

To What Extent did the Tet Offensive contribute to US withdrawal from Vietnam?

History Internal Assessment

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will evaluate the question, ‘To what extent did the 1968 Tet Offensive contribute to the US withdrawal from Vietnam?’. Source A, a monograph by Erik Villard, surmises important engagements in the Tet Offensive, giving relevant context to explain the reactions to the offensive both in the field and within the US government. Source B, a journal titled *Tet 1968: The Turning Point*, by John H. Willbanks provides a general scope of how the US public and leadership reacted to the offensive, it is relevant as it examines how these reactions determined future policy.

Source A is a monograph on the Tet Offensive titled *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, by Erik Villard, references various firsthand accounts of engagements by using U.S. infantry reports.¹ The origin of Villard as a Historian for Digital Military in the U.S. Army Center of Military History, with a Ph.D. in history and extensive experience covering the Vietnam war is valuable in attesting his reliability, however it may also be limited as Villard’s perspective and history introduces biases regarding the perception of the U.S. military. The purpose of the source is to document a series of engagements during the Tet offensive and detail the immediate effects of the Tet offensive on the involved combatants,² this is valuable because it provides insight into the perspective of the US combatant and by extension US government. This is also a limitation as the perspective of the Viet-Cong is rarely explored. The Content of the source contains numerous primary sources and firsthand accounts from U.S. military reports to reinforce its claims.³ The report contains no perspectives from the Viet-Cong, as it was focused on addressing the U.S. and South Vietnamese perspective. While this provides a valuable description of U.S. military leadership and troop reactions, it is also a limitation as it provides little in the ways of the effect on Viet-Cong troops or leadership.

¹ Villad, Erik. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*. Fort McNair, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008.

² Ibid, p. 6

³ Ibid, p. 8-14

Source B is a disquisition titled *Tet 1968: The Turning Point* by John H. Willbanks,⁴ a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel with a M.A. and Ph.D. in History from the University of Kansas. Willbanks' extensive military history and qualifications in academia lend him significant credibility, thus the origin of the source is valuable in its reliability. This origin is also limited by Willbanks' history with the US military which could impact the objectivity of his perspective. The content of the disquisition details the US reaction to the Tet offensive both from the general public and leadership – with an extensive focus on the effect the Tet offensive had president Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy regarding Vietnam.⁵ This content is valuable as it addresses important factors like the Lyndon administration's role in withdrawal, but is limited in that the focus is set on a variety of topics, so in depth analysis is impossible given report constraints. The purpose is to document America's foreign policy reaction, which is valuable because it directly relates to the research question, but it is similarly limited as it ignores critical perspectives of the Vietnamese public and leadership, which also played a crucial role in the US decision to withdraw.

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Section 2: Investigation

Introduction:

The Tet Offensive was a series of surprise coordinated assaults on over 100 cities and outposts in South Vietnam by the Viet-Cong on January 30th 1968. Historians see the offensive as a key turning point in US motivation to continue the war effort, eventually leading to US withdrawal in May of 1973. The Tet Offensive contributed to the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam for a myriad of reasons. It fueled domestic Anti-war sentiment, turning the general public against continued intervention, worsened troop morale for the US while bolstering enemy morale, and convinced the public that the war was not in favor

⁴ Willbanks, James H. "Tet 1968: The Turning Point." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. May 15, 2012.

⁵ Willbanks, James H. "Tet 1968: The Turning Point."

of the US. Overall, while the Tet Offensive represented a military success for the US, it was a geopolitical failure which directly contributed to the withdrawal decision.

