

On April 7, 1965 President Lyndon Johnson told a group of people at Johns Hopkins University that the United States was undertaking a stronger position to guarantee the freedom of South Vietnam. In the speech, Johnson also guaranteed American involvement in Vietnam would not end until the United States was satisfied with the peace arrangement. He told the crowd, “We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement.”<sup>1</sup>

By mid-1966 America had 265,000 troops in South Vietnam; by then end of 1967 it had more than 500,000. The war was costing the American government an estimated \$100 billion per year by 1968.<sup>2</sup> By April 1975, however, President Gerald Ford ordered all Americans in South Vietnam out of the country. As the last marines were leaving the roof of the United States embassy in Saigon, the communist North Vietnamese were entering the front door. On April 30, 1975, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam and the American attempt to guarantee the freedom of South Vietnam ended in defeat.<sup>3</sup>

During this time period, the United States had to come to grips with its first complete military defeat. Unlike the War of 1812 and the successful ending battle of New Orleans, there was no positive spin that could be placed on the losing conflict in Vietnam. Almost immediately, the analysts began debating why the United States was unable to achieve military victory in Vietnam. Many theories have surfaced, which

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Lyndon, “Speech to Johns Hopkins University on 4-7-65,” The Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon Johnson, 1965, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson James T., American in the Twentieth Century: A History, (San Diego: HBJ Publishers, 1989), 415.

include; There were no clear policy goals established which would satisfy the American people, the military adopted a strategy of avoiding defeat instead of securing victory, the one-year tours of duty for American GIs, and the failure of Johnson to achieve a declaration of war at the beginning of the conflict.

All of these theories have credibility and did probably play a role in the defeat of the United States at the hands of an enemy that was much weaker. In fact, the different theories regarding the loss in Vietnam could fill up a complete volume in a textbook series. However, each time the conflict of Vietnam is studied by this author, three reasons stand out more than any of the others. The three reasons are; the American leaders did not understand the determination of the North Vietnamese to fight, the United States, at home, was undergoing a continuance of the American revolution that included violence, and the American media was allowed to dominate the interpretation of the war for the American people.

The first reason the United States was unable to achieve its military objective was that it did not understand the determination of the North Vietnamese to win its revolution. The leadership of North Vietnam understood what they had to do to win and unify Vietnam under communist leadership. In an interview with Stephen Young, Bui Tin, who served on the general staff of North Vietnam's army, was asked what Hanoi's strategy was to win the war. He replied by quoting Ho Chi Minh: "We don't need to win military objectives, we only need to hit them until they [the United States] until they give up and get out."<sup>4</sup> Students of American history realize this was the same strategy used by

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<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, Steven E., Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 263.

<sup>4</sup> Horowitz, David, "Vietnam General Confirms U.S. Lefts Role in Losing War," Human Events, 22 September 1995, 15.

George Washington and the Continental Army while fighting for their independence from Britain.

This policy was most apparent during the Tet Offensive in February 1968. Paying no attention to the important Vietnamese holiday, the North invaded the South with a fury that had not been seen during the conflict. The American Army was caught off-guard, but was able to repel the attack. Despite not winning the military battle, the North was able to convince the Americans of their willingness to win, even if it meant attacking on their most important holidays. The American leadership had underestimated the will of the North Vietnamese to win the war.

The second reason that the United States was unable to achieve its military objectives in Vietnam was the social revolution that was occurring in the United States. During the 1960s, the United States was embroiled in a revolution of civil rights and the authority of the people over the government. Numerous riots happened throughout the United States as the people of the country began to demand equal treatment. Americans began to question the authority of the government over them. The Supreme Court of the United States handed down decision after decision that secured individual rights over the abuses of government. The turbulence of the 1960s was epitomized by the assassination of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. During these times, people often turn to the country for help. In the Presidential Election of 1968, Lyndon Johnson did not seek re-election and Richard Nixon was elected on the platform of bringing a successful end to the war in Vietnam and restoring the American dream.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roseboom, Eugene H., A History of Presidential Elections From George Washington to Richard Nixon, (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1970), 603.

However, just as Americans may have been turning to the central government to secure the American Revolution to all of its citizens, the Pentagon Papers were published and the country began a new round of distrust of its government.<sup>6</sup> At about the same time, news of the events of mid-March 1968 at the small village of My Lai came to the American people. Those Americans who were unaffected by the Pentagon Papers, began to question the government and its role in Vietnam. Because of the structure of the American republic, according to its Constitution, it was, and still is, important for the government to have the support of its people when conducting a military war. However, American was not supporting its government, which made a successful outcome in Vietnam almost impossible.

What made the American people turn against the war? The country supported its government almost unanimously in the two great wars against Germany less than forty years before Vietnam. Social strains were apparent during those conflicts, but they did not bring down the war effort against Germany. However, when you combine the social strains in the country with the access the American media had to the war, the ability of the United States to reach its military objective was doomed. No other war up to that point was actually watched by every American. The American media, especially television, brought the war to every home in the United States. The media was everywhere in Vietnam. Tom Jones, a Corporal in the United States Army during Vietnam, said the journalists were a part of every assignment.

Every where we went, there was at least one person from the Associated Press or CBS it seemed like. They were armed with their cameras and we were responsible for their safety. As we would fly into enemy territory for a rescue, we would sometimes have to physically move the journalist out of the way in order to rescue our guy. One of my worst injuries came when we had to evacuate an area, and I ran into a journalist with

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<sup>6</sup> Pooley, Eric, "1960-1973: Revolution," Time, 9 March 1998, 144.

a TV camera. His camera broke my nose and delayed my exit from the area as Charlie [the North Vietnamese] was moving in.<sup>7</sup>

While the people in the United States came home every night to see the events of the war on their televisions, so were the North Vietnamese. The American media helped the North Vietnamese plan their strategy. Bui Tin said “It was essential to our strategy...Every day our leadership would listen to world news over the radio at 9 a.m. to follow the actions of the Americans.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the leak of security it caused, the American media played an extensive role in eroding the support for the war. Peggy Jones, who would later marry Tom and have a wonderfully bright oldest son, said, at first, the war was fascinating, but as it was combined with everything else that was happening, it became tiresome.

I was in sixth grade when I really first became aware of what was going on in Vietnam. We would rush home to watch what happened on the evening news so that we could go to school and talk about it. However, as the war went on, the television was also telling us what was happening in cities in the United States. It seemed that all the news became was how many Americans died in Vietnam and how many Americans died in Chicago. We really became tired of it all. When we found out one of the guys serving in Vietnam from our small town was killed, it seemed that all of the fighting needed to stop. But there it was every night. It seemed to go on and on. When I found out about My Lai, I felt sick to my stomach. The solution to the killing was simple, get out of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

Had the citizens of the United States seen on television what happened to Dresden in World War II, or Hiroshima in World War II, would the support of the war efforts remained in place? Possibly, but when combined with the social revolution occurring in the United States during the 1960s and the will of the North Vietnamese to fight until the bitter end, the chances of the United States achieving a military victory was slim to none.

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<sup>7</sup> Jones, Scott, “Interview with Tommy Lee Jones on 12/1/199.”

<sup>8</sup> Horowitz, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Jones Scott, “Interview with Peggy Jones on 12/1/99.”

However, it would be a terrible loss if we did not learn from the war. Just because the United States lost the war on the battlefield, does not mean the country should not study. Mistakes were made by people in powerful positions, the military, as well as, the citizens of the country itself. If we can learn the lessons from the conflict in Vietnam, then the war is not a loss, but a victory.

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