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HISTORY 195 ASSIGNMENT 3

Finding a turning point in a war as controversial and confusing as Vietnam is a hard task. Many things went wrong in Vietnam, both in the lead-up and then implementation of the war. However, I have always thought of one of the main things that turned against the Americans was its failure to win the hearts and minds of the locals. More-so, not only did they not win them - they actually turned them against them with the brutal tactics they used. In the reading of part four in the Appy book, I found an account that really compounded that belief for me, explaining from the view of someone who saw it with his own eyes the sheer brutality unleashed by the Americans on the people of Vietnam. This account was the one by helicopter door-gunner Larry Colburn, and his experience in the massacre in My Lai-4.

My Lai had been effectively covered up by the military at first as a successful firefight in which they had killed 128 Viet Cong soldiers. However, it later came to light that this was simply another brash military action in which the Americans took too much liberty with its "body count" and "free fire zone" tactics and murdered innocent woman and children. Though other accounts of atrocities came to light here and there after the My Lai event - none was more shocking than these events.

For Larry Colburn, i feel this proved the turning point for him personally on his thoughts on the war. In his account, he mentions straight off that they weren't pacifists, but they didn't kill without justification - only when they felt they needed to kill to protect themselves did they fire. At My Lai, Larry and his crew started off the day believing they were looking for soldiers and weapons. On their first pass, they actually saw a man in uniform - but that was the only one for the entire day. It was on another pass when they saw a group of women and children who had all been killed - a group they saw alive earlier that day - that they wondered what was going on. However, Larry said all their scenarios, none of them seemed to consider that it was American soldiers at that point.

Not long after that they saw a young woman, wounded, in the grass. They marked her with green smoke, meaning she was safe to approach as opposed to the red smoke they would use for a



YES

hostile. They watched as a Captain Medina walked over, “.. kicked her, stepped back, and finished her off. Right in front of us. When we saw Medina do that, it all clicked. It was our guys doing the killing.”

Now, Colburn never actually says anything like “This was the turning point for me” or anything like that. However, he does not need to. In his writing, you can tell that this was the moment when in his head he said to himself “This isn’t right, we should not be doing this.” This is proven by the actions, heroic actions, that him and his crew took by setting their helicopter between the Americans doing the killing and some civilians and refusing to let them be killed.

My belief with all this, and how I interpreted Colburn’s story, is that the soldiers started to believe that the war was not going right. They became more and more disillusioned by these events, and thus the divisions in the ranks became more apparent. This also would have been a major factor in the Vietnamese people being more sympathetic to the North Vietnamese cause, thus isolating the Americans even more. Without the support of the people, there was no way the war could have been a success, and events such as My Lai contributed majorly to that. For Colburn personally, this simply was the moment in which the war became not good versus evil - but an utter mess in which the Americans were committing atrocious acts just as bad, and thus were not going to come out of the war with an outcome they desired. This was an undoubted and clear turning point for Colburn, and these men, as they saw American soldiers doing what can only be described as horribly criminal acts.

As for an “ending” to the war, I found Truong Tran’s account near the end of the book quite intriguing. From reading this, I came up with the assumption that this war was, in effect, over before it truly began back in 1965 with the first engagements of American and North Vietnamese troops. Truong’s words seem to echo that kind of thought.

His quote about “We could either lose or tie the war, but not win” was the one that was most profound. It seems despite his involvement in the war, and trying to help the cause of the South against the North, that he always held this view. This is a key quote, as it signals a defeatist look at the situation before it has even began. Morale is key in war, and regardless of the actual thinking at times of battle, subconsciously that belief lends to a more beleaguered effort on the battlefield.

Tran also talks about how through all of history, children had been

taught that you had to be “..courageous enough to fight foreign aggressors. We could not tell our brothers and sisters we were fighting for ourselves as long as American soldiers were in the country fighting for us.” This shows another reason as to why the war was already not going to be a success before it started - the Americans helping out went against the basic beliefs of the people, and it seems that not many of them truly believed in the cause of the Americans. He also mentions the destruction brought by the Americans on the infrastructure of South Vietnam, such as wiping out the farming lands and forcing the people off of that land.

The account as a whole opens up my mind to a new way of looking at the end of the war - it was over before it began. It was lost before it began. It just took a long time for the Americans to realize that, but men like Tran knew it all along. He knew the best they could hope for was a ‘tie’, while the North could at worst come away with a ‘tie’ - therefore giving them more to fight for, as they could unite Vietnam where all the South could hope for was half. He mentions that although all Vietnamese may not have wanted communism, they all hoped for national unification. They would much rather that than not have communism. With popular support generally behind the push for unification, and the Americans destroying the land and acting like more of an aggressor, and a foreign one at that, the war effort was “ending” before it truly had a chance to begin.



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