Anti-War Sentiment

When the war started with Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965, only 15% of Americans were against the war⁶, by January of 1968, 28% were in opposition; immediately following the Tet Offensive, opposition would rise to 42%.⁷ Historian Matthew Dallek contends the political disaster for the Johnson administration as a result of Tet had “sowed profound doubts about the war’s course—exposing the truth that, in spite of the presence of some 500,000 American military personnel in Vietnam, three years of fighting and heavy casualties had yielded nothing more than a protracted, bloody stalemate”⁸. The offensive provided an irrefutable example that not only was the war in Vietnam far from over, but that it would likely never produce a decisive victory for the U.S. Dallek is in agreement to historian James H. Willbanks, who expresses the impact Tet had on American politics, specifically President Johnson, who was, “Beset politically by challengers within his own party”⁹ ensuing the offensive. Willbanks depicts the result as so profound, claiming the offensive had claimed its more important victim yet.¹⁰ Johnson’s subsequent decision not to run for re-election demonstrated to American politicians that Vietnam was the primary issue; more importantly, it established that supporting the war further was political suicide. The chaos sewn by Tet Offensive into American politics swiftly deposed of the Johnson administration, opening a new niche of candidates who promised America an end to the war.

Declining Troop Morale

⁶ Warfare History Network. “How Tet Offensive Changed the Tide of the Vietnam War (Why America Lost).” *The National Interest*. The Center for the National Interest, February 1, 2020.

⁷ Willbanks, James H. “Tet 1968: The Turning Point.” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. May 15, 2012.

⁸ Dallek, Matthew. “How the Tet Offensive Shocked Americans into Questioning If the Vietnam War Could Be Won.” *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, January 25, 2018.

⁹ Willbanks, James H. “Tet 1968: The Turning Point.”

¹⁰ Willbanks, James H. “Tet 1968: The Turning Point”

American forces on the ground grew tired of the prolonged war following the Tet Offensive. Historian Erik Villard utilizes numerous primary sources, including reports by several infantry divisions during the offensive to depict the odds US and South Vietnamese troops faced. Villard describes the opposition as a “numerically superior and well-entrenched enemy”¹¹ providing fierce resistance. Villard stresses the conditions and ferocity faced by US troops as overwhelming; despite eventually succeeding.¹² Villard makes it clear through his descriptions that US troops were significantly stressed, at a time where they expected a closing to the war.¹³ Villard’s perspective is justified by his use of official military reports showing US victories accompanied by significant casualties. This is significant because US leadership recognized fleeting troop morale, an indication of slowing performance in the field – this information cast doubt into the minds of US military leaders. Moreover, political scientist Konrad Kellen argued that the morale boost from the Tet Offensive as a result of Viet-Cong propaganda would lead to extremely driven opposition. Konrad performed a study two years after the offensive which interviewed 22 Viet-Cong prisoners of war where he concluded “Most VC and NVA soldiers seem to expect an ultimate win, are not discouraged by U.S. weapon superiority, and appear determined to fight on indefinitely”.¹⁴ Konrad supplied a primary perspective of the Viet-Cong mentality, a widespread phenomenon which seemed to only strengthen with each engagement, regardless of failure. Konrad’s contention is significant because it illustrated the key difference between US moral and Viet-Cong morale, as the same drive could not be applied for U.S. troops in the closing years of the war.¹⁵ As the morale divided continued to widen, US military leadership was forced to spend more time and resources compensating, which was decidedly noticed by the American people.

¹¹ Villad, Erik. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*. Fort McNair, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008.

¹² Ibid, p. 85

¹³ Ibid, p. 85

¹⁴ Kellen, Konrad. “Conversations with Enemy Soldiers In Late 1968/Early 1969: A Study of Motivation and Morale,” September 1970.

¹⁵ Warfare History Network. “How Tet Offensive Changed the Tide of the Vietnam War (Why America lost)”

