

Tet Offensive: How Lyndon B. Johnson Won the Battle but Lost the War

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Abstract

As domestically controversial as it was globally influential, the Vietnam War is one of the most momentous events in American history during the twentieth century. From 1963 to 1969, President Lyndon B. Johnson, as the commander-in-chief, escalated American military involvement in Vietnam. His management of the Tet Offensive in 1968, in which the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong guerillas coordinated a large-scale surprise attack against cities throughout South Vietnam, is particularly significant. It proved to be a watershed moment for the war and greatly shaped its outcome. As such, this paper explores Johnson's handling of the Tet Offensive crisis and analyzes the associated implications. Militarily, the American forces recovered from the surprise attacks and emerged victorious against the North Vietnamese forces. However, the Tet Offensive was an overwhelming psychological defeat. It not only damaged the American troop morale and public support for the war, but it also destroyed Johnson's personal convictions for the war. The Tet Offensive marked the beginning of the end of American involvement in Vietnam, which had been escalating up to that point. As such, Johnson and the United States won the battle but ultimately lost the war.

Introduction

As domestically controversial as it was globally influential, the Vietnam War is one of the most momentous events in American history during the twentieth century. The war, which started in the middle of the 1950s and lasted for two decades, was a prominent proxy war during the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. It pitted the Americans and the South Vietnamese against the communist North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, a southern guerilla group. During the war, the United States experienced several changes in presidential leadership. From 1963 to 1969, President Lyndon B. Johnson, as the commander-in-chief, captained the ship of American involvement in Vietnam. Naturally, Johnson led the American response to crises that arose during that time. His management of the Tet Offensive, in which the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army coordinated a large-scale surprise attack throughout South Vietnam, is particularly significant. This incident proved to be a watershed moment for the war and greatly shaped its outcome.

This paper explores Johnson's handling of the Tet Offensive crisis and analyzes the associated implications. Militarily, the American forces recovered from the surprise attacks and emerged victorious against the North Vietnamese forces. However, the Tet Offensive was an overwhelming psychological defeat. It not only damaged the American troop morale and public support for the war, but it also destroyed Johnson's personal convictions for the war. The Tet Offensive marked the beginning of the end of American involvement in Vietnam, which had been escalating up to that point. As such, Johnson and the United States won the battle but ultimately lost the war.

Background

To analyze Lyndon B. Johnson and his actions in response to the Tet Offensive, it is important to understand the situation in Vietnam that he inherited as well as his foreign policy agenda. In addition, this section details the escalating American engagement in Vietnam leading up to the Tet Offensive.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, communist North Vietnam threatened to take over a weak democratic South Vietnam. The north had the help of a southern communist rebel group called the Viet Cong. Ascending to the presidency after John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Johnson maintained Kennedy's objective to support the anti-communists in South Vietnam in their fight against their northern aggressors. Like Eisenhower and Kennedy before him, Johnson held a strong belief in the domino theory, which describes that if one country falls into communism, there could be a series of neighboring countries that also fall. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stated in 1965 that if the United States left South Vietnam and the communists took over, "Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma" would also fall, and that the communist influence could spread throughout eastern Asia and into Europe and Africa.¹ As such, the United States and many other European democratic powers held a containment approach, in which they worked to prevent the spreading of communism to neutral states. More simply put, Johnson and his foreign policy advisers all held "the belief that it was necessary to stand up to dictators and totalitarian states while avoiding nuclear war."² In this case, the dictators are

¹ Barrett, David M. *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993, 58, "Minutes of July 22, 1965 Meeting, file: July 21-27, 1965, Meetings on Vietnam, Meeting notes, box 1, LBJ Library"

² Colman, Jonathan. *The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B. Johnson: The United States and the World, 1963-1969*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 7.

communist leaders, and thus Johnson felt it imperative that the United States showed strength against the North Vietnamese.³

To this end, Johnson employed opportune incidents to ramp up American involvement in Vietnam. Most notably, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed in 1965 in response to an ambiguous attack on the USS *Maddox* by a North Vietnamese torpedo boat.⁴ The resolution served as a “conditional declaration of war” that essentially “provided the White House with freedom of action in Vietnam.”⁵ Since that time, details have emerged that suggest that the North Vietnamese aggression was misconstrued. Historian David Schmitz analyzes that Johnson exploited “an unexpected opportunity [in the Gulf of Tonkin], deliberately misled Congress, and the American people... to obtain Congressional authorization for a war that they had secretly decided on months before, while promising the voters peace.”⁶ Johnson committed to major American military involvement in Vietnam in July of 1965.⁷ As such, Johnson utilized the Tonkin incident as the justification to take direct military action and pursue his foreign policy objective of containment in southeast Asia.

