intervention in Vietnam as late as May 1964, said in the debate over the Tonkin Resolution that while he questioned the original intervention, that was not now the issue: "Our national honor is at stake"--the U.S. must retain the right to operate in international waters.<sup>203</sup>

As time went by, some senators began to attack the President for his alleged duplicity. Gore claimed that he had been duped into believing our ships were victims of an "unprovoked attack."<sup>204</sup> And in late 1967 Republican Senator Clifford Case, usually known for his mild-mannered sincerity, blasted Johnson for creating "a crisis of confidence" by his "misuse," even "perversion," of the Tonkin Resolution. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, softer in his criticism, replied truthfully that the Senate too was responsible: "I am not happy about the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. I

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<sup>202</sup>*Congressional Record*, 88th Cong., 1st sess. (7 August 1964), vol. 110, pt. 14, 18469.

<sup>203</sup>Quoted in Gilbert C. Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr.: Senator from Georgia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 439.

<sup>204</sup>Gore, *Eye of the Storm*, 8. Gore left open the possibility that Johnson too had been deceived.

am not happy about the Vietnam war. But it is too late now to point the finger of blame."<sup>205</sup> After Tet, Fulbright began hearings to determine whether the Tonkin incident represented a ruse to widen the war or a North Vietnamese mistake misinterpreted as an act of aggression. (The findings were inconclusive.<sup>206</sup>) President Nixon would later sign a law which repealed the resolution, though he and his congressional supporters stated that the resolution was not necessary to wage war.<sup>207</sup>

#### Early Doubts

As President Johnson moved toward a wider U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, a number of congressmen were reportedly resistant; Johnson was said to have overcome their doubts through private briefings.<sup>208</sup> Leadership in the Senate was divided over the major increase in ground troops initiated by Johnson in July 1965. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen supported the escalation. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield led the opposition; Armed Services Chairman Richard Russell also wanted to get out of Vietnam, perhaps using a regime change as a pretext. Yet

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<sup>205</sup>John W. Finney, "Johnson Assailed in Senate by Case for War Conduct," *New York Times*, 27 September 1967, 1, 14.

<sup>206</sup>Macdonald, *Giap*, 297.

<sup>207</sup>Fulbright, *Crippled Giant*, 181-182.

<sup>208</sup>"Southeast Asia: The Waiting Game," *Newsweek*, 15 March 1965, 25.

neither Mansfield nor Dirksen was prepared to reopen the issue of our presence in Vietnam, fearing it might prove divisive.<sup>209</sup>

Beneath the placid surface, doubts percolated. In August, one anonymous senator--like Cassandra wailing from her tower of doom--made this prophetic prediction:

We shall have to take over more and more. We shall have to do the fighting to keep from losing. There will be U.S. casualty lists growing longer. As each Senator gets closer to the Vietnam situation, he gets more and more disturbed. We cannot maintain a policy of defending every square foot of Asia against the Communists.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to Morse and Gruening, who alone had voted against the Tonkin Resolution, other senators began to bring their doubts into the open. In the spring of 1965 Fulbright suggested the merits of a bombing pause; Church, afraid of Chinese intervention, was calling for negotiations; George Aiken, a Republican, scolded: "It is plainly evident now that unless reason returns to the world we will be headed into the most devastating conflict the world has ever known. . . ." Mansfield, whose position as majority leader may have prevented a formal break with the President over Vietnam, was a constant voice of moderation.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup>McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 191.

<sup>210</sup>"Chances for Peace in Vietnam?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 August 1965, 31.

<sup>211</sup>"U.S. Voices of Dissent on Vietnam Policy Grow Louder," *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 May 1965, 4.



As 1965 drew to a close, other open critics of ongoing escalation included Senator Stephen Young, who claimed Vietnam lay outside our sphere of interest and that the Vietnamese were involved in a civil war; he called for negotiations as a prelude to a pullout. After a recent tour of Vietnam, McGovern professed himself a convert of sorts: now he believed military victory was possible, but such a victory would be pyrrhic due to South Vietnam's political instability; the Viet Cong might take control of the government even if South Vietnam emerged victorious on the battlefield.<sup>212</sup>

But "doubt" did not always mean a desire for de-escalation. Senator Joseph Tydings said, "The war is reaching home," and confessed confusion as to our war aims. Yet he did not call for de-escalation at that time. Senator Thomas Dodd believed that the war would become a political issue in 1966--on "how the war had been waged, rather than whether we should be there."<sup>213</sup> In January 1966, Senator Russell echoed this sentiment on the Senate floor, exhorting the administration to take "the action necessary to win the war in Vietnam and bring a conclusion to our commitment."<sup>214</sup> In a May 1966 interview, he expressed the issue more viscerally: We should "go in and win--or get out."<sup>215</sup> The *New York Times* called him a

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<sup>212</sup>"What Congressmen Found in Vietnam," *U.S. News & World Report*, 3 January 1966, 25, 30.

<sup>213</sup>*Ibid.*, 28, 31.

<sup>214</sup>Quoted in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 228.

<sup>215</sup>Quoted in Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr.*, 449.

“dawk” for saying so--a hybrid between a dove and a hawk due to his pacific and bellicose tendencies; it noted that his opposition to U.S. involvement in the war dated back to 1954.<sup>216</sup> Now that the U.S. was involved, Russell--who believed his opinion corresponded with that of the average American--wanted a quick win.

### The Air War

The various emotions that erupted over the bombing campaign against North Vietnam marked a fault line in the Senate's attitudes toward the war. Doves and hawks, both in Congress and among the American public, lined up on opposite sides of this divide. Henry Kissinger, in his memoirs *The White House Years*, makes the excellent point that a bombing halt had become the focus of opposition to the war because it was one step we could take “unilaterally” and there was always hope it would lead to negotiations.<sup>217</sup> The flip side of this argument was that *escalating* the bombing was a unilateral step which appealed to hawks, because it might lead to a more rapid conclusion of the war.

President Johnson was squeezed between these two factions. As a result, one detects in administration policy concerning the air war the same vacillation seen in the war as a whole, President Johnson oscillating between bombing pauses and increases in the intensity of the bombing.

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<sup>216</sup>Tom Wicker, “Senator Russell: ‘Win or Get Out,’ ” *New York Times*, 1 May 1966, sec. IV, p. 3.

<sup>217</sup>Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 237.

On March 2, 1965, Johnson unleashed a continual air assault against North Vietnam, code-named Operation Rolling Thunder. The staff of the U.S. Pacific Headquarters, based in Honolulu, predicted the air war's withering assaults would destroy North Vietnam's ability to wage war in the south within twelve days. By July 1966, this prediction had proven precipitous; the air war clearly wasn't working, so Johnson lifted some restrictive requirements, permitting bombing of oil and ammunition depots. In the spring of 1967, he broadened the target list yet again, allowing U.S. warplanes to attack plants, airfields, and factories in and around Hanoi and Haiphong; he also granted permission to mine the harbors of the north.<sup>218</sup> In 1967, some MIG bases came under attack for the first time; in August, the U.S. began bombing rail lines close to the Chinese border,<sup>219</sup> and two American planes were shot down over China.<sup>220</sup> This limited and gradually intensifying air war of 1965-1967 was punctuated by repeated bombing pauses. After one such pause in early 1966, *Time* claimed almost half of Senate Democrats "are known" to desire continuing the suspension.<sup>221</sup> Other Democrats, most prominently Senator Russell, continued to call for escalation.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup>Macdonald, *Giap*, 234.

<sup>219</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 921.

<sup>220</sup>"Racing the Monsoon," *Time*, 1 September 1967, 18.

<sup>221</sup>"The String Runs Out," *Time*, 4 February 1966, 21.

<sup>222</sup>"Broader Bombing Urged by Russell: Georgia Democrat Calls for the Sealing of Haiphong," *New York Times*, 27 April 1966, 5.

In general, Republicans tended to be hawkish on the air war. On August 23, 1967, Senator Jack Miller (Republican of Iowa) raged that the American people wouldn't support a needlessly protracted war. Yet over the past eighteen months, more and more Americans had begun to believe that the bombing wasn't working, "not because of the failure of our air and sea power, but because of the failure of the administration in its conduct of the war to permit our air and sea power to be used against highly significant military targets."<sup>223</sup>

In its review of the Vietnam War, the non-partisan *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* reported that "Viet Nam was the dominant issue facing the United States in 1967." LBJ's war policies had

divided Democrats, Republicans, the public and even the Administration itself. The opposition centered on U.S. bombing of North Viet Nam. The opposition also was divided, however, between those favoring a reduction in the bombing, in [the] hope that it would lead to negotiations, and those favoring increased bombing in search of a decisive military victory. There seemed to be little effective support for the extreme alternatives of unilateral withdrawal or massive escalation.<sup>224</sup>

#### The Preparedness Subcommittee

The deep division between hawks and doves over the air war played itself out in the committees, in particular the hawkish Preparedness Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, chaired by Democratic Senator John Stennis, and the

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<sup>223</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (23 August 1967), vol. 113, pt. 18, 23775.

<sup>224</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 917.

more pacific Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by another Democrat, Senator William J. Fulbright. The membership roll of Stennis' subcommittee included, in 1967, five Democrats, generally from conservative states, and three Republicans: John Stennis, D-Mississippi; Stuart Symington, D-Missouri; Henry "Scoop" Jackson, D-Washington; Howard Cannon, D-Nevada; Robert Byrd, D-West Virginia; Margaret Chase Smith, R-Maine; Strom Thurmond, R-South Carolina; and Jack Miller, R-Iowa.<sup>225</sup>

In his recently published memoirs, *In Retrospect*, President Johnson's former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argues that the Preparedness Subcommittee took a "hard line" on the air war in 1967, repeatedly criticizing the administration's bombing policy. In the spring, Senator Symington denounced the administration's policy of forbidding attacks on Hanoi's MIG bases, while the Preparedness Subcommittee, to which he belonged, released a report calling for increased bombing. McNamara ignored these pleas; when the subcommittee discovered in June, through information supplied by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Johnson intended to pursue McNamara's advice to continue with a policy of *limited* bombing, the subcommittee--in McNamara's words--"went on the warpath," scheduling testimony regarding the efficacy of the air war from military leaders and from McNamara himself.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup>McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 284.

<sup>226</sup>Ibid, 284-285; "Hanoi Strengthens LBJ's Hand," *Newsweek*, 10 April 1967, 31-32.

Stennis, in his opening remarks to the August 1967 hearings, warned flatly: “Step up the bombing or get out”; he also worried that continuing the bombing at current levels would drag on the war “for years to come.” Challenging the administration’s policy of limited war and gradual escalation, he questioned the wisdom of sending more troops in view of restrictions placed on the air war.<sup>227</sup>

McNamara later called the August hearings “one of the most stressful periods in my life.”<sup>228</sup> Witnesses included Marine Commander Wallace M. Greene; Admiral Ulysses S. G. Sharpe, Commander in Chief of U.S. Pacific forces; General John P. McConnell, Chief of Staff of the Air Force; and General Earle E. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>229</sup> The witnesses complained about the Johnson administration’s limitations on the air war, complex rules of procedure, and micro-management from Washington. General McConnell believed that the air war, correctly waged, would be “most likely to force the enemy to reconsider his avowed road. . . . He cannot escape the reality that we have the controlling instrument of military power.” General Wheeler argued that fifty-seven additional bombing targets selected by the Chiefs were worth attacking, “no question.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup>“The Pressures Mount,” *Time*, 18 August 1967, 17.

<sup>228</sup>McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 284.