Loss of Confidence for the US

In the U.S., the offensive represented a massive intelligence failure, dealing a huge blow to American confidence in both their current intelligence and previous assessments of the Viet-Cong's fighting potential. Military leaders were aware of an imminent attack but were oblivious to the true scale.¹⁶ As an interim report by the CIA following the Tet Offensive details; "Although warning had thus been provided, the intensity, coordination, and timing of the enemy attack were not anticipated".¹⁷ The CIA's assessment of the offensive demonstrated a remarkably unreliable intelligence community, doubts within U.S. leadership ensued.¹⁸ Villard contends that forces on the ground were likely aware of an imminent assault, but preparations were sparse and not adequate to repel assault.¹⁹ Underestimation of the Viet-Cong's ability would prove to be a devastating blow to the confidence of the US military's capabilities. While the majority of the attacks were repelled, they convinced US leadership and the public that the Viet-Cong's coordination and numbers were growing.²⁰ Ironically, according to historian James Writz, Viet-Cong forces were so depleted that their main body fighting force would remain crippled for the remainder of the war.²¹ Writz's noting of the crippled Viet-Cong forces is in agreement with the CIA's assessment of the offensive TDCSDB-315/00518-68; almost all 14 goals set forth by the Viet-Cong had failed.²² Most importantly they had not won the support of the Vietnamese people, and had sustained over 60,000 casualties.²³ But public opinion in the U.S. had other views of the war; the Tet Offensive was just another indication of a protracted war.

¹⁶ Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam (interim report), Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam (interim report) § (1968).

¹⁷ Ibid pg. 2

¹⁸ Ibid pg. 7

¹⁹ Villard, Erik. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*.

²⁰ Willbanks, James H. "Tet 1968: The Turning Point."

²¹ Writz, James J. *The Tet Offensive*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991.

²² "SITUATION APPRAISAL: ANALYSIS OF VIET CONG TET OFFENSIVE." Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, February 12, 1968.

²³ Mosettig, Michael D. "The Campaign That Changed How Americans Saw the Vietnam War." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, January 31, 2018.

Conclusion

The Vietnam war was stagnant long before the Tet Offensive, arguably it had no tangibly negative effects on the US. US forces took relatively minimal casualties and dealt a crippling blow to the Viet-Cong. However, it was a massive political failure, directly leading the US to withdraw. The American public saw the offensive as the final gasp of US forces. Opinion turned against the Johnson administration and ended his future political career. Political favor shifted towards those who could pull US troops out of the war. Furthermore, the Viet-Cong's ability to muster tens of thousands of troops negatively affected US troop morale whilst bolstering the Northern Vietnamese cause. Confidence was lost in both the US intelligence community's ability to assess Viet-Cong activity, and the US military leadership's decisiveness. In the end, these factors initiated a series of events that would lead to US withdrawal.

Word count: 1290

Section 3: Reflection

This investigation has given insight into the importance of perspectives and the complexity of subjectivity in the historical method. Throughout the investigation it is demonstrated that, counter-intuitively, the perspectives and evaluations of even the government may be radically detached from reality. In the case of this particular investigation, the perception of the Tet offensive carried much more weight than the tangible impacts of it.

Additionally, this investigation shows that historical accounts for events are often predominantly organized by those with more resources to do so, and as such present possible biases and unrealizabilities throughout the historical method. For instance, the lack of Vietnamese based sources and historical analysis presents a significant lack of perspective. The vast majority of popular academic resources available are of western origin. Section 1 details two sources the investigation relies heavily on, both of

western origin. Furthermore, section 2 is also completely based on western sources, with the Viet-Cong perspective being included through these sources but not by them.

As a consequence, ascertaining sources with Vietnamese origins to include in the investigation was difficult, instead, section 2 bases its evaluation on the Vietnamese perspective through relying on what was said about how they viewed the events leading up to and following the offensive. This is likely due to the much larger academic fields and institutions present in the U.S. and other western nations relative to those of Vietnam.

Research on the historical perspectives regarding the research question of this investigation were used to attain a fundamental picture of the general historical consensus regarding the impact of the offensive, with a primary focus being to determine the specific influence on the US government and public opinion. The investigation then relied on a series of indirectly related sources, which provided further background information, and additional information to form a correlation between the offensive and other more obscure events and outcomes that may have contributed to withdrawal. For example, section 2 utilized Erik Villard's monograph to relate the firsthand experiences of US combatants to overall troop morale immediately during and after the offensive. Overall, section 2 utilizes a variety of sources from numerous institutions like the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the CIA, however a lack of a reference frame to compare with non-western sources made it difficult to identify possible inaccuracies due to biases.

Word count 386

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