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Turning Point in a War of Public Opinion

Clark Dougan's story, "He was only 19—Did you know him?" represents a distinct turning point in the Vietnam war. From the beginning, North Vietnamese leaders recognized the war as being more about turning the American public against the war than anything; the U.S. was a powerful nation and would not be defeated on the battlefield. Therefore, it wasn't a military victory or defeat that marked a turning point in this war, but rather the point at which Americans became so fatigued with the death and the waste and dishonesty that they turned against the war they had once supported. To Dougan, this moment occurs in the wake of a former classmate's death—a boy who was just 19 when he was killed in Vietnam.

In his interview, Clark Dougan tells of a boy whom he went to school with, Greg Fischer, who volunteered for the marines just after graduation (Appy 304). Even in high school, far removed from the war, the students could feel its presence. The principal would frequently announce the death of another local youth in Vietnam (Appy 304). The students coped with the oppressive reality of the war using black humor, even spontaneously singing "The Caissons go Rolling Along" and the theme to *The Bridge on the River Kwai* during their graduation ceremony (Appy 305). In his first year of college, Dougan opened a copy of the *Cleveland Press* to find that Fischer had been killed in Vietnam at the age of 19 (Appy 305). The tone of the accompanying editorial was angry, which was unusual because the newspaper wasn't typically anti-war. It was in fact "part of the Scripps-Howard chain, a conservative syndicate that had strongly supported the war," (Appy 306). Dougan concludes that this is "the moment when 'Middle America' really turned against the war," (Appy 306).

The Vietnam War was in many ways a war of public opinion. The United States and its South Vietnamese held their ground, but had little hope of a lasting victory against guerillas with popular support. In the words of Walter Cronkite, "To say that we are mired in a stalemate seems the only reasonable, yet unsatisfactory conclusion," (Herring 241-242). Although the war was costly in lives and resources, the U.S. was still a large and enormously wealthy nation, too powerful for a small nation like North Vietnam or the southern guerillas they supported to defeat on the battlefield. From an early point, North Vietnamese leaders saw that public opinion and popular support were the United States' weak point (and therefore the weak point of the South Vietnamese as well); they used this to their advantage. Collateral damage inflicted on civilians by ARVN soldiers was powerful propaganda for southern guerillas (Herring 107). Hanoi was known for using captured American pilots to produce propaganda and other material meant to increase international opposition to American involvement. At one point, interrogators tried to get evidence of American war crimes to send to the Stockholm war crimes tribunal, torturing a crew of F-4 pilots to produce false written confessions (Porter Halyburton as quoted in Appy, 226). Although this particular incident backfired on Hanoi, it demonstrates how important public opinion was in this conflict. If American public opinion turned against the war, the U.S. would be forced to withdraw troops and aid, leading to the defeat of the undermanned and demoralized ARVN.

In the early years of the Vietnam War, most Americans public and politicians supported their government's efforts. Over 60 percent of Americans supported the Vietnam War at the end of 1965 (Herring 212). At the time of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, only two U.S. senators, Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening, opposed expansion of the president's military powers (Appy 112). However, as American involvement expanded and U.S. casualties grew larger, so did opposition to the war. In 1970, the Senate overturned the Gulf of Tonkin resolution (Herring 294). In the same year, amendments were proposed to cut off funds for American military in Cambodia and to withdraw all U.S. forces in Vietnam by 1971 (Herring 294-295). U.S. lawmakers had gone from strongly supporting the war to clamoring for its end.

Mass antiwar demonstrations gained momentum across the nation. Violent protests occurred during the 1968

Democratic convention in Chicago, prompting Chicago Mayor William Daley to mobilize over 25,000 police, National Guard, and army troops (Herring 261). On October 21, 1967, 100,000 protestors demonstrated at the Lincoln memorial, and 35,000 marched on the Pentagon (Herring 209). Americans "could no longer turn away from the fact that the war in Southeast Asia... was causing a kind of civil war in the United States," (Zaroulis as quoted in Herring, 261). Although demonstrators constituted a minority of Americans, they expressed attitudes that were beginning to be felt at all levels of society.

As stated by Historian George C. Herring, "The antiwar movement caused fatigue and anxiety among the policy makers and the public, thus eventually encouraging efforts to find a way out of the war" (Herring 210). In August of 1967, polls indicated that "for the first time a majority of Americans felt the United States had erred in intervening in Vietnam," (Herring 211). Between 1967 and 1968, approval of President Johnson's conduct in the war fell from 40 to 26 percent (Herring 242-243). The support that the Johnson administration had sought so hard to build was crumbling; America was fed up with the war.

To Greg Fischer, the time at which the *Cleveland Press* published an angry editorial about the death of a 19-year old Ohio boy in Vietnam was a turning point in the war. This was the moment in which American opinion shifted from supporting the war to opposing it, and ultimately what led to the U.S. withdrawing from Vietnam and the victory of North Vietnam. Many 19-year old Americans died fighting in Vietnam; in Dougan's eyes, Greg Fischer was one too many for the American public.

References

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