<sup>229</sup>“Senate Unit Asks Johnson to Widen Bombing in North,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1967, 11.

<sup>230</sup>Strom Thurmond, *The Faith We Have Not Kept* (San Diego, CA: Loeffler, 1968), 62; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 929.

In stark contrast, Secretary of Defense McNamara testified that bombing, by itself, had not worked, could not work in a society which was predominately agricultural. Victory could only come on the ground in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, he added, the air war had been “successful” given its stated objectives; South Vietnam’s spirits had rallied, and the North Vietnamese were “pay[ing] a high price for their continued aggression. . . .” But cutting off the flow of goods to the south or ending Hanoi’s will to fight would not be possible in the absence of systematic targeting of the civilian population.<sup>231</sup>

Senator Symington, who would soon become a proponent of de-escalation,<sup>232</sup> conceded that *if* McNamara were correct, we should withdraw “at the earliest possible time and the best possible basis.” But the subcommittee’s August 31 report did not contain such qualifications; the unanimous report attacked McNamara’s “gradualism” and extended enthusiastic support to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their desire for an escalation of the war. The report also called for the blockading of the port of Haiphong and bombing “all meaningful targets with a military significance.” It concluded: McNamara had “shackled” the air war, and without significant changes the senators of the subcommittee could not “in good conscience ask our ground forces to continue the fight in South Vietnam.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup>“McNamara on Bombing the North,” *Time*, 1 September 1967, 19; also see Oberdorfer, 96-97 and *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 929.

<sup>232</sup>Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 329.

<sup>233</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 930.

The report was a damning statement of “no confidence” in the administration’s policies of limited war, attrition, and gradual escalation. Yet, significantly, the report issued no call for a grand invasion of North Vietnam. The senators apparently believed (or at least hoped) that unleashing the air war alone would prove the deciding factor in Vietnam.

Stressful as they may have been, the hearings did not force McNamara to back down. In a memo to the President in late October, he requested that the U.S. “stabilize our efforts” in Vietnam and institute a bombing pause. But Johnson (who quipped, “We were murdered in the hearings”) blinked, approving more bombing targets. And soon McNamara was on his way out, eased into the leadership of the World Bank.<sup>234</sup>

#### The Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Senator William J. Fulbright’s Foreign Relations Committee was a dovish reverse image of Stennis’ Preparedness Subcommittee. In early 1966 its membership included thirteen Democrats and five Republicans. Doves included Fulbright, D-Arkansas; Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, D-Montana; Joseph Clark, D-Pennsylvania; Albert Gore, D-Tennessee; Eugene McCarthy, D-Minnesota; Wayne Morse, D-Oregon; and to a lesser extent Clairborne Pell, D-Rhode Island, and George Aiken, R-Vermont. Hawks included Thomas Dodd, D-Connecticut; Frank Laushe,

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<sup>234</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam*, 509-510; Johnson is quoted by McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 284.



D-Ohio; Russell Long, D-Louisiana (Long was also Democratic “Whip”); John Sparkman, D-Alabama; Stuart Symington, D-Missouri; Bourke Hickenlooper, R-Iowa; and Karl Mundt, R-South Dakota. Frank Carlson, R-Kansas, and Clifford Case, R-New Jersey, either agreed with the President in early 1966 or hadn’t said anything that could be construed as inimical to the administration’s war policy.<sup>235</sup>

In January and February of 1966, Fulbright oversaw televised public hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on a military supplementary authorization bill requested by the President. Stacking the deck in the proceedings, Fulbright invited such administration critics as General James Gavin, who outlined his “enclave strategy” aimed at limiting U.S. casualties by stationing soldiers in fortified bases on the South Vietnamese coast, and George Kennan, former ambassador to Yugoslavia and the USSR and author of the influential “containment” doctrine. Kennan, whose doctrine had been used by many in the Cold War era as a club against communist expansion, now cautiously remarked that escalation of the Vietnam War was undesirable, calling for a quick end to the war and warning of conflict with China.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup>William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988), 53. Dove/hawk allegiances would of course shift over time, and the composition of the committee itself would shift. There was a vacancy in early 1966; by 1967 Senator John Cooper (R) would join the Committee, and Senator Russell Long (D) would be replaced by Senator John Williams (R). *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 947.

<sup>236</sup>Berman, *Fulbright*, 56.

Fulbright was on a crusade to end the war. At the beginning of 1967 he released *Arrogance of Power*, which outlined an eight-point peace plan for Vietnam; the salient points included a halt to the air war, a reduction in military operations, participation of the National Liberation Front in peace talks, a referendum on reunification, and "neutralization" of South Vietnam--that is to say, de-politicizing the conflict by removing Vietnam from the status of pawn in the global chess game being waged by the Soviet Union, China, and the United States.<sup>237</sup>

Fulbright celebrated the new year not only through verbal pyrotechnics but also by holding new hearings, this time on the "responsibilities of the United States as a great power." Kennan made another star appearance, arguing that communist unity had unravelled in recent years; "for the first time perhaps since 1917, real and hopeful possibilities" had emerged for the United States to arrive at peaceful coexistence with the communist world. Former ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer also testified against the idea of a unified communist threat; regarding China and its supposed designs on Southeast Asia, he averred that the U.S. had "overestimated" the military and political power of Red China. "Even excluding their [*sic*] current troubles, Communist China has never had the industrial base to back a military effort for any considerable distance." Henry Steele Commager, professor of history at Amherst

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<sup>237</sup>William J. Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1966), 188-197. The first listed copyright is 1966; the *Congressional Quarterly*, in mentioning January 23, 1967, was referring to a release date. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 927; Berman, *Fulbright*, 76.

College, called Vietnam a “misguided adventure” and declared that academic disillusionment over the war had “lost us the moral leadership of the world.”<sup>238</sup>

Although it would be simplistic to posit a strict cause-and-effect relationship between these hearings and changes in the committee members’ positions on administration policy, such hearings, in conjunction with public frustration, mounting casualties, and the onward press of time, must have had a cumulative effect. Senator Pell<sup>239</sup> moved more solidly into the dove’s camp as did Senator Aiken.<sup>240</sup> Case began questioning the war after the ’67 hearings. In his view the war represented an unjustified expansion of executive authority, while the U.S. had usurped South Vietnam’s responsibility to protect itself; the war, moreover, could not be won without destroying South Vietnam and weakening America.<sup>241</sup> In May 1967, Senator Symington, previously a hawk, warned of a ground war in North Vietnam.<sup>242</sup> And on August 28 he seconded an appeal by Mansfield to turn over settlement of the war to the United Nations. Two months later he went further: The U.S., he urged his

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<sup>238</sup>Ibid., 950.

<sup>239</sup>Hedrick Smith, “U.S. Warns China on Vietnam War,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1967, 3.

<sup>240</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (2 May 1967), vol. 113, pt. 9, 11436-11437; James S. Olson, ed., *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 10, 11.

<sup>241</sup>Olson, 66-67; *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (9 October 1967), vol. 113, pt. 21, 28207-28208, 28212-28213. Case, in October 1967, advocated gradual withdrawal and a new military strategy aimed at weakening the Viet Cong.

<sup>242</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (9 May 1967), vol. 113, pt. 9, 12113.

Senate colleagues, should specify a date on which all of our military actions in North and South Vietnam would terminate. If North Vietnam did not respond in kind, we could renew the war.<sup>243</sup>

Superficially, Symington seemed to contradict himself, for on August 31 (only two months before the above plea on the floor of the U.S. Senate) he had signed the Preparedness Subcommittee's report calling for an escalation of the air war. But this contradiction was only a surface one: Symington's deeper desire was for a quick end to the war. Symington, who had been Secretary of the Air Force from 1946-1950, sympathized deeply with American pilots' complaints about restrictions on the air war; Symington may have believed that their lives were more important than the ends sought by Johnson in a limited war. Symington would later become an influential spokesman for de-escalation in Vietnam.<sup>244</sup>

Senator John Cooper, new to the Foreign Relations Committee in 1967 but a long-time critic of the war, kicked off a long debate in the Senate at the beginning of October by calling for an unconditional bombing pause in the hopes that it would lead to negotiations.<sup>245</sup> Senator Lausche, heretofore a hawk, also advocated a bombing pause in 1967.<sup>246</sup> The *Congressional Quarterly* labeled Lausche a convert to the dove

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<sup>243</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 928.

<sup>244</sup>Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 329.

<sup>245</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (2 October 1967), vol. 113, pt. 20, 27441; also see p. 27449.

<sup>246</sup>"Drift & Dissent," *Time*, 11 August 1967, 9.

position as a result of this statement.<sup>247</sup> But this label was in error; Laushe continued to solidly support, even defend, the Johnson administration--this was true even after the Tet offensive. The 1967 positions of Senator Laushe and Senator Symington show the serious limitations of the helpful but overly broad terms "hawk" and "dove." Laushe and Symington advocated positions common to both camps--Symington calling for an escalation of the air war yet urging steps toward negotiation; Laushe calling for a bombing pause yet defending the administration. Laushe's stated purpose for a bombing pause, however, showed that he was no dove--he hoped that a pause would unite the nation behind the war and defuse enemies of the administration's war policy.<sup>248</sup>

#### Mounting Republican Opposition

Congressional committees were not the only focus of organized resistance to the administration's war policy. Increasingly, as the war dragged on, the Republican Party's support for the President unravelled. Despite his protestations over the duration of the war and the related malady of war-weariness ("There's fatigue in the country"),<sup>249</sup> Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen continued to support the

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<sup>247</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 939.

<sup>248</sup>"Hartke Says U.S. Weighs Invasion," *New York Times*, 7 October 1967, 2; John W. Finney, "Criticism of War Widens in Senate on Build-Up Issue," *New York Times*, 8 March 1968, 8.

<sup>249</sup>"A Look Ahead by the Republicans," 72; "Thunder from a Distant Hill," *Time*, 6 October 1967, 22.

administration, even after Tet. But he could not suppress his fellow Republicans from rising up in revolt. *Time* estimated in its October 6, 1967, issue that from ten to sixteen of the Senate's thirty-six Republicans were doves.<sup>250</sup> Although *Time* did not name all likely candidates for this designation, such a list at the end of 1967 would have included such administration critics as Senator Charles Percy of Illinois,<sup>251</sup> Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon,<sup>252</sup> Senator George Aiken of Vermont,<sup>253</sup> Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey,<sup>254</sup> Senator Jacob Javits of New York,<sup>255</sup> and Senators Thurston Morton<sup>256</sup> and John Cooper,<sup>257</sup> both of Kentucky.

*Time*, in its broad assessment of who might be doves, was not necessarily being lazy. Opinions were constantly in flux and some, such as Senator Percy, favored the ends that doves sought--i.e., a negotiated settlement and no further escalation--but not necessarily the means, Percy favoring limited bombing of North

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<sup>250</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>251</sup>Ibid.; "Into the Dovecote," *Newsweek*, 16 October 1967, 27.

<sup>252</sup>"Thunder from a Distant Hill," 24; "Long Says to 'Bear Down,'" *New York Times*, 16 January 1967, 8.

<sup>253</sup>See earlier comments on Aiken, pp. 93, 100, and 104 above.

<sup>254</sup>In addition to earlier comments regarding Case on pp. 91 and 104 above, see "Politics '68: Beyond the Water's Edge," *Newsweek*, 9 October 1967, 23.

<sup>255</sup>Richard Witkin, "Rockefeller Turning Away from Johnson on Vietnam," *New York Times*, 4 October 1967, 15.

<sup>256</sup>John W. Finney, "Dirksen Rebukes G.O.P. War Critics," *New York Times*, 4 October 1967, 16.