Despite a shaky justification for military escalation in Vietnam, the American public generally supported the initiative, especially at the beginning. Historian David Barrett writes that in the early stages of war, “the public displayed attitudes consistent with the bipartisan near-consensus that the domino principle applied to southeast Asia and that containment was the best solution for what was perceived as global communist aggression.”⁸ Moreover, the news media did not seek to verify the truth in the Tonkin incident at the time. Instead, Johnson’s swift actions

³ Schmitz, David F. *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 33.

⁴ Johnson, Lyndon B. *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, 112.

⁵ Colman, 27.

⁶ Austin, Anthony. *The President's War*. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1971, 345.

⁷ Johnson, 153.

⁸ Barrett, 46.

in response to Tonkin received “overwhelming support from the press, Congress, labor and veterans organizations.”⁹ Johnson acted in a sociopolitical climate that commended toughness against Communism.

The American military strategy sought to contain the north Vietnamese expansion and protect the south Vietnamese government. As such, American troops carried out extensive bombings on the ground and through the air to “crush the enemy’s capacity and will for fighting.”¹⁰ Known as Operation Rolling Thunder, a total of 643,000 tons of bombs were dropped on north Vietnam from 1965 to 1967.¹¹ However, the North Vietnamese proved to be more resilient than Johnson anticipated, and the bombings did not achieve their intended level of impact. The war did not end quickly, but dragged on in a war of attrition.

As more troops were deployed at higher costs with no end in sight, public support for the war gradually eroded. The potential of a costly stalemate loomed. In fact, many Americans felt a practical annoyance with the Vietnam war. Historian Don Oberdorfer writes that “most people became distressed only after the war became protracted and doubts grew about military progress towards a tangible victory... the public was uncertain and unhappy.”¹² In response, the American government attempted to appease the public by claiming that they were succeeded on the battle front and that a light was at the end of the tunnel.¹³ Ultimately, at the eve of the Tet Offensive, Johnson faced tremendous uncertainty about the future of the war as well as a waning level of public support.

Military Success

⁹ Turner, Kathleen J. *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985, 85. “Memorandum, James L. Greenfield to Rusk, August 6, 1964, NSF:VN, box 6, no. 127.”

¹⁰ Schmitz, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² Oberdorfer, Don. *Tet!* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

From a military point of view, the Tet Offensive was a major success for the United States. Johnson and his generals overcame the initial surprise and crushed the opposition. The Tet Offensive started in the early morning hours of January 31, 1968. More than 80,000 North Vietnamese militants coordinated attacks on over 100 cities throughout South Vietnam.¹⁴ The targeted areas included five of the six largest cities, sixty district capitals, and the American embassy in Saigon. The attackers were ordered display their “revolutionary heroism by surmounting all hardships and difficulties and making sacrifices as to be able to fight continually and aggressively... [to] secure the final victory at all costs.”¹⁵ With these attacks, the North Vietnamese aimed to incite popular uprisings in South Vietnam and break the will to fight in the American forces. The attack was in large part a surprise to the South Vietnamese and American military because of its timing. Conventionally, the Tet holiday, which celebrates the lunar new year, is accepted as a day of truce in warfare. As such, the attack was unexpected even though the Central Intelligence Agency by the end of 1967 had collected evidence that increasingly suggested an intensification of North Vietnamese aggression.¹⁶ Johnson confirmed in his memoir the anticipation of an attack “around the Tet period,” notably receiving a report from his top general, William Westmoreland, that the Viet Cong displayed ““a very unusual sense of urgency”” and promised its supporters a ““final victory’.”¹⁷ However, Johnson admitted that “it was difficult to believe that the Communists would so profane their own people’s sacred holiday.”¹⁸ As such, the North Vietnamese caught the Americans and South Vietnamese in a false sense of security and made significant initial victories, such as bombing the American embassy and taking over several cities.

¹⁴ Gilbert, Marc Jason, and William P. Head. *The Tet Offensive*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ Oberdorfer, 120-121.

¹⁷ Johnson, 381.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 384.

