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History of the Vietnam War

Assignment #3

Part 1: Turning Points

To write this particular assignment, I had to think about it and re-read Part Four of the Appy book to find what I thought was the best example of a turning point in the Vietnam War. I felt it didn't have to be a particular event, so I focused on someone whose words caught my attention. I felt the best example of this would be someone either in the US military or in the South Vietnamese army. I decided to go with someone in the US military, preferably someone of considerable rank. In the end I chose Douglas Kinnard's account. He was a brigadier general who did two tours of duty in Vietnam.

Kinnard's views on the war were shared by many American soldiers serving in Vietnam, especially in the latter half of the war. The one passage in his account that caught my attention was where he talked about how it all came down to a war of attrition, and that the assumption was that if they kept hitting the Vietcong and North Vietnamese they would just quit. Then he said that that assumption was wrong, and that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese were never going to quit, no matter how good the United States was. But the one thing he said that spoke to me the most was this: "We had made it a war of wills, rather than a war of power. The problem was, while we had the power, it turned out they had the will." To me, just this one phrase really summed up the thinking during the latter half of the war after Tet. The Vietcong and North Vietnamese had a very strong will to keep fighting. And if there is one thing that is very tough to beat, it is a strong will. The US military could not successfully fight against an enemy who was determined to outlast them at any expense.

Kinnard said that by the end of his first tour in the summer of

1967, he came to the decision that the war was lost for the US and that it could go on forever. And he said this before the Tet Offensive. He had already come to the decision that Vietnam was a mistake even before Tet.

Kinnard discussed a 1974 questionnaire he sent to all the generals who served as combat commanders in Vietnam, and that seventy percent of the questionnaires he got back said that the war's objectives weren't clear. They also questioned what they were doing in Vietnam, and who they were trying to save. So in a way, Kinnard's views on the war had similarities to those of other commanding officers in Vietnam, because Kinnard was also asking the same questions.

When you have a US Army general making a decision, whether they publicize it or keep it to themselves, that a war was lost, that is when the turning point happens. It all boils down to a war of wills instead of a war with weapons. The US' will wasn't strong enough that time to win the war in Vietnam.

While to some my reason for choosing Kinnard's account may not be too clear, I thought it was the best representation of the thinking of how the war had turned, not necessarily in favor of the enemy, but in the eventual withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam. To me, it all boils down to that one thing Kinnard said that meant the most to me: "While we had the power, it turned out they had the will."

Part 2: Endings

As with Part 1 of this assignment, I had to think about what an "ending" to the Vietnam War was to me. The ending of the Vietnam War was different for each person involved in it. For some veterans, the war is still real to them, and hasn't ended yet. But for me, I feel that the Vietnam War ended when the official American presence finally left Vietnam, which to me is the fall of Saigon in April 1975, when the American embassy was evacuated. I chose Frank Snapp's account of the American embassy in Saigon falling to the North Vietnamese. I feel that Snapp's telling of what happened that day in April 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam War for the US.

Snapp described the last days of the US embassy in Saigon. The best part of his account was where he described the final day of the US embassy, which was April 29, 1975. He described how the CIA and US military personnel still at the embassy were scrambling their helicopters to hurry and evacuate the Americans at the embassy, and some of their Vietnamese employees, as the North Vietnamese

Army was approaching the outskirts of Saigon. Snapp described how he could see the headlights of the North Vietnamese Army's vehicles on the edge of the city, only a half-hour away. When that last American boarded that final helicopter to evacuate Saigon was when the war ended for the US.

To be honest, I really wanted to use a prisoner-of-war account for an "ending" of the Vietnam War for me. But I could not find one appropriate in the Appy book. My first choice was that when the last American POW was returned to America, was when the Vietnam War ended. So I used my second choice, which was the Fall of Saigon. And I felt that Snapp's account was perfect, since he was there on the day Saigon fell.

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