<sup>257</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 939.

Vietnam.<sup>258</sup> Senator Edmund Brooke of Massachusetts flip-flopped twice in 1967, announcing himself a convert to LBJ's war policy after a Vietnam tour. (In appreciation Johnson, ever the egotist, sent the greatest of gifts--an autographed picture of himself.<sup>259</sup>) In October, Brooke began to backslide, asking Johnson to rethink his bombing strategy and seek greater military commitment from South Vietnam.<sup>260</sup> By December he was calling for a bombing pause in the hope that it would lead to negotiations; even if this hope should prove illusory, he extolled the virtues of a halt which would help unify the American people, split the Viet Cong from their North Vietnamese patrons, and expose the Soviet Union as insincere supporters of peace in Vietnam.<sup>261</sup>

Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, like Morton a former Republican National Committee Chairman, signed with Percy and Javits a declaration calling for greater strides at a negotiated settlement and avoidance of a wider conflict; the declaration also called for the President to be more candid about the war. Yet later in the year Scott defended the President's war policy and--in direct questioning from Percy--contended that there was no contradiction between such support and his earlier

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<sup>258</sup>Ibid.

<sup>259</sup>John Henry Cutler, *Ed Brooke: Biography of a Senator* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), 235-236; John Herbers, "Brooke Shifts War View and Supports President," *New York Times*, 24 March 1967, 1-2.

<sup>260</sup>*New York Times*, 13 October 1967, 15.

<sup>261</sup>*New York Times*, 25 December 1967, 29.

declaration. ("I am no hawk," he would say. "I just don't want to be a pigeon.") Finally, even as unabashed a hawk as Senator John Tower of Texas said, in response to Scott's Senate speech, that America should "pursue any honorable means . . . to bring this terrible war to an end." This was not, however, a dovish statement, for the definition of "honorable" was flexible; he noted that American troops should only withdraw after South Vietnam's freedom was assured.<sup>262</sup> The point, once again, is that the definitions "hawk" and "dove" were slippery and mired in ambiguity.

What is clear is that Republican pressure against the administration's conduct of the war increased as the year dragged on. Republican Whip Thomas Kuchel of California warned Republican colleagues that calls for a unilateral bombing pause would redound to the benefit of North Vietnam.<sup>263</sup> And in defending the administration Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois had to take on not only the likes of Senator Fulbright<sup>264</sup> but, increasingly, criticism from his own party. Thus Dirksen launched a broadside attack against Senator Morton--one of the newest and brashest critics of the President, who had charged Johnson with being "brainwashed." Said Dirksen: "It don't (*sic*) look good and it don't sound good.

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<sup>262</sup>John W. Finney, "Bailey Says G.O.P. Uses War for Gain," *New York Times*, 10 October 1967, 1-2; *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (9 October 1967), vol. 113, pt. 21, 28203-28207.

<sup>263</sup>John W. Finney, "Dirksen Rebukes G.O.P. War Critics," *New York Times*, 4 October 1967, 16.

<sup>264</sup>"Dirksen vs. Fulbright--Confrontation in the Senate," *New York Times*, 8 October 1967, sec. IV, p. 1.



Have you heard the British demean their king or queen?" Demeaning the President was to "demean the prestige of this republic, and I don't mean to do it." Pounding on his desk while addressing the Senate, gray curls shaking, he warned that the communists were bent on world domination and that Vietnam was "our outside security line"--when it fell, the next line would be Alaska and Hawaii.<sup>265</sup>

Of course most Republicans were not doves but hawks. Though some hawks continued to support the President, this support became increasingly tenuous; often it fell apart. The criticism of the Republican members of the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee has already been mentioned. Other hawks also ridiculed the President. In late 1967, Senators Jack Miller of Iowa, Peter Dominick of Colorado, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, and George Murphy of California criticized Johnson, arguing for increased military pressure on North Vietnam, presumably through an intensification of the air war.<sup>266</sup> Even Senator Tower, an administration supporter, pleaded for a "new policy to shorten the war. . . . Instead of gradualism we need decisiveness. Instead of vacillation we must have victory."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup>Finney, "Dirksen Rebukes G.O.P. War Critics," 1, 16. In the early fall Morton had also called for gradual withdrawal "if necessary unilaterally." Hedrick Smith, "Morton Assails Johnson on War," *New York Times*, 28 September 1967, 1-2.

<sup>266</sup>John W. Finney, "Cooper Bids U.S. Keep War in South," *New York Times*, 3 October 1967, 2. *Time* estimated that of the Senate's thirty-six Republicans, ten to sixteen were doves. "Thunder from a Distant Hill," 24.

<sup>267</sup>"Tower Urges Victory," *New York Times*, 7 October 1967, 2.

The common denominator between Republican hawks and doves was a desire to end the war, either through negotiations or the enemy's defeat. Senator Margaret Chase Smith aptly complained in a speech to the Republican National Committee that the Democrats were "bogged down and apparently incapable of winning the war or bringing the fighting to an honorable conclusion."<sup>268</sup>

The so-called White Paper, a Republican staff report released in the spring of 1967, highlighted many of the Republicans' concerns. The report was controversial, especially in its conclusions. (For example, it blamed the war on "Democratic mistakes," ignoring Eisenhower's role in sending aid and advisors to Vietnam and in the formation of SEATO; Democratic Senator McGee would later put this slanted accusation under a microscope on the Senate floor.<sup>269</sup>) Many Republican senators felt compelled to observe after its publication that the report did not mean Republicans were moving away from support of the President. Dirksen left the hospital to appear at a meeting in which he "reaffirm[ed] our position of standing foursquare behind him and our field, air and sea commanders in Southeast Asia [in addition to] our superb fighting men [in their] fight to win the struggle against Communist aggression."<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup>"A Paucity of Choice," *Time*, 15 September 1967, 19.

<sup>269</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (3 May 1967), vol. 113, pt. 9, 11544-11545.

<sup>270</sup>Quoted in introduction to U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, *The War in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 4. This policy report was more commonly called "The White Paper."

Nevertheless, Dirksen believed the report was “complete, authentic, [and] well-documented,” and he defended the Republicans’ “right of full and fair inquiry and criticism.” He also stated that the report contained two important questions whose answers would dictate the party’s future commitment to the war.<sup>271</sup> These questions were, first: “What precisely is our national interest in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos?” And second: “To what further lengths are we prepared to go in support of this interest?”<sup>272</sup> In short, while Dirksen rejected the report’s implication that Republicans should not support the President on the war, he did not believe such support should be open-ended or uncritical.

The end of the report has an apocalyptic flavor, tossing about such words as “confusion,” “frustration,” “challenges”--the “challenges within Congress, within colleges and universities, within the press, within the military itself--and all to a degree not experienced in the United States since the Civil War. . . .”<sup>273</sup> In the aftermath of this report, Republican Senators Tower, Miller, and Karl Mundt once again demanded more vigorous military action in Vietnam.<sup>274</sup>

It is difficult, in the face of such evidence, to conclude that the Tet offensive was “the turning point” in the Republicans’ attitudes toward the Vietnam War.

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<sup>271</sup>Ibid.

<sup>272</sup>“The War in Vietnam,” 58.

<sup>273</sup>Quoted in *Congressional Almanac* 23 (1967): 940.

<sup>274</sup>Introduction to “The War in Vietnam,” 4, footnote.

Senator Javits of New York opined, in 1967, that although most Republicans continued to support the President's war policy, a "large number" would favor direct negotiations with the National Liberation Front " and a "good majority" would not support an invasion of North Vietnam.<sup>275</sup> One might add, on the basis of the analysis here, that support for the President was increasingly ambivalent, tenuous, and begrudging, while criticism from both doves and hawks had a sharper edge. The period *before* Tet seemed to mark a sharper change in Republican rhetoric than the changes that occurred immediately afterward. Moreover, if by 1967 the Republicans in the Senate did not support an invasion of the north, in what way did the Tet offensive mark a turning point? An invasion, risky and foolhardy as it may have been, was the only realistic way to break out of the stalemate that was strangling the U.S. effort. Yet in Javits' opinion, even before Tet such an attempt would not have been acceptable to the Republicans in the Senate. And if an invasion had been unacceptable to them, it surely would have been unacceptable to the majority of Democrats.

By the Numbers: Estimating Discontent in the  
Senate on the Eve of the Tet Offensive

George McGovern, who would fight for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968 and win it in 1972 only to lose to Nixon in the general election, estimated in his autobiography, *Grassroots*, that by the summer of 1967 between eighteen and

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<sup>275</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 939.

twenty senators were "openly opposing" U.S. involvement in the war. Though he did not define his phrase "openly opposing," what he did *not* mean was support for a unilateral withdrawal--he noted that no senator had ever called for that. One must assume that his phrase referred to persistent, critical calls for a negotiated settlement. Among the senators directly mentioned by McGovern as deserving this appellation were fellow Democrats Frank Church, William Fulbright, Ernest Gruening, Joseph Clark, Gaylord Nelson, Lee Metcalf, Eugene McCarthy, and Robert Kennedy.<sup>276</sup>

In May 1967 Senator Church circulated a petition among vocal dissenters in the Senate (all of them doves) who had opposed administration policy in Vietnam; the purpose of the petition was to make it clear to the communists that dissent did not mean a desire for unilateral withdrawal in the absence of a negotiated settlement. The signatories included all of the aforementioned senators, except for Gruening and McCarthy; other signatories included Democratic Senators George McGovern, Frank Moss, E. L. Bartlett, Vance Hartke, Quentin Burdick, Stephen Young, Clairborne Pell, and Republicans John Cooper and Mark Hatfield.<sup>277</sup> Democratic Senator Albert Gore<sup>278</sup> and Republican Jacob Javits<sup>279</sup> must be added to any list of prominent

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<sup>276</sup>McGovern, *Grassroots*, 103, 111, 113; *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (17 May 1967), vol. 113, pt. 10, 13012.

<sup>277</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (17 May 1967), vol. 113, pt. 10, 13011-13012.

<sup>278</sup>See e.g., John W. Finney, "Gore Bids Nation Quit War 'Morass,'" *New York Times*, 25 October 1967, 1, 7.

doves, and certainly by the end of 1967, one could add recent Democratic converts Joseph Tydings of Maryland and Stuart Symington of Missouri as well as Republican Thruston Morton of Kentucky.<sup>280</sup> Thus, on the eve of Tet, approximately one fifth of the U.S. Senate openly opposed the President. The defection of Republican and Democratic senators from conservative states also represented a dangerous trend for the President.

This list of vocal doves was fluid, changing not only as a function of time but also as a result of one's definition of "openly opposing"; put simply, what degree of ideological consistency and brash, open opposition to Johnson's war policies was necessary before a senator could be awarded the appellation "vocal critic" or the tag "openly opposing"? Certainly, other senators opposed escalation by the end of 1967, though they were not necessarily vocal or brash about it. Examples are Republican Edward Brooke of Massachusetts and, as will be seen, his Democratic counterpart Edward Kennedy. Again, some senators defy easy categorization--Senator Percy opposing escalation but not all bombing; Senator Scott supporting a negotiated settlement but also supporting the President. Senator Russell, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was saying "win or get out"--some dubbing such views as "dawk

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<sup>279</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st Sess. (2 October 1967), vol. 113, pt. 20, 27445; "LBJ at a Low Ebb," 16.

<sup>280</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 939; "Drift & Dissent," 9.

talk"--the cry of a dove crossed with a hawk.<sup>281</sup> And there was that strange specimen Senator Mansfield; most certainly he was a dove, but, constrained by his position as majority leader and his ties to the President, he kept his persistent cooing as soft as possible, avoiding shrill cries of blame aimed at the President.

