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History of the Vietnam War

Assignment #3

Turning Point

I think the story in Part Four of Appy's book that best exemplifies a significant turning point in the war is Clark Dougan's interview (304-306). Although Dougan's story is short, it represents two profoundly important turning points in the war. During the interview, Dugan comments on the conservative press turning from support of the war to angry opposition to the war. He also dramatically illustrates what I consider to be the most important domestic turning point in the war. That was the loss of support from conservative working-class Americans. These Americans who, after World War II, had nothing but faith in the integrity of their government and a strong sense of patriotism, suddenly found themselves doubting the validity of the war and the honesty of their leaders.

Clark Dougan attended Valley Forge High School in Ohio with a classmate named Greg Fischer. Occasionally, during class, the principal would request a moment of silence for former students who had lost their lives in Vietnam. To these young students, the war seemed far off and surreal, even though they were regularly given this dark reminder. After graduation, Dougan headed off to college, and Fischer headed off to war. On Memorial Day in 1968, Dougan opened the Cleveland Press and found an editorial titled, "He Was Only 19 - Did You Know Him?" The editorial was about the death of Fischer (305). For Dougan, seeing the editorial brought the realities of the war right into his home. It stopped being some abstract conflict in a faraway place as soon as Dougan realized he knew this dead soldier.

It was not Dugan's own reaction to this news that marked the turning point in the war. Many Americans were having similar reactions to the waste of life and futility the war represented. Protest grew in America not just on college campuses and the fringes of society, but in regular, hardworking, patriotic American homes. Dougan states, "I think that was the moment when 'Middle

America' really turned against the war" (306). The loss of support for the war from "bread and butter" Americans would exact a price from policymakers. Suddenly, it seemed, "World War II vets who had been sitting around their kitchen tables saying 'You've got to fight for your country,' were starting to say, 'Fuck this. It's not worth Greg Fischer's life or his buddy's life'" (306). Their protests were not always heard in the streets, but they were heard in ballot boxes.

Dougan also comments on the shift the media made from support of the war to opposition to the war. The editorial featuring Fischer's death was written in the Cleveland Press which "... was part of the Scripps-Howard chain, a conservative syndicate that had strongly supported the war" (306). That the editors of a conservative newspaper wrote such an angry editorial about one soldier's death was representative of many media outlets turning against the war during those years.

In just a short time the American government lost the majority of its foundational war supporters. Americans had grown war-weary, and the loss of support from conservative citizens and conservative media outlets left the government essentially unable to further escalate the war. Policymakers were left with two options, somehow win the war soon with what they had, or get out of Vietnam.

End of the War

The story in Appy's book that best represents an end to the war is Charles Cooper's interview (445-448). Charles Cooper was a battalion commander in Vietnam late in the war. Cooper dealt with the mounting problems in the military that demonstrated how America could no longer sustain the war. He dealt with soldiers of poor quality, racial tensions between soldiers, and an elusive, ever-determined enemy, indistinguishable from the civilian population. His interview outlines the war's futility and the hopelessness of America achieving victory in Vietnam.

When Cooper became battalion commander he took command of troops that were inundated with soldiers who had scored at the bottom of military aptitude tests. These soldiers were to receive specialized remedial training as part of Project 100,000. The program was launched by Johnson as a "social uplift" program. Most of these low-scoring soldiers received little if any remedial training and were simply sent to Vietnam as infantry soldiers. By that point, the war had cycled through most of the quality soldiers in America. Military admission standards had to be lowered to meet the demands for fresh men the war required. These men "...couldn't learn well and they'd get frustrated and aggressive" and as a result,

were less likely to differentiate between civilians and combatants (445). America's wellspring of quality manpower was running dry.



With the draftees flooding into Vietnam came all the racial and social strife found on American streets. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing in America, and the draft exacerbated racial tensions between soldiers. Black soldiers were organizing publicly and secretly in Vietnam. Cooper talks about the problem when he says, "I learned that there was a secret underground society of blacks called the Mau Maus. It went back to the Kenyan story where the Mau Maus rose up and murdered all of the English settlers. At any rate, they were pro-Viet Cong" (446). Some of America's own disenfranchised soldiers were siding with the enemy. Fights bordering on riots were common between races, and the military was ill-equipped to handle such problems. The longer the war went on, the more racial problems became an issue. In addition, minority soldiers felt that their low socioeconomic standing was a factor in their being chosen in the draft. They felt like cannon fodder for the wealthy in America. All these factors led to a completely unsustainable condition within the military in Vietnam.

The Viet Cong, their families and their supporters were indistinguishable from the civilian population. Vietnamese women and children were sometimes enemy combatants and easily melted into the general population. Cooper tells the story of a Vietnamese child killing American soldiers: "This kid had waved to the marines while they were on patrol and signaled them to come over. As they closed in on him he reached down and pulled up an AK-47 and started shooting. Two guys were killed and a few more wounded and this kid capered off toward the village of Son Thang" (446). After this incident, the marines put together a "Killer Team" and ended up killing twenty women and children in the village (447). With no way to tell who the enemy was, the only way soldiers could stay alive was to assume all the Vietnamese were the enemy. Under such conditions, massacres like the ones in Son Thang and My Lai were inevitable. There was no way to truly pacify hamlets or win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people when facing such an elusively embedded and deadly enemy.

Cooper's story encapsulates the end of the war because he demonstrates how there was simply no way America could sustain effective combat operations while also achieving its political and social objectives. War-weariness, deteriorating military discipline, racial strife, lack of support for the war and an increasingly despondent indigenous population all spelled the end of the Vietnam War for America. America's seemingly endless supplies of manpower, material, and money had been stretched to their limits.

In addition to this, the North Vietnamese never faltered or lost sight of their objectives to unify Vietnam and drive the Americans out. Cooper acknowledges their determination when he states, "Their guys just care more. Whatever motivates 'em, or whatever they feed 'em, or whatever they believe in, whether its getting rid of the Europeans or all this Communist pap, they believe it. They were totally unselfish" (445). While the North Vietnamese stood steadfast and determined in the face of significant attrition, America had finally succumbed and had very little left to support an ongoing effort in Vietnam.

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Todd,
Again, TOP
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