

Due date: Saturday, 20 November 2010, 09:05 PM

Last edited: Saturday, 20 November 2010, 03:53 PM (982 words)

The Vietnam War was about stopping communism. In order to win a war against an idea we had to try to win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese people. Winning the hearts and minds of any people is extremely difficult. Winning the hearts and minds of a nation is impossible when the hearts and minds of your own people turn against you. As soon as a civil war broke out back home, the Vietnam War appeared un-winnable. The story that explains this civil war the best was J. Shaeffer, “The palace guard.” His story is essential to understanding the turning point in the Vietnam War. His story is symbolic of how confusing the Vietnam War could be to everyday people. The reason why I chose his story is because as I was reading through “Patriots” I came to a realization. I came to the realization that the true turning point in the Vietnam War had more to do with public perception than anything else.



“We used to make jokes about it, referring to ourselves as the palace guard. This is the revolution and we’re surrounding the palace. They want to tear down the flag, tear down the castle. We’re protecting the establishment. It was kind of like the same situation going on in other countries. I never in my life had ever envisioned seeing army tanks rolling through the streets of my hometown.” It’s hard to win a war when your nation is divided. Civil unrest and rioting in the streets was the biggest turning point in the war. The reason why it was the biggest turning point is because public perception is what matters in a war with no front line. It doesn’t matter how much progress the U.S. makes if its own citizens don’t believe in it. Reading through J.Shaeffer’s story revealed this. He showed that his doubts about the war were magnified when he had to deal with a tear gas incident. “It was like a Vietnam thing really, because you never knew who was who.” His story indicated that the guards he

worked with also had doubts about the war as they were the ones who had to police the anti-war movement. One could draw several parallels from combat operations in Vietnam, to the police and National Guard units that dealt with the civil unrest back home. Both felt the anger of the American public, but more importantly, both had trouble identifying who they were fighting. This is why it was the biggest turning point in the war. Our police back home had to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys on the streets of our cities, when in fact there were no good guys or bad guys. There were just people who saw things differently, and this is symbolic of the entire war. After the tear gas incident J. Shaeffer came to this realization. "So I just walked away thinking, what the hell is this insanity? In fact, you know what? I think we were all victims together in this whole business, this whole thing."

The POWs in Vietnam fought an entirely different kind of war. For them the future was uncertain. At any time they could be killed or tortured, and all they had was hope. I chose the story of John McCain, because it's important that as we look at different "endings" to Vietnam we recognize one fact. This fact is that for a POW an "ending" to their war is up to their enemy, and other factors out of their control.

Some POW's war never ended, as many never came home. For some POWs their ending was bitter-sweet as it had to do with when they gave in to the enemies demands. For some POWs this ending would haunt them for the rest of their life as they regretted not having more strength to endure the torture and torment of those who detained them. "They wrung a confession out of me and that was terrible, made me confess to war crimes, bombing villages and women and children, that sort of thing. I don't think I ever had any moments that low again. I had lots of beatings and ropes and that kind of stuff, but I never felt as low. I failed. I didn't live up to the standards that were expected. Others were stronger than I was. Some guys were a lot tougher. I just wish I could have done better." It was amazing to me how much regret I could sense in McCain's story. I could also sense some real undertones of

survivor's guilt. It's hard for me to believe that a man who was a POW for that long would regret not being tougher. McCain's war ended when he was released from the "Hanoi Hilton." I still believe however, that there are still psychological wars going on in his head. He pointed out that many men never came back mentally from Vietnam. This is another facet to take into account when one looks for an ending to war. "Probably the greatest tragedy of the Vietnam War was all those who could never really make it back. There are still Vet centers that still have people who come for counseling and haven't been able to get all the way back." It's important to remember that mentally many men are still overseas, even though physically they are among us. Then there are those who are both mentally and physically still overseas. When people talk about wars ending, they forget about the fact that the war isn't over for those that are still detained. And what's really disturbing is that it's possible that there are still guys out there. For them the war still hasn't ended.



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