None of this should obscure the possibility that, even in 1967, hawks may have been more numerous than doves--if by "hawk" one means a senator desiring any form of escalation, in particular the air war being waged against North Vietnam. An Associated Press poll, released in August 1967, showed that forty of eighty-four senators who responded no longer supported Johnson's war policy.<sup>282</sup> Regarding this poll, *Newsweek* wrote that an "educated guess" was the hawks were the largest bloc among the opposition, though doves were gaining.<sup>283</sup>

The problem with those who argue that Tet was "the turning point" is that they get caught up in the drama of the offensive, and in the vehemence of the reaction to it, rather than in the context of what went before. This problem is just as apparent regarding an assessment of Congress' reaction to Tet. Yes, indeed, dramatic speeches were made against the President's policies following Tet, but there was drama before Tet as well. On August 2, 1967, Senators Jacob Javits and Robert Kennedy of New

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<sup>281</sup>"Dawk Talk," *Time*, 30 September 1966, 20. On Edward Kennedy see p. 129 below.

<sup>282</sup>Neil Sheehan, "Fulbright Doubts Congress Repeal of Tonkin Gulf Resolution," *New York Times*, 21 August 1967, 7.

<sup>283</sup>Kenneth Crawford, "We Don't Have It?" *Newsweek*, 11 September 1967, 26.

York launched what *Newsweek* called “the most powerful attack heard in the Congress on the Saigon government and U.S. conduct of the war in general.” Javits said there was

an imperative need to reassess our commitment in Vietnam. The country is deeply troubled and highly dubious about the war. . . . The budgetary impact of the Vietnam War is in competition with the urgent nation[al] call to respond to the agony of our cities--all combine to project Vietnam as the prime issue facing our country.

For his part, Robert Kennedy criticized South Vietnam for making “a fraud and a farce” of the upcoming elections. Twelve other senators, in addition to Kennedy and Javits, echoed the call for fair elections.<sup>284</sup>

On October 2 a wide-ranging Senate debate on Vietnam highlighted rising discontent with the war, even among supporters of continued bombing. Like many of the Senate’s Vietnam debates, a key issue was the air war. Republican Senator John Cooper commenced the debate by calling for a unilateral bombing pause, without conditions, in the hope it would lead to negotiations. While he did not advocate withdrawal, he did argue against expansion of the war. South Vietnam should also be forced to reform itself. Finally, in the most poignant comment of the whole debate, he cut to the heart of waning support for increased involvement in the war: “. . . if the people of this country, and the overwhelming majority of Members of Congress, believed that our security was threatened we would be united, and we would support without question any means to fight the war. We would endure any deficit. We

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<sup>284</sup>“LBJ at a Low Ebb,” 16.



would do what we have done in other wars.” The problem, he concluded incisively, is that people “do not believe such a threat exists.”<sup>285</sup>

Republican Senator Jacob Javits concurred that the “risk” of a bombing pause was worth taking. He agreed that the majority leader’s proposal to involve the United Nations in the peace process should be pursued. And like Cooper, he challenged the notion that Vietnam was vital to America’s security.<sup>286</sup>

Republican Senator Charles Percy responded by lamenting “the frustration and bitterness and discontent” which had enveloped the nation. He added, later in the debate, that half of Americans disapproved of LBJ’s conduct of the war yet only about 10 percent demanded unilateral withdrawal; therefore, the President’s contemptuous dismissal of his opponents as “nervous nellies” was both mean-spirited and illogical. Another Republican, Senator George Murphy, replied that although he no longer believed reports indicating that the war was a stalemate, and although he continued to support America’s presence in Vietnam, he was disenchanted with the President’s war policy. “We are winning and could win a lot faster if we were not fighting a limited war. . . . I agree that the quickest way out is the way we should go. However, it must be an honorable and proper way.” Regarding Murphy’s point about escalating the war, Senator Percy retorted that Murphy had once believed that the bombing would force North Vietnam to capitulate in thirty days. He also angrily contested Murphy’s

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<sup>285</sup>*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (2 October 1967), vol. 113, pt. 20, 27441, 27444-27445, 27449.

<sup>286</sup>*Ibid.*, 27445.

point about South Vietnam's fighting spirit, citing the words of a Negro soldier whose arm and leg had been amputated due to a grenade: " 'They are ready to hold our coat while we go in and do the fighting.' "287

Two administration supporters then broke in, Senator McGee arguing that our presence in Vietnam was essential to Southeast Asia's security, and Senator Miller asking for a little patience; the bombing rate had been expanded over the last sixty days and needed a chance. Senator Pell countered that the bombing was counterproductive. To bolster his argument he cited McNamara's testimony that the bombing had not " 'significantly reduced the flow of men and material to the South.' "288

The remainder of the debate continued to center on the efficacy of the administration's air assault on North Vietnam. In all, supporting statements for Senator Cooper's plea for a bombing halt were made by fellow Republicans Jacob Javits, Charles Percy, and Thruston Morton as well as Democrats William Fulbright, Claiborne Pell, and Joseph Clark. Republicans Strom Thurmond, George Murphy, Peter Dominick, and Jack Miller were joined by Democrats Gale McGee and George Smathers in opposition.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup>Ibid., 27446-27447.

<sup>288</sup>Ibid., 27448-27451.

<sup>289</sup>Ibid., 27448-27454.

Although Republican doves weren't as numerous as their Democratic counterparts, this debate showed that fault lines existed in both parties regarding Vietnam policy. Senator Clark seemed to be referring only to the more general fault lines in the entire Senate when he mentioned the division in the Senate over the bombing issue.<sup>290</sup>

But this debate was significant for other reasons. Some supporters of the administration's bombing in Vietnam were increasingly opposed to limitations on the air war. Miller, an administration supporter, asked his colleagues to be patient, giving recent bombing escalations time to work. Yet this was hardly an unqualified endorsement--presumably, he would lose patience in the absence of measurable progress. In fact, only a few gave unqualified support to the President--McGee, Smathers, and Dominick. Other hawks evidenced impatience. Senator Murphy, fearing dangerous "division" at home and waning public morale, inveighed against an administration policy which had shackled the military. On this point Senator Thurmond commented bitterly that the American people were *not* divided: "The American people want this war won; they want to win it in a hurry, and get our American boys home." But he also chased the illusion that the air war alone could do the job; with proper bombing he believed the war could be won "in a brief period."<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>290</sup>Ibid., 27454.

<sup>291</sup>Ibid., 27446-27447, 27450-27451, 27453.

Four days later, Democratic Senator Vance Hartke accused the administration of planning an invasion of the north; in so doing he attacked the credibility of the administration. History, he said, was repeating itself: "A contrived leak, a trial balloon, a carefully worded Pentagon denial." Republican Senator Mark Hatfield likewise accused the administration of "double talk and deceit" regarding Vietnam. "We are captive of confusion; confusion that is fostered by the Government."

Democratic Senator Frank Lausche, in contrast, warned his Senate colleagues to stop waging war on the administration's war policy. He feared that the "libel and slander and abuse" heaped on the executive branch made the enemy think we were ready to withdraw. On October 20 Democratic Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson, who had largely kept silent during the debates on Vietnam, made similar remarks, decrying the "negative" tide of the Vietnam debate. "The war in Vietnam cannot be brought to an end by attacking each other here at home. But it can be lost--rather, it will be lost--if we destroy our confidence in each other."<sup>292</sup>

But such criticism had little success in quelling dissent. On October 24 Senator Albert Gore, a long-time Democratic critic who had largely remained quiet for the past year in the course of the debate, called for the U.S. to "honorably extricate" itself from Vietnam by submitting to neutralization of Southeast Asia. Recalling that the Johnson administration had supported the concept of neutralization, Gore said he

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<sup>292</sup>"Hartke Says U.S. Weighs Invasion," 2; "Hatfield Sees 'Deceit,'" *New York Times*, 7 October 1967, 2; "'Negative' War Foes Scored by Jackson," *New York Times*, 20 October 1967, 12. Lausche's quote is contained in the Hartke citation.

didn't believe it. "The administration has misled itself and the public as to our real national interests and intentions." The war was causing our relations with the USSR and China to worsen. "We are bogged down." Hartke added that Secretary of State Dean Rusk was wrong in arguing that we must stop communism in Asia until Asians themselves were ready to shoulder the burden.<sup>293</sup> Meanwhile, Johnson's proposed 10 percent tax surcharge was going nowhere, undermined since its introduction in the summer by the majority leader himself.<sup>294</sup>

Open dissent was increasing. In November *U.S. News* reported that a number of congressmen and senators had detected a mood of uneasiness, among Congress, the administration, and the general public. This mood was partly, though not wholly, a result of the Vietnam War. Said Senator Thruston Morton:

The war has been the cause of part of the frustration felt by the American people. Until six months ago, the war touched the lives of mainly those people who had loved ones in Vietnam. The people used to say "Win the war or get out." Now they are asking, "How can the war be brought to an honorable conclusion?"<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup>Finney, "Gore Bids Nation Quit War 'Morass,' " 7.

<sup>294</sup>"LBJ at a Low Ebb," 15.

<sup>295</sup>"Real Story of Revolt in Congress," *U.S. News & World Report*, 13 November 1967, 39.

Tet: A Sea Change in Senate Sentiment?

To return to the main issue: Did Tet mark a sea change in Senate sentiment? The following analysis, when compared to the data prior to the Tet offensive, indicates that the answer is *no*; the Tet offensive accelerated trends already in place--Tet was but another curve on the road to disaster.

Senator Robert Kennedy, having entered the race for the Democratic presidential nomination after McCarthy's strong March performance in New Hampshire, was calling for de-escalation, a bombing pause, a gradual transfer of more of the war burden onto the shoulders of the South Vietnamese--and even a coalition government with the communists.<sup>296</sup> In a February address in Chicago, Kennedy had asserted that Tet "has finally shattered the mask of official illusion. . . . But a short time ago we were serene in our reports and predictions of progress. . . . Those dreams are gone. . . ." Not always fair or balanced, Kennedy went on to critique South Vietnamese corruption and inertia, lashing out at both South Vietnam and the administration with these bitter words:

How ironic it is that we should claim a victory because a people whom we have given sixteen thousand lives, billions of dollars, and almost a decade to defend, did not rise in arms against us. More disillusioning and painful is the fact that the population did not rise to defend its freedom against the Viet Cong.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Newsweek*, 22 March 1968, 11.

<sup>297</sup> Inserted in *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 February 1968), vol. 114, pt. 3, 2671-2672. The speech referred to occurred in Chicago on the same day.

Echoing some of these same sentiments, his brother Senator Edward Kennedy blasted the “complicity” of the South Vietnamese people. We could not instill in them a sense of national identity, he informed his audience. And it was a scandal that American boys were dying in Vietnam, while in Saigon, “thousands of young men 18 and 19 years old race through the streets on their motor bikes, exempt from the war and oblivious to the agony of their own nation. . . .”<sup>298</sup> Even the specter of JFK was raised when Senator Hartke inserted into the *Congressional Record* an article quoting the former President: “In the final analysis, it is their war. We can help them” but they must win it.<sup>299</sup>

One could extend this catalogue of invective, but such a list would remain impressionistic. Perhaps more suggestive of how things stood was the criticism of some hawks. Arch-conservative Senator Strom Thurmond declared in a South Carolina speech that “if a war is worth waging, it is worth winning.” Yet, he continued (only half facetiously), “if we decide against military victory . . . we ought to put our tails between our legs and get running out of Vietnam.” Blasting “managed news and questionable reports of progress,” he recalled that in the State of the Union Address President Johnson had claimed that the South Vietnamese people were more

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<sup>298</sup> Richard Harwood, “Ted Kennedy Assails S. Vietnam Corruption,” *Washington Post*, 6 February 1968, 8.

