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A Failure of Leadership

I would like to start by first asking the following question: "Why do Commanders fail?" Now I understand the question seems arbitrary; however there are certain characteristics that have been found throughout history proven to be a lack of leadership. For example, both Napoleon at Waterloo, and Lee at Gettysburg were both not feeling well during the time of battle, and led their men into a disaster.

The leadership roles of both the United States and Vietnam played a crucial part in the outcome of the Vietnam War. Lyndon Johnson was a profoundly insecure man who feared dissent and craved reassurance. In 1964 and 1965, Johnson's principal goals were to win the presidency in his own right and to pass his Great Society legislation through Congress. The Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, was particularly adept at sensing the president's needs and giving him the advice he wanted.

Lyndon Johnson was also an extremely intimidating man. He had quite the temper for a President of the United States. In one particular instance, page 121 of Christian Appy's book, Patriots, Charles Cooper as well as four other Senior Military Advisors to the President presented Lyndon with a strategic operation to begin blockading the North Vietnamese coastline and simultaneously beginning a B-52 bombing offensive on Hanoi. Now the president, feeling completely undermined, screamed obscenities to his five Senior Advisors, and kicked them out of his office. Now this operation took place regardless, but at the time, Lyndon was extremely fearful of Chinese, or Soviet intervention.

By this time advocates of "containment" set in place by Truman, were also advocating a new theory, "The Domino Theory." Hardly a theory at all, since it had little or no intellectual content, the domino theory argued that if a weaker nation (Vietnam) were to fall to communism, neighboring nations would also fall, like dominoes. This theory seems a bit ridiculous, it viewed smaller and weaker nations (Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, etc.) as having no history, no past, and no culture that mattered. They were simply a domino in a row waiting to be knocked down or picked up by a powerful nation. Lyndon was also presented another, and possibly great, solution to end the war. This solution came from Whitman Rostow, pg 124, his idea was to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail from within Laos, and take the city of Vinh hostage. Now to me, taking a city hostage seems a bit over the top, so this idea was a little farfetched but had a

possibility of great success. For example, if the Ho Chi Minh trail were to be destroyed, then supplies, men, etc. could not reach the front line in South Vietnam, then victory would surely be at hand in the South. Lyndon, again, shot this idea down. His main reasoning, again, was fear. The Johnson administration was influenced by the entrance of the Chinese into the Korean War, which in turn raised their fear of a Chinese recurrence in Vietnam.

Two possible ideas shot down based on fear, and not on any evidence of real threat to American lives. Lyndon was troubled with fear and doubt, none of the characteristics needed from a leader, but human nonetheless. I believe that it was this fear that led an inept offensive on Vietnam soil, not to mention the fraudulent account of the famous Maddox, and Turner Joy attack. While the Maddox did appear to have a torpedo shot at it, the Turner Joy it would seem did not contrary to national news at the time. The whole incident was turned into a National Security crisis. Lyndon fabricated this crisis for two purposes: 1. To gain political strength among the U.S. and ultimately lead to his legitimized Presidency, and 2. To tell the nation we would get involved in Vietnam.

However, Lyndon would not be the only leader to make a decision that would be detrimental to the determination of our GI's. The leaders of the Anti-War movement had begun to create a feeling of immorality among many soldiers. When morale is low, people tend to fight to stay alive, and not fight to win. When a soldier named Jim Soular, pg 156, had witnessed his best friend get murdered by another GI right in front of him. The Court marshal decided that Bob Harris, the man responsible, should only endure five years hard labor, while a case before theirs had a young man who tried to save a chopper, and crashed it, had received fifteen years. It was an injustice. The military of course did not tell the family the truth, they called it an accident. It is lies like these which decreased the morale of civilians, as well as GI's.

Morale seemed to be the deciding factor of the war. The war could not be won in a way that the American public would accept. The morale of the United States civilians had collapsed, and with this collapse, the GI's morale collapsed. The United States, as a nation, and as a leader in battle, failed to increase morale among GI's. As a result it would seem most GI's were left wondering, "just what in the hell am I doing here." These are not thoughts that should be going through their heads, GI's need only to listen to command, and be prepared to follow orders.

Imagine being a GI after his 12 month service, or being injured, coming home to a flight attendant telling you, a veteran, exiting his flight from Vietnam back to his own country, that he had better change out of his uniform before he gets into the public. This to me is a horror story. I cannot imagine the guilt these men felt coming home to a country who considered them murderers, or in some

cases 'baby killers.'

The Vietnamese on the other hand had pride. The morale of the Vietnamese came from their sincere belief that they were working toward freedom, and the freedom to pursue happiness. They even had some of their most popular singers and artists among them to help keep morale high. Even the U.S. troops in some cases could hear the singing and laughter of the Vietnamese people, which was bewildering at the time. It almost seemed to shatter the confidence and courage of our men, while building the courage and confidence of the Vietnamese.

Although on a few occasions battles had been lost due on the Vietnamese side to an underestimate from commanding officers of U.S. firepower, and tactics; the Vietnamese kept a high morale, and believed in the cause for which they were fighting. Troops from the North did not need to be recruited; they came in large numbers willing and ready to serve their country. The leadership of the Vietnamese was not well organized, but delivered one constant message, to keep spirits up and never lose courage. Even Ho Chi Minh himself would deliver this message to young soldiers. Pg. 213. It seems clear that mistakes by commanding officers had been made across the board, but when have they not? How many wars have been 'perfect', and how can you predict an outcome before it is made? I believe that in some cases people made the best decisions they could based on their current situation, and in others the account seems too obvious to have overlooked at the time, but the decision was not made now, it was made then when it had to be. But nonetheless it is imperative that we respect the nature of those mistakes in order to look for a better understanding of the future.

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