The Tet Offensive had three phases between January 30 and September 1968. However, most of the North Vietnamese vigor faded after the first few weeks, during which they suffered heavy losses in troops. American forces recovered from the initial attacks and recovered their territories. For example, the North Vietnamese fought intensely for three weeks in the historic city of Hue, but ultimately failed to capture the city.¹⁹ Likewise in Saigon, it took several weeks for American and South Vietnamese troops to weed out 1000 Viet Cong guerillas who infiltrated the city and bombed the US embassy.²⁰ Over the next few weeks, American forces overpowered the enemy to recover nearly all the targeted urban centers. North Vietnamese Colonel General Tran Van Tra admitted in his memoir that the Americans won militarily. Tra reflects that “during Tet of 1968 we did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy... [and thus] suffered large sacrifices and losses with regard to manpower and material, especially cadres at the various echelons, which clearly weakened us.”²¹ In fact, Johnson recalls that 45,000 of the total 84,000 Communist attackers were killed by the end of February in 1968.²² He notes that this figure is greater than the entire losses of the American military in nine years in Vietnam. Therefore, Johnson and the American military achieved a resounding success during the Tet Offensive by effectively repelling the North Vietnamese surprise attack.

Psychological Defeat

Despite the military success by the United States, the Tet Offensive dealt a fatal blow to the American war effort. The crisis dealt debilitating psychological damage to American

¹⁹ Gilbert, 25.

²⁰ Bowman, John Stewart. *The Vietnam War: An Almanac*. New York, NY: World Almanac Publications, 1985, 195.

²¹ Ford, Ronnie E. *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*. Ilford, Essex, England: F. Cass, 1995, 139.

²² Johnson, 383.

soldiers, the American public, and Johnson himself. The negative impact proved too much for Johnson and his administration to overcome, and thus it became a turning point for the war. In his memoir, Johnson accurately captured the overall mental effect of the Tet Offensive:

There is no doubt in my mind that the Tet offensive was a military debacle for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.... [It is] the most disastrous Communist defeat of the war in Vietnam... But the defeat the Communists suffered did not have the telling effect it should have had largely because of what we did to ourselves.”²³

The effect of the Tet Offensive was most immediately reflected in the American troops stationed in South Vietnam. The unexpected nature of the attacks implied not only an underestimation of the opposition’s firepower, but more alarmingly revealed a lapse in military intelligence. At the top of the chain of command, General Westmoreland was unshaken by the surprise and felt optimism that the North Vietnamese were down to their last options.²⁴ Unfortunately for him, his confidence was not shared by the troops. In the memoir of an American writer who stayed with the army during the Tet Offensive, the author described the atmosphere in the American camp as very tense. He recounts that after the surprise attack, even the simplest open terrains had “something... that seemed threatening.”²⁵ The paranoia reflected the sentiments of the soldiers. Furthermore, the Tet Offensive destroyed any hope among the soldiers that the war was close to being finished. Instead, it propagated the prospective of a stalemate at best and an indefinite continuation of the war of attrition. The soldiers’ morale steadily deteriorated as the war dragged on, resulting in many of them being unable to serve effectively.²⁶ In fact, the gloomy sentiments among the troops started even before the Tet Offensive. In late 1967, a Marine Corps pilot, Captain Robert R. Chastant, lamented that “one of

²³ Ibid., 384.

²⁴ Oberdorfer, 186.

²⁵ Falabella, J. Robert. *Vietnam Memoirs; a Passage to Sorrow*. New York, NY: Pageant Press International, 1971, 62.

²⁶ Ibid., 91-92.

the basic problems is that Johnson is trying to fight this war... with poorly allocated funds, minimum manpower, limited time, and few new ideas.”²⁷

However, if the disillusionment among the troops in Vietnam was bad, then the concern domestically in the United States was far worse. Historian Michael Hennessey analyzes that “the ability of the supposedly numerically weak Viet Cong to infiltrate to the heart of South Vietnam’s urban centers... brought American domestic frustration with the war to a head.”²⁸ The surprise attack greatly damaged public confidence that the war effort was going well. It emboldened the anti-war faction of politicians, media members, and average citizens to openly criticize the war. The Tet Offensive gave leverage to them to put public pressure on Johnson. Oberdorfer indicates the Tet Offensive “provided dramatic evidence that the Johnson administration had been misleading the public”²⁹ At the same time, Johnson and the American military could not effectively allay public fears because they lost credibility. Moreover, Tet Offensive destroyed General Westmoreland’s image because it appeared that he had been “manipulating the press to his own advantage, avoiding questions which would have detracted and diverted attention from the message he sought to deliver, that the US was winning.”³⁰ Before Tet, Westmoreland told Johnson and the American people what they wanted to hear. In fact, he spoke the famous line that the end was in sight. However, the Tet Offensive directly challenged the veracity of Westmoreland’s public statements. Johnson and Westmoreland were subsequently unable to effectively prove to the people the high casualties the North Vietnamese suffered; instead, the information appeared as the same type of deceitful war propaganda as

²⁷ Hennessey, Michael A. *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ Oberdorfer, 174.