<sup>299</sup> Inserted in *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess. (14 February 1968), vol. 114, pt. 3, 2967-2968.

secure than ever. "Today thousands of dead civilians . . . are mute evidence of the fallacy of that statement."<sup>300</sup>

On March 7, 1968, some five weeks after the onset of the Tet lunar new year and the furious communist assaults on South Vietnam's major cities and towns, Senate dissidents asked the President to consult the Senate before additional American soldiers were sent to Vietnam. Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and inveterate dissident Senator William Fulbright began the attack on the administration; according to the *New York Times* his speech "provoked an outpouring of protest against President Johnson's policy exceeding any previously heard in this session of Congress." (While this statement may be true, the difference was one of degree, not of kind.) Senator Robert Kennedy argued it was "immoral and intolerable" to go on the way we were going in Vietnam; it would be "a major mistake to escalate without the support and understanding of the Senate and the American public." Senator Mike Mansfield asked rhetorically, "Are we like the God of the Old Testament that we can decide, in Washington D.C., what cities, what towns, what hamlets in Vietnam are going to be destroyed?" Warning that "escalation only begets escalation," he went on to exclaim, his voice rising: "We are in the wrong place and we are fighting the wrong kind of war."<sup>301</sup> Senator Joseph Tydings,

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<sup>300</sup>Inserted in the *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 March 1968), vol. 114, pt. 5, 5746-5749. The speech was delivered at the University of South Carolina.

<sup>301</sup>John W. Finney, "Criticism of War Widens in Senate on Build-Up Issue," *New York Times*, 8 March 1968, 1.



among other critics, wanted to know the justification for any future escalations. Except for Senators Frank Lausche and John Tower, few administration supporters spoke up on behalf of the President; members of the Armed Services Committee brooded quietly in a corner. Two Republican hawks, Senators Jack Miller and Norris Cotton, joined in the attacks on the administration's strategy, arguing in particular against Johnson's policy of a limited air war.<sup>302</sup>

It would be easy to take these speeches out of context (the context being the increasing Senate unrest over Vietnam between 1964-1967) and conclude that Tet had caused a major turnaround in congressional sentiment. In reality, there was nothing new under the sun. The rhetoric in the fall of 1967 was nearly as vociferous as the post-Tet rhetoric. There were no sudden calls for unilateral withdrawal; Mansfield himself observed that no one in the Senate was calling for that.<sup>303</sup> And, as will be discussed in more detail shortly, there were no dramatic votes cutting off public funds for the war. The only serious argument for a congressional "turnaround" is this: informal, behind-the-scenes pressure, as opposed to a formal vote of Congress, forced the President to change direction in Vietnam.

There is some evidence to sustain this argument. After Tet the incoming Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, often in the company of General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conducted several meetings with congressional

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<sup>302</sup>Ibid., 8; "Excerpts from Debate in Senate over the Administration's Policy in Vietnam," *New York Times*, 8 March 1968, 8.

<sup>303</sup>Ibid.

leaders--especially with members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees. General Wheeler concluded that congressional leaders opposed a call-up of the reserves; in the face of optimistic reports on the progress of the war, many wondered why a call-up was even necessary.<sup>304</sup> In one of these meetings, Senator Russell, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, claimed that Vietnam had been a mistake. Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson recollected that "about four of us [from the Armed Services Committee] blocked an attempt, right after Tet, to get a quarter million more troops out there. I opposed it, because I said we must start to wind this thing down. . . ." The senators involved in the discussions were five: Jackson, Russell, John Stennis (Chairman of the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee), Stephen Young, and Margaret Chase Smith. Senator Smith later recalled that she had supported a limited increase in troop strength and a call-up of the reserves. Other dissenters in the Senate included most prominently William Fulbright, who demanded that Clark Clifford appear before his committee for questioning, and Mike Mansfield, who encouraged Clifford to do everything he could to end the war.<sup>305</sup>

In conjunction with public opinion--in particular declining support for Johnson's leadership in waging the war--behind-the-scenes congressional pressure may have played a pivotal role in reversing administration policy from one of gradual escalation and attrition to one which sought to stabilize the American war effort and

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<sup>304</sup>Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 210, 213.

<sup>305</sup>Ibid., 210-212, 215-218.

initiate a serious search for a negotiated settlement. But the question is: Was Tet primarily responsible for the Senate's disillusionment? Among the Senate leaders just cited, Mansfield, Fulbright, and Young had already gone on record in favor of a negotiated settlement; Russell had already expressed weariness with the war, urging the administration to "win or get out"; and Jackson, Stennis, and Smith had endorsed a Preparedness Subcommittee report which stated that the undersigned "cannot, in good conscience, ask our ground forces to continue their fight in South Vietnam in the absence of an expanded air war." That report had enjoyed unanimous subcommittee support. The significance of Tet was therefore secondary rather than primary--it further clarified congressional sentiment against the war, perhaps at a faster rate than would have otherwise occurred.

Other arguments that Tet was "the turning point" in congressional sentiment are less convincing. After Tet it is difficult to demonstrate wholesale conversions against the war. Many of the most strident post-Tet critics had criticized Johnson's war policy *before* Tet--Thurmond and Robert Kennedy among them.<sup>306</sup> In fact, Kennedy's post-Tet proposals on strategies to end the war were substantially the same

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<sup>306</sup>On Thurmond compare e.g., pp. 98-100, 110, 120 with pp. 124-125 above.

as proposals he had made as early as 1966.<sup>307</sup> Moreover, in March 1967 he had already publicly questioned the morality of the war. Vietnam, he had said,

is a country where hundreds of thousands fight, but millions more are innocent, bewildered victims of brutal passions and beliefs they barely understand. . . . This horror is partly our responsibility. . . . It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants.<sup>308</sup>

Rather than wholesale conversions against the war after Tet, one sees, at most, a hardening of attitudes, a sharper edge to the rhetoric. Senator Edward Kennedy called Tet "an outstanding political victory" which would increase our efforts to obtain a political settlement. His speeches in the wake of Tet were among the most memorable and biting.<sup>309</sup> Nevertheless, he had been a quiet dove before Tet, supporting peace initiatives for Vietnam--including his brother's. In early 1967 he had said succinctly: "It is time to talk; it is time for peace."<sup>310</sup> Likewise Senator

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<sup>307</sup>In 1968, RFK proposed requiring greater effort from the South Vietnamese government in pursuing the war, a bombing halt, and negotiations with the National Liberation Front; he said he was in favor of de-escalation of the war (*New York Times* 17 March 1968, 1, 59). Yet these proposals were not new. See "The Shadow and the Substance," *Time*, 16 September 1966, 32-36; Hedrick Smith, "Kennedy Asks Suspension of U.S. Air Raids on North," *New York Times*, 3 March 1967, 1, 10; "Excerpts from Kennedy Speech and Texts of Rusk Statement and Johnson Letter," *New York Times*, 3 March 1967, 10; Roy Reed, "Bunker Sees the President," *New York Times*, 14 November 1967, 1, 3; "LBJ at a Low Ebb," 16; Douglas Ross, *Robert F. Kennedy: Apostle of Change* (New York: Trident Press, 1968), 506-510, 512-515, 519-522, 529-530.

<sup>308</sup>Quoted in Ross, *Robert F. Kennedy*, 536.

<sup>309</sup>John W. Finney, "Javits and Edward Kennedy Ask War Compromise," 6 February 1968, 15. For an example of his anger after Tet, see p. 124 above.

<sup>310</sup>"Brother Supports Senator," *New York Times*, 5 March 1967, 6; also see "Edward Kennedy Opposed," *New York Times*, 3 December 1967, 26.

William Proxmire, head of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee, was a rather subdued dove before Tet; he supported a bombing halt but not an end to the war and often seemed ambivalent toward the administration's Vietnam efforts. After Tet, he became a "superdove," even requesting (in June 1968) removal of \$268 million from an appropriations bill for B-52 bomber operations in Southeast Asia.<sup>311</sup>

The hardening of Senate attitudes wasn't always so transparent. Senators Walter Mondale and Robert Byrd represent a maddening reality for the student of congressional attitudes toward the war: the disparity between the public and private record. For example, before the conclusion of the Tet offensive friends of Mondale detected (in the words of one biographer) "a subtle shift in Mondale's attitude" toward Vietnam.<sup>312</sup> He began doubting the war and was more surly toward the administration's representatives. Mondale also supported an effort to persuade Vice President Hubert Humphrey to openly adopt a more dovish position on the war. The biographer concluded that Humphrey's defeat against Nixon in the general election unfettered Mondale, who went on to become a more prominent dove than even Senator Eugene McCarthy, his counterpart from Minnesota.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup>Jay G. Sykes, *Proxmire* (N.Y.: Robert B. Luce, 1972), 183-187; see also "Congressmen Ask for Quarterly Data on U.S. Financing," *New York Times*, 4 February 1967, 42.

<sup>312</sup>Finlay Lewis, *Mondale: Portrait of an American Politician* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 184-185; see also p. 181.

<sup>313</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

Senator Byrd offers another example of an incongruity between the public and private records. Byrd had criticized the administration before (e.g., by signing on to the 1967 Preparedness Subcommittee report which had announced a reluctance to send more troops in the absence of changes in Johnson's war policy, including an escalation of the air war). Yet apparently Byrd didn't want to publicly question the idea that the war was winnable. After Tet, he said simply, "something is wrong over there"; rather than being demoralized, the Viet Cong had shown they "could attack all over the country." Yet Byrd refrained from making such doubts public.<sup>314</sup>

Tet accelerated doubts about the war, yet it was only one curve in the road toward disaster. Senator Edmund Muskie did not make his first public criticism of the war until October 15, 1969.<sup>315</sup> How long had he been harboring such doubts? Those doubts would in part be due to Tet--but only in part. The events of 1965-1967 were equally a part. This same argument holds true for all those who expressed dissent (most of it not new) in early 1968. Too many accounts feel content to offer a few post-Tet barbs from Congress (often quoting Robert F. Kennedy or his brother without context), further fueling the myth that Tet was "the turning point."

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<sup>314</sup>Spector, *After Tet*, 5.

<sup>315</sup>Donald Hansen, *Muskie* (New York: Norton, 1971), 177.

### The Senate's Vietnam Voting Record

This section will close with a brief survey of the Senate's voting record on the Vietnam War. The justification for this survey is based on Barbara Tuchmann's observation that in order to discover what people believe it is often more important to study what they *do* rather than what they *say*. This apt comment is not without its truth--but the Vietnam War, like everything else it touches, turns this truth upside down: A study of the Senate's voting patterns shows continued solid support for the Vietnam War in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. In the face of this continuity, it is difficult to argue that Tet was "the turning point."

A rapid overview of Congress' voting record on Vietnam will put 1968 into context. Between 1966 and 1973 Congress voted one hundred and thirteen times on issues directly related to the Vietnam War. However, no limits were placed on the war until 1969, when Congress mandated restrictions on the deployment of U.S. troops in Cambodia and Laos. Not until August 1973, after American forces had been withdrawn from Vietnam, did Congress vote to stop the bombing in all of Indochina.<sup>316</sup>

Many doves voted often and regularly for appropriations and resolutions supporting the continuation of the Vietnam War. In January 1966, for example, fifteen Senate doves signed a petition asking Johnson to delay resumption of the bombing

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<sup>316</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam*, 491.

over North Vietnam. But when these same senators voted on a March 1 amendment to a Vietnam appropriations bill, only five of the original fifteen senators--Fulbright, Morse, Gruening, S. Young, and McCarthy--voted against a motion to table the amendment; if passed, the amendment would have annulled one of the legal underpinnings behind America's involvement--the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.<sup>317</sup>

Gruening, in his 1968 book *Vietnam Folly*, later wrote in a chapter entitled "The Congress Dissents but Consents" that the sentiment against the aims of this amendment was not as overwhelming as this vote indicated. The senators defeated the amendment because they did not want to delay the appropriations bill which would provide needed funding for the war. Moreover, many senators--including McGovern--were preparing their own amendments; if this one was not tabled, these other amendments might also be introduced--again causing delays.

But, if more than five senators opposed continuation of the war, why this desire to speed passage of a Vietnam appropriations bill in the first place? Gruening makes a telling point: many who voted to table the amendment did so only with a concomitant disclaimer announcing that a vote for the bill could not be interpreted as support for past or future military action in Vietnam. The Senate, in effect, was refusing to " 'put their votes where their mouths were.' " Senator Morse, the author

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<sup>317</sup>Berman, *Fulbright*, 53, 59.



of the amendment, complained that votes, not "opinions," were binding. Concluded Gruening: Congress was "spineless."<sup>318</sup>

Something petty was going on here--the desire (by who knows how many?) not to alienate voters by a clear stand on the issues. Senate Majority Leader Mansfield is symptomatic of this lack of backbone, though it is true that his leadership of the Democratic Party and his personal obligations to Johnson made his position precarious. In mid 1965, the night before Johnson announced a major escalation of the war, Mansfield reportedly handed the President a three-page letter announcing that while he would publicly support the President, he had privately opposed most of the policies in Vietnam undertaken since Diem's 1963 assassination, in particular the bombing against the north.<sup>319</sup>

Certainly by 1967 patience for the war was thinner than votes in the Senate would indicate. Congress found itself traveling a narrow path between a mountain and a precipice: the mountain representing the rising unpopularity of the way Johnson was running the war (as opposed to the war in the abstract); the precipice representing the abyss which awaited any senator who would dare suggest unilateral withdrawal or a seeming abandonment of support for American soldiers. These potentially contradictory strands--a desire to end the quagmire (through negotiations or escalation of the air war) and a desire to continue supporting American troops--weave their way

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<sup>318</sup>Ernest Gruening, *Vietnam Folly* (Washington, D.C.: National Press, 1968), 318, 320-321, 325-326.

<sup>319</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

through the various provisions of a 1967 rider attached to S665, a \$4.5 billion supplementary authorization bill for the Vietnam War. This rider, which the *Congressional Quarterly* called the first “Congressional policy declaration” since the 1964 Tonkin Resolution, had three basic parts--(1) a provision declaring support for U.S. armed forces in Vietnam; (2) a declaration of support for the President’s and others’ efforts to “prevent an expansion of the war in Viet Nam and to bring that conflict to an end through a negotiated settlement which will preserve the honor of the United States, protect the vital interests of this country, and allow the people of South Viet Nam to determine the affairs of that nation in their own way”; and (3), a declaration of support for reconvening the Geneva Conference, or any other such international body, for the purpose of adhering to the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 and to conclude the conflict in Vietnam honorably.<sup>320</sup>

This resolution constituted a hodgepodge of ideas welded together to form a consensus. The first provision was a sop to hawks and supporters of the administration as well as reassurance to the nation that our soldiers would continue to receive congressional support. The second provision was aimed at gathering the support of Senate doves, though the statement could also muster support among hawks since it called for the attainment of every stated American objective (the plausibility of obtaining these objectives diplomatically was quite another matter--most notably the goal of leaving South Vietnam free to determine its own destiny). The third provision,

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<sup>320</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 204.

by agreeing to international arbitration, introduced a potentially unknown factor into the equation--though the provision did mention that it sought an "honorable" end to the conflict--an emotionally loaded word which would hold a different meaning to hawks and doves. This rider, with all three provisions intact, passed easily, by a 72-19 vote; and the final supplemental authorization bill passed in March of 1967 by an overwhelming margin of 89-2.<sup>321</sup>

Except for its third provision, it is difficult to see how this compromise amendment could have changed the military and political landscape in Vietnam. Mansfield himself had proposed the amendment only to circumvent a more substantive amendment, by Senator Clark, which called for ending the air war against North Vietnam and maintaining troop levels under the half-million mark pending a declaration of war. Mansfield claimed that Congress should not take responsibility for the conduct of the war, but to vote against Clark might seem "a go-ahead for the unlimited intensification and expansion of the conflict"<sup>322</sup>--hence his toothless substitute amendment. One sees in Mansfield's statement the abdication of responsibility which Gruening was talking about. The majority leader's statement also suggested that the President could not escalate the war indefinitely--once again, this supports the contention that the Tet offensive only affected the timing of the

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<sup>321</sup>John Herbers, "Senate Pledges Johnson Support in Limiting War," *New York Times*, 2 March 1967, 1.

<sup>322</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

stabilization of America's effort in Vietnam, in particular the levelling of overall troop levels.

Given the scale of the amendment's victory, obviously many hawks and administration supporters voted for Mansfield's amendment--including three key Republicans: Dirkson, Kuchel, and Hickenlooper. The nineteen senators in opposition included nine Democrats and ten Republicans, mostly outspoken hawks--including Byrd, Long, Russell, Stennis, Thurmond, Tower, and Cotton. Cotton, a Republican hawk, said truthfully that the amendment was "an indication to the world that we are furnishing the money but our heart isn't in the war." Supporters of the amendment cited different reasons for their votes. Senator Clark said he had voted affirmatively because it "implies that we are not supporting escalation of the war." Mansfield argued that the question of how we originally got involved in Vietnam was moot. "The question now is, 'How can this war be terminated at the soonest possible time in an honorable peace for all concerned?' " Secretary of State Dean Rusk, giving the administration's spin on the matter, expressed pleasure at the Senate's show of support.<sup>323</sup>

In its review of 1967's political landscape, *Congressional Quarterly* summarized:

For Congress, as well as the nation at large, Vietnam was a dominant topic. But in floor action, the surest indicator of congressional will, there were very few attempts to come to grips with the issues raised by the war. . . . Most dissenters found it awkward to vote against supplies or in favor of restrictions on the grounds

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<sup>323</sup>Ibid.

that they did not wish to expose men already committed to battle to unneeded risks.<sup>324</sup>

Senator Stennis, in urging the defeat of proposed cuts in defense spending, illustrated the efficacy of such arguments when he warned in the summer of 1967 that cuts might hurt "our boys in Vietnam." The final record defense bill passed in August by a vote of 85-3.<sup>325</sup>

Did the Tet offensive of 1968 institute dramatic changes in congressional support for the Vietnam War as measured by voting patterns? Despite some rousing rhetoric, the Senate and the House failed to stop the war. The *Congressional Quarterly* wrote succinctly, "There was not a single roll-call taken on the Vietnam issue during the session."<sup>326</sup> Funding for the war continued apace.<sup>327</sup>

Tet was a lost opportunity to shorten the war rather than Vietnam's "turning point." Even in 1972, a year before the Paris peace accords of January 1973 signalled America's final withdrawal, Senator Fulbright wrote in *The Crippled Giant* that although "a majority of members of Congress are convinced that our involvement in Indochina had been a disastrous mistake," Congress has nevertheless "acquiesced in

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<sup>324</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 23 (1967): 925.

<sup>325</sup>B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. "Senate Approves Funds for Defense," *New York Times*, 23 August 1967, 1, 17.

<sup>326</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 24 (1968): 75.

<sup>327</sup>*Ibid.*, 2S, 16S, 55S 75, 251. Serious efforts to stop funding of the war emerged, and were defeated, in the summer of 1970 and 1971. Those efforts failed by votes of 55-39 and 55-42, respectively. Fulbright, *Crippled Giant*, 194.

every major Presidential action in the long war.” Echoing Senator Gruening’s *Vietnam Folly*, Fulbright argued that although more than half of the Senate wished to end the war, less than a majority was willing to “take the responsibility” for doing so--due to “tribal loyalty to the ‘Chief,’ ‘a lack of will,’ and a desire to continue supporting ‘our boys’ in Vietnam.” According to Fulbright this last point was crucial to many senators and representatives, who believed the issue of whether we should remain in Vietnam was academic in view of the presence of American soldiers on foreign soil--soldiers who needed America’s support, not abandonment and betrayal. Unfortunately, both Johnson and Nixon were able to use such congressional support--which came in the form of funding--to argue that Congress supported their larger policy aims in Vietnam.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>328</sup>Fulbright, *Crippled Giant*, 193-194, 197.

## CHAPTER 8

### TET'S LEGACY

Tet destroyed any lingering hopes that Johnson could recapture the White House. The eclipse of the President's fortunes in little more than four years has the markings of a Greek tragedy. In the first act, we encounter the protagonist at the height of his prestige and powers: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood in 1964, led on to the fame for Lyndon Baines Johnson." Thus wrote *Time* in proclaiming Johnson Man of the Year. "1964 was his year--his to act in, his to mold, his to dominate."<sup>329</sup> In the succeeding years, act two, the hero is struck down. Johnson's popularity was destroyed by a combination of events, not all of them his own doing. Johnson foresaw the potential divisions that could result as a result of pursuing the war, but felt trapped by treaty and political obligations inherent in our status as a world power. "I just shudder to think what all of 'em [i.e., the world] would say," he had said, if we should "get out of there."<sup>330</sup> Certainly, it was fate that thrust Vietnam upon Johnson--fate that Kennedy and he viewed the world through the prism of communist-capitalist dualism and Munich--fate again that America's

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<sup>329</sup>"Man of the Year," *Time*, 1 January 1965, 14.

<sup>330</sup>Quoted in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 191; see also p. 190. McNamara's account implies that, for Johnson, upholding America's image as a world power was more important than fears of the spread of international communism.

prestige had already been committed to the survival of an unstable nation. But Johnson's own personality also played a role in the complex drama that was Vietnam. By extension, Johnson's personality--and not just inherited political conditions--contributed to the President's increasing unpopularity. The same *Time* article that proclaimed Johnson "man of the year" observed that the President possessed an "anthology of antonyms":

. . . over-bearing . . . then suddenly overwhelmingly considerate; cynical about men's motives, yet sentimental enough to weep when a group of Texas Congressmen presented him with a laudatory plaque; thin-skinned, yet able to brush off some criticism with the comment, "My daddy told me that if you don't want to get shot at, stay off the firing line."<sup>331</sup>

McNamara, Johnson's brilliant but equally fallible Secretary of Defense, has concurred in his recent memoirs: "Lyndon Johnson was one of the most complex, intelligent, and hard-working individuals I have ever known. He possessed a kaleidoscopic personality: by turns open and devious, loving and mean, compassionate and tough, gentle and cruel."<sup>332</sup>

In November 1966 *Time* observed that an "active dislike" of the President had incubated among the populace due to "Johnson's pettiness and peevishness, his displays of deceit and conceit."<sup>333</sup> *Newsweek*, in the late summer of 1967, reported a "tide of anger" against the President--not only as a result of the war but also due to

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<sup>331</sup>"Man of the Year," 23.

<sup>332</sup>McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 98; also see p. 99.