³⁰ Blood, Jake. *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War*. London: Routledge, 2005, 52.

before Tet. The intensification of the anti-war sentiment is illustrated by the quantity and content of anti-war propaganda posters that were produced.³¹

It is important to note the controversial role of the American media during and after the Tet Offensive. While the extent of which can be debated, the press undeniably impacted public opinion of the war in a negative way. The press played a very active role in covering the Tet Offensive, “particularly the suffering both sides had imposed on innocent civilians.”³² As such, the coverage became increasingly disparaging towards the war.³³ In fact, Tet proved to be a major turning point for the tone of television coverage regarding the Vietnam War. Prior to Tet, 78.6% of editorial comments were positive towards the conduct of the war. During Tet, 100% of the editorial comments were negative, and this only slightly declined to 78.6% of negative comments after Tet.³⁴ While many argue that the media swayed public opinion, the media also reflected public opinion in a positive feedback loop. Most notably, the Walter Cronkite moment perfectly illustrates the public frustration with the Vietnam war. In late February 1968, famous CBS anchor Walter Cronkite delivered an hour-long special, *A Report from Vietnam*. In response to the Tet Offensive, Cronkite questioned “what the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war!”³⁵ In response, Johnson allegedly lamented that “if I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America.”³⁶ Johnson’s defeatist sentiment proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, because his own disillusionment sealed the psychological defeat of America in the Vietnam War.

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, Johnson lost his conviction for the war. In his memoir, he states that he ultimately agreed with the anti-war sentiments that felt “the bitter

³¹ Benson, Thomas W. *Posters for Peace: Visual Rhetoric & Civic Action*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015.

³² Hammond, William M. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998, 115.

³³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁴ Robbins, James S. *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive*. New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2010, 249.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

debate and noisy dissension at home about Vietnam were too high a price to pay for honoring our commitment in Southeast Asia...so did I.”³⁷ Interestingly, there was a small window of opportunity for Johnson to act decisively to end the war with a win, but the window was small. Right after Tet, public sentiment briefly increased in bellicosity in the Gallup polls, though they also increased in frustration with the war. Historian James Robbins analyzes that “in the wake of Tet, Americans wanted the war to be pursued with vigor, or not at all.”³⁸ However, Johnson lost his confidence that the Vietnam War could be won in the foreseeable future. His waning faith in the war was expedited by his own military advisers. Johnson indicates that “six advisers favored some form of disengagement, one was in between, and four were opposed.”³⁹ As a result, Johnson declined the March 1968 request by Westmoreland for 206,000 more men, and moved swiftly to reduce the 500,000 soldiers already there.⁴⁰ Johnson implies his psychological defeat by repeated indicating in his memoir that “we were defeating ourselves.”⁴¹ As a final signal of surrender, Johnson announced on March 31, 1968 that he would not run for presidential reelection.⁴² The Tet Offensive’s psychological damage compounded with Johnson’s physical fatigue to sap him of his conviction to lead the United States.

Legacy

The Tet Offensive was the turning point in the Vietnam War. The American military victory was completely overshadowed by its psychological defeat. The intent of the Tet Offensive has been retrospectively debated. Some scholars, especially those in Vietnam, argue that “the Tet Offensive was a three-phase application of military pressure that ... was not a failed

³⁷ Johnson, 422.

³⁸ Robbins, 256-257.

³⁹ Johnson, 418.

⁴⁰ Oberdorfer, 280.

⁴¹ Johnson, 418.

⁴² Johnson, 424.

desperate gamble that had to win the war at one stroke, but a successful multifaceted effort to drive the Americans to the negotiating table.”⁴³ However, this seems unlikely because of the heavy military losses and the accounts of North Vietnamese generals. Regardless of the original intent of the Tet Offensive, though, it certainly achieved its goal of halting and reversing American involvement. The United States had to accept that the war of military attrition with the North Vietnamese was no longer worth it, and thus sought to achieve its goal of containment through negotiation.⁴⁴ Moreover, the Tet Offensive also changed the course of American political history because it was the final straw that convinced Johnson not to run for reelection in 1968. Under Richard Nixon, who won subsequently won the presidency, the United States embarked on a process of disengagement from Vietnam in a process called “Vietnamization,” in which political and military burden was given back to the local South Vietnamese over the next half decade. On January 27, 1973, the United States signed a cease fire agreement with North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong.⁴⁵

The Tet Offensive is as complex as it was influential. Its dichotomous military and psychological result is endlessly fascinating, especially as it pertains to the Johnson administration and the course of the war. Ultimately, the Tet offensive became a key turning point that shaped the outcome of the Vietnam War and heavily influenced subsequent American foreign policy.

⁴³ Gilbert, 2.

⁴⁴ Schandler, Herbert Y. *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977, 350.

⁴⁵ Bowman, 338.