<sup>333</sup>"Protecting the Flank," *Time*, 4 November 1966, 25.



racial turmoil and the problems of the inner cities--even his personality, which was "an issue in itself."<sup>334</sup>

The President's lack of candor, on Vietnam and other issues, plagued his Presidency and undermined his authority in Congress and among the general public. The so-called "credibility gap" was a common theme of Johnson's Presidency. At the beginning of 1967 *Time* noted that Johnson's lack of credibility was already resulting in "considerable [domestic] trouble" for the President.<sup>335</sup> David Cargo of New Mexico recalled: "At the White House they gave a group of us Governors a thousand reasons why they couldn't bomb Haiphong Harbor. Yet four days later it was done. I just about died when I heard that."<sup>336</sup>

The poll numbers reflected increasing disenchantment with both the President and his leadership. In January 1964, in the same month that *Time* released its announcement that Johnson had been named "man of the year," one poll showed Johnson's popularity topping 80 percent. The President's popularity did not fall below 60 percent until the spring of 1966. Late in that year, his popularity fell below the crucial 50 percent threshold; by August of 1967, after a summer of racial riots and growing dissatisfaction with Johnson's management of the war, the President's overall

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<sup>334</sup>"The President in Trouble," *Newsweek* 4 September 1967, 17.

<sup>335</sup>"Flak From Hanoi," *Time*, 6 January 1967, 13-14.

<sup>336</sup>"Criticism of War Mounts," *New York Times*, 8 October 1967, 42.

popularity bottomed at 37 percent. Johnson rebounded from there; by January 1968, on the eve of Tet, it stood at 48 percent.<sup>337</sup>

Of course it is quite possible that even if the Tet attacks had never come, Johnson would still have been defeated. The President's popularity had increased by late 1967 due in part to Johnson's so-called "progress" campaign, which saw General William Westmoreland, the American field commander in Vietnam; U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker; and other administration representatives fan out across the country to laud the war's progress.<sup>338</sup> But without substantive progress, this optimism would have been shattered even in the absence of a Tet-style offensive. Bunker stressed that between 67 and 70 percent of South Vietnam's population was under control, while the Viet Cong controlled only 17 percent.<sup>339</sup> Westmoreland confidently declared, "I am absolutely certain that, whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing." He predicted that the U.S. could begin to withdraw its troops within two years. We were entering a third phase in the war, he

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<sup>337</sup>The results are per the Harris survey (*New York Times*, 8 October 1967, sec. IV, p. 1). The Gallup poll released similar results; e.g., its December 1967 results showed LBJ's popularity at 46 percent, compared to 38 percent in October (*U.S. News & World Report*, 8 January 1968, 11). Gallup's January 1968 results were also in agreement with the Harris survey: LBJ's popularity was estimated at 48 percent (*U.S. News & World Report*, 26 February 1968, 19).

<sup>338</sup>The *New York Times* of January 1, 1968, reported that increasing administration pressure for American officials to report "convincing evidence of progress" had begun in approximately October and had accelerated in December. Cited in Thurmond, *The Faith We Have Not Kept*, 156; also see "Whose Benefit? Whose Doubt?" 68, 73; "Can You Top This?" *Newsweek*, 4 December 1967, 29.

<sup>339</sup>"Bunker Reports War Gain," *Washington Post*, 14 November 1967, 1.

explained, which would be followed by a final phase in which South Vietnam "will take charge of the final mopping up."<sup>340</sup>

There were other problems: racial tensions and fractures over the Great Society were shaking the Democrats' New Deal coalition. The financial costs of the war and the toll of dead were mounting--and inflation, cited as a major problem by many, was projected to rise to 6 percent in '68. Meanwhile the President's requested 10 percent income-tax surcharge to help pay for the war was encountering a decidedly negative reaction among the American people.<sup>341</sup>

Johnson was understandably worried about his re-election chances even before Tet--he fretted in particular about the slogan "win or get out," which could result in the unification of the hawks and doves against his Presidency.<sup>342</sup> The looming shadow of Robert Kennedy, whose popularity had surpassed the President's,<sup>343</sup> also darkened Johnson's re-election hopes.

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<sup>340</sup>"Next in the War--Westmoreland's View." *U.S. News & World Report*, 4 December 1967, 20. The prediction of withdrawal within two years is cited in Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 261.

<sup>341</sup>More than half of the electorate felt the Democrats were moving too fast on the issue of civil rights; however, the poll was administered by Republicans and could be biased ("A Question of How Big," *Time*, 4 November 1966, 31). On the issues of taxes and inflation, see "Accord at Ford--A slippery Road," *Newsweek*, 30 October 1967, 69. This account notes that, per Gallup, 60 percent of workers reported that high costs were the "most urgent problem" of their families. And according to Harris, 78 percent rejected LBJ's tax proposal.

<sup>342</sup>"Johnson and His Top Advisers Stand Firm on Vietnam Policy," *New York Times*, 8 October 1967, 42.

<sup>343</sup>*New York Times*, 8 October 1967, 34.

Nevertheless, the President was once again close to the crucial 50 percent approval rate at the beginning of 1968 and his re-election--certainly in the eyes of contemporaries--did not seem inconceivable. Tet destroyed any lingering hopes--or illusions--that Johnson would once again reside in the White House, Johnson's popularity falling to 41 percent, in February, and then to 36 percent in March. Approval of the President's war leadership suffered a similar decline, falling from 39 percent in January to 26 percent in March.<sup>344</sup> The President's popularity only recovered after his dramatic March 31 speech, in which he announced a partial bombing pause, a promise to pursue negotiations, and an end to his quest for re-election.<sup>345</sup>

Senator McGovern observed that the context of Johnson's dramatic March 31 speech was Senator Eugene McCarthy's expected victory over LBJ in the April 2 Wisconsin primary--this coming on the heels of his near loss to McCarthy in the March 12 New Hampshire primary. Meanwhile, Johnson's arch rival Robert Kennedy had entered the race for the Democratic nomination after McCarthy's strong New Hampshire showing, further stacking the deck against him. Lady Luck was not smiling on the President; Johnson himself believed that the war and the nation's racial protests had undermined his ability to lead. He thus folded his hand rather than risk

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<sup>344</sup>*U.S. News & World Report*, 26 February 1968, 19; 8 April 1968, 10; Braestrup, *Big Story*, 1:665.

<sup>345</sup>McGovern, *Grassroots*, 112.

further embarrassment.<sup>346</sup> While McCarthy's strong New Hampshire showing had revealed a desire for change in Vietnam, it did *not* demonstrate a dovish tide against the war. Indeed, an NBC poll showed that more than one-half of Democrats questioned did not know where McCarthy stood on Vietnam.<sup>347</sup>

Arguably, Johnson would have lost the general election--or would not have run--even in the absence of Tet, but the real answer to this question is unknown. However, the larger issues of the importance of Tet must go beyond its effects on any one individual--even the President. If Hubert Humphrey had staked out independent ground on Vietnam at an earlier date (or if Johnson had not vetoed a compromise plank on Vietnam), the Vice President might have gone on to win the general election --as it was he was narrowly defeated in the popular vote (43.4% for Nixon, 42.7% for Humphrey, 3.5% for Wallace)<sup>348</sup> thanks in part to the presence of George Wallace, who siphoned off southern support from the Republican ticket.

In the event of a Humphrey victory, the course of the war might have been dramatically altered. And Tet, by causing Johnson to withdraw when he did thereby giving Humphrey more time to prepare for victory, could have justifiably been labeled "the turning point." There is much evidence to support such a scenario. Many

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<sup>346</sup>Ibid.

<sup>347</sup>*Newsweek*, 22 March 1968, 15. Presumably, the poll was of registered New Hampshire Democrats.

<sup>348</sup>James Olson, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 212.

individuals--among them Humphrey's biographer and close friend Edgar Berman, Under-Secretary of State George Ball, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, and George McGovern--have stated unequivocally that Humphrey in fact hated the war and, once in power, would have moved quickly to end it. Ball wrote that "in spite of Hubert Humphrey's loyal and excessively exuberant support for President Johnson, I knew that he was personally revolted by the war. Once a Humphrey Administration were in place, we might then move promptly toward extrication." Clark Clifford said more succinctly: "I knew that, in fact, in his heart, Humphrey was against the war, but thought it was still *necessary* [Clifford's italics] to stick with the president."<sup>349</sup>

But Nixon won the Presidency rather than Humphrey. With regard to the crucial Vietnam issue, Nixon ran an obtuse campaign, cleverly straddling both sides of the dove-hawk divide and promising to "win the peace" rather than win the war. Whether this victory would be achieved on the battlefield or through negotiation--or both--was left maddeningly unclear. But sensing the mood of the nation, he did clearly state this much: he would end the war sooner than the administration. Such a claim was aimed at garnering the support of both hawks and doves.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>349</sup>See Edgar Berman, *Hubert: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Humphrey I Knew* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1979), 106, 111-115, 217; McGovern, *Grassroots*, 125, 129; Ball, *Another Pattern*, 409; Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 570; also see pp. 562-564.

<sup>350</sup>See Ball, *Another Pattern*, 410, 445; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 582; McGovern, *Grassroots*, 129; Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon Sharpens Attacks on Johnson," *New York Times*, 8 March 1968, 23; "Sorenson Rebukes Nixon, Rockefeller," *New York Times*, 8 March 1968, 23; "Nixon Blueprint for U.S. Role," *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 April 1968, 10.

### Changes in Official Policy

Since Nixon, the victor, inherited policies put in place by the Johnson administration, it is imperative to determine how Johnson's policies were affected by Tet. For Tet did cause a turnaround in official policy toward the war. Did these changes constitute the war's "turning point"? The answer, again, would seem to be "no."

The *New York Times*, on March 10, 1968, featured a sensational article on the Wheeler-Westmoreland request for 205,000 reinforcements. There is, to this day, some discrepancy over the motives of this request--was it made to restore the military balance after Tet, or to wage a general offensive? There is also disagreement on how many troops were intended for Vietnam--General Wheeler later argued only half of the troops would have gone to Vietnam, the other half being earmarked for the strategic reserve to fulfill world-wide commitments.<sup>351</sup> On the other hand, Clark Clifford, McNamara's replacement as Secretary of Defense, denied that Wheeler's report said this. Clark believed that the entire amount (205,179) was intended for the Vietnam

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<sup>351</sup>On this disagreement, see Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, chapter 11 passim. Plans for troop increases of approximately 200,000 men had been made as recently as the spring of 1967. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 222-223.

theater.<sup>352</sup> Johnson, not to be left out, said that by the time this story had been leaked such a large increase was no longer in consideration.<sup>353</sup>

Peter Braestrup, in his *Big Story*, devotes an entire chapter to an analysis of the media's allegedly inaccurate handling of this request. If Braestrup were an attorney, the lengthy March 10 article by the *Times* would form one of the prosecution's major exhibits. This article, as Baestrup correctly notes, suffered problems of internal consistency: it implied that General Westmoreland's request was made in order to restore the military balance after Tet. Irresponsibly, the *Times* article only mentioned several paragraphs later that the request was made in order to launch a broad offensive.<sup>354</sup> (Whether this was the true reason for the request is immaterial; Baestrup is correct to point out the internal inconsistency.)

Braestrup quotes the March 10 article in full, and the arguments he makes are largely valid. Nevertheless, he does his readers a disservice by not emphasizing a more legitimate aspect of the *Times* article: its fear that further escalation in Vietnam would require significant civilian sacrifices, would go beyond the bounds of limited war and, far from ending the war, would only increase the level of slaughter. To support its case the *Times* cited several unnamed civilian advisors in the Defense Department--including assistant secretaries--who believed that North Vietnam would

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<sup>352</sup>Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 479-482.

<sup>353</sup>Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 399, 402.

<sup>354</sup>See Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, chapter 11 passim.



match an increase even of 205,000 men, and who contended that North Vietnam's will to carry on would not falter.<sup>355</sup>

Outside evidence corroborates the *Times'* contention that administration officials at even the highest levels opposed further escalation. Even before Tet, Secretary of Defense McNamara had urged "stabilization" of our efforts and a gradual transfer of more of the war burden to South Vietnam. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had agreed, though he remained skeptical about McNamara's other proposal--a bombing halt intended to coax the communists into negotiations.<sup>356</sup>

In the aftermath of the Tet offensive, McNamara continued to support what was later called "Vietnamization" of the war. To commit 205,000 extra U.S. troops into the struggle would not make a difference, he advised, for North Vietnam would simply match our increase. Dean Rusk, swallowing his earlier opposition to a bombing halt, agreed after Tet that it was at least worth a try<sup>357</sup>--though Rusk also supported Wheeler's request for 205,000 troops and a more vigorous military effort should the bombing halt fail to spur negotiations.<sup>358</sup> Most surprising of all, Clark Clifford, the new Secretary of Defense, made a stunning about-face on the war. Clark,

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<sup>355</sup>Nicholas Katzenbach, Assistant Secretary of State, may have been one of these under-secretaries. See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1971), 653.

<sup>356</sup>Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 372-373, 377. The memo was dated November 1, 1967.

<sup>357</sup>*Ibid.*, 377, 392; Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War*, 246.

<sup>358</sup>Karnow, *Vietnam*, 556; Olson, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War*, 395.

who had originally sided with George Ball against the military build-up in 1965<sup>359</sup> but who had subsequently defended the war, had been considered a hawk. Although a trip during the summer of 1967 had revealed a disturbing lack of support for our struggle throughout Southeast Asia, Clark believed that the war was being won.<sup>360</sup> Tet inflamed Clark's doubts; he asked the President to revise the text of the speech he was working on and to talk about peace, not war. Clifford later wrote that after a gruelling series of meetings he had realized that "the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless . . . . Henceforth, . . . our primary goal should be to level off our involvement, and to work toward gradual disengagement."<sup>361</sup>

Other Johnson advisers were reaching the same conclusion. On March 25 and 26, the Senior Advisory Group, or "Wise Men," met to assess the post-Tet situation. This outside advisory group included such notables as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, former Under Secretary of State George Ball, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, former Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, former Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean (who had helped negotiate the treaty that formally ended the Korean War), as well as Robert Murphy, Generals Matthew Ridgway, Omar Bradley and Maxwell Taylor, U.N. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, and a sitting Supreme Court

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<sup>359</sup>Ball, *Another Pattern*, 402.

<sup>360</sup>Clark, *Council to the President*, 475; also see Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 375.

<sup>361</sup>Quoted in Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War*, 245-246.

Justice, Abe Fortas.<sup>362</sup> McGeorge Bundy, when asked by the President to sum up the general consensus, replied that the group's outlook had shifted since its last meeting in November. Now the group was "not so hopeful" about the situation in Vietnam. At the end of their discussion, Johnson summarized that six advisers favored some sort of de-escalation, one was in the middle, and four were opposed. "Mac" Bundy replied that this assessment was too simple. He urged the President to see what a bombing halt, and a shifting of more of the war effort onto the shoulders of South Vietnam, would do for us.<sup>363</sup>

This is not to argue that the President's most important advisers had retreated from the war. Most--including William Bundy ("Mac's" brother), Rusk, Rostow, Bunker, and Taylor--continued to support full engagement.<sup>364</sup> But the defection of so many from the Senior Advisory Group unnerved Johnson. Clifford reported that Johnson was "shocked" by the group's turnaround. Ball concurred, stating that the outcome of the meeting "profoundly shook" Johnson--a President who (also in Ball's assessment) was preoccupied, lacked confidence and deep powers of analysis, and therefore depended on the guidance of his advisers. Johnson immediately suspected sabotage, and scrutinized the officials who had briefed the Wise Men. But he

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<sup>362</sup>Memories of who was present differ. Shandler, in *The Unmaking of a President*, illuminates this issue on pp. 259, 262-263; also see Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 416-418; Ball, *Another Pattern*, 408; Clark, *Counsel to the President*, 516-518.

<sup>363</sup>Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 416-418.

<sup>364</sup>Halberstram, *Best and Brightest*, 653, 656, 659.

concluded that such misinformation would have been secondary to “the general mood of depression and frustration that had swept over so many people as a result of the Tet offensive.”<sup>365</sup>

The March 31 speech, and events subsequent to that speech, demarked a “turning point” in official policy toward the war: an *unconditional* bombing halt, with no announced resumption date, was instituted north of the twentieth parallel; the President announced plans for bolstering the South Vietnamese army (the President’s increased aid included the M-16 rifle, helicopters, and other equipment); and soon after this speech serious peace negotiations began in Paris. Of crucial importance, the President announced only a nominal troop increase in Vietnam of 13,500 men.<sup>366</sup>

Johnson did *not* state that our new troop levels constituted an absolute ceiling, although Secretary of Defense Clifford certainly desired such a ceiling.<sup>367</sup> On April 11, Clifford said the U.S. would “turn over gradually the major effort to the South Vietnamese,” although he never mentioned a time table for withdrawal. On

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<sup>365</sup>Schandler quotes Clifford in *The Unmaking of a President*, 264; Ball, *Another Pattern*, 374-377, 409; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 334.

<sup>366</sup>*Ibid.*, 400, 415, 435. Enhanced training of the ARVN had actually begun before this speech. Ball, *Another Pattern*, 408.

<sup>367</sup>On this issue see Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, 284-285, 314-317.

September 25, he denied we would be reducing our troop levels any time soon.<sup>368</sup>

Once out of office, he would call for withdrawal within eighteen months.<sup>369</sup>

Such policy changes were critical; it is only in the area of executive decision making, and the alterations in military and diplomatic policy that followed those changes,<sup>370</sup> that Tet can be called a turning point. President Nixon inherited these policies and took them further. In his first presidential speech on the war in May, 1969, he renounced the idea of a "purely military solution on the battlefield." To gain support for continuing the war Nixon also announced phased withdrawals of U.S. troops, thus reversing the Americanization of the war<sup>371</sup>--a process presaged by the Johnson administration's levelling of U.S. troop levels and by its increased focus on training and equipping of the ARVN.

Did these changes in official policy represent "the turning point" of the Vietnam War?

They did not. Even in the absence of Tet these trends were inevitable. By 1966, certainly by 1967, both the American people and the Congress would not have

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<sup>368</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 24 (1968): 126.

<sup>369</sup>Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal: A Personal History of One Man's View and How It Evolved," *Foreign Affairs* 47 (July 1969): 619.

<sup>370</sup>Among the military changes: General Creighton Abrams took over from Westmoreland in the middle of 1968 and redeployed American troops to protect population areas; he also ended search-and-destroy methods. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 236.

<sup>371</sup>Quoted in Gore, *Eye of the Storm*, 11-12, 15-16.

supported a land invasion of North Vietnam--and in the absence of such an invasion, the continuing stalemate in Vietnam would have continued to bedevil whoever was President. Nor was continued escalation a solution to America's woes--the communists, just as McNamara had argued, would simply have matched our buildup.<sup>372</sup>

How much longer would America have supported a continued buildup without tangible results to show for it? At a minimum, the funding of such a buildup would have been doubtful. One of the four reasons listed by Johnson in his memoirs for his rejection of a larger buildup in the spring of 1968 involved a lack of funding and the deficit. Johnson mentions, as another reason, that the public

continued to be discouraged as a result of the Tet offensive and the way events in Vietnam had been presented to the American people in newspapers and on television. Critics of our policy became more and more vocal as contention for the presidential nomination heated up.<sup>373</sup>

Despite his jab at the media, criticism of the President and his war policies had been mounting before Tet; the cries to get out--whether through negotiations or a military victory--had been increasing before Tet. Tet's real impact was thus only one of timing--it forced the President to make changes that would have had to be made anyway, probably before the election--certainly afterward.

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<sup>372</sup>Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 369-370.

<sup>373</sup>*Ibid.*, 415.

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's unforgettable National Security Adviser and (later) Secretary of State, wrote in his memoirs, *The White House Years*, that by the time Nixon assumed the Presidency,

. . . [the] country had been riven by protest and anguish, sometimes taking on a violent and ugly character. The comity by which a democratic society must live had broken down. No government can function without a minimum of trust. This was being dissipated under the harshness of our alternatives and the increasing rage of our domestic controversy. . . . Public support was ebbing for a war we would not win but also seemed unable to end.<sup>374</sup>

Kissinger points out that Nixon did not create, but "inherited this cauldron."<sup>375</sup> But was this cauldron a product of Tet?

Only in part. Kissinger unduly blamed Tet, but even his account relates a larger context--not the least of which were South Vietnam's internal weaknesses, the failed strategy of attrition, and the American government's lack of appreciation for the political and psychological nuances of guerrilla war.<sup>376</sup> Nixon was constrained by anguish and anger over the course of the war--of which Tet was only a part. Tet was only one step in this journey. Tet did not, by itself, change public or congressional opinion. Tet did force the President to review and implement changes in Vietnam policy, but those changes would have occurred sooner rather than later. Tet, in short, was not "the turning point" of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>374</sup>Kissinger, *White House Years*, 226.

<sup>375</sup>*Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>376</sup>*Ibid.*, 226-227; "The Viet Nam Negotiations," 212-216.

By framing the years 1965-1968 into historical context, it also becomes impossible to sustain the argument that media distortion was responsible for America's psychological defeat in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. Despite any distortion that did occur, the press accurately reflected growing concerns of the American people: How much longer would the war drag on? How much more sacrifice would be expected of America's youth and of the American nation? For what purpose? To what end? By lashing out at the media, President Johnson, like President Nixon<sup>377</sup> after him, was incriminating a convenient scapegoat rather than placing the blame where it belonged: on his own failed policies of attrition, gradual escalation, limited mobilization, and limited war.

Yet far from being villains donning black top hats and cloaks, Johnson, Nixon, and their advisers were misguided by an exalted notion of American honor and the damage that would accrue to that honor as a result of a precipitate withdrawal.

Kissinger wrote after the war that the Nixon administration began its term of office

determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. But it came up against the reality that had also bedeviled its predecessor. For nearly a generation the security and progress of free people had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel.<sup>378</sup>

A few pages later he wrote more succinctly: "It seemed to me important for America not to be humiliated, not to be shattered, but to leave Vietnam in a manner that even

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<sup>377</sup>Nixon, *Real War*, 102, 114-115.

<sup>378</sup>Kissinger, *White House Years*, 227-228.



the protesters might later see as reflecting an American choice made with dignity and self-respect."<sup>379</sup>

The tragedy of Tet was that despite any re-evaluation of policy that did occur, American troops toiled and died in Vietnam for another five years. The saddest thing about Vietnam is not that it occurred but that, once involved, we could not extricate ourselves. Even by 1968 it was not too late to reduce the slaughter; Tet provided a salient warning that America should, at last, get out.

It was only one of many such warnings. Nixon, like Johnson before him, believed he could forestall those warnings, Nixon clinging to the illusion that because withdrawal would lead to a loss of credibility and honor, we could somehow hang on until the omens proved more favorable. But the gods--fate--history--call it what you will--have no care for the musings of foolish men.

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<sup>379</sup>Ibid., 229; also see p. 235.

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