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To define a turning point for the Vietnam War requires that we understand the trajectory of the war. There was really no point after we soiled our own consciences with support for a corrupt regime in Diem or any point after backing out on hand shake promises of Vietnamese self determination made during the Geneva talks of 1954 where the trajectory of the conflict was in our favor. We were fighting a war labeled as a fight against the "bad" guys, when any critical view of the conflict would have put us on par or worse than our enemy in regards to the question of integrity. This is not to say that overwhelming firepower and mountains of cash cannot buy the temporary setback of your adversary or the temporary support of your supposed allies. This is simply to claim that at no point was the long-term momentum in our favor after 1956.

Defining a turning point from the stories in Chapter four I kept coming back to a simple theme. The enemy had unwavering conviction in their cause, while the American presence started with the usual flag waving optimism born by our history of undefeat as well as our recent success with nation building, it's shine eventually wore off. Eventually morale devolved at all levels of our society and our presence in Vietnam had the unfortunate side effect of undermining the rare South Vietnamese conviction that existed in the corrupt south. Dissent was both justified and fostered by our governments manipulations, and like a virus it spread to efforts in Vietnam.

I found the stories of the two brothers who took such different paths through such turbulent waters telling of the times, and telling of the turning of the American people. As I have said, we hadn't been in Vietnam for the right reasons for nearly a decade before the ingrained support of the American people for their governments actions started to wear thin. Nathan Houser grew up exposed to the kind of indoctrination that gave early support to the war, but eventually failed in the face of the unanswered questions later. "I grew up believing that America was God's chosen country and that the American way of life was the right one and the just one. This was preached to us during the Cold War period." He recounted raising questions to his teacher about whether communists shared any of our values and receiving the response from her teacher "not to bother". While Nathan developed the sense of healthy skepticism that eventually led him to question many of the hand me down truths of our society, his brother, Richard Houser, was more willing to follow the momentum dictated path handed to him. "I had no question I was going to Vietnam. I volunteered. I also volunteered for a seven-month extension in Vietnam after my first tour." While

unquestioning social ethics of the World War Two era were still dominant in the early 1960's they had begun to deteriorate. A sort of American reformation era pervaded and the notion of questioning the establishment resulted in people like Nathan Houser's reaction to the Kennedy Assassination. "That's when I began taking a critical stance toward the government." The skepticism was not focused only on the government but pervaded society. Referring to his time in a religious school Nathan says "I was still saying my morning and evening prayers but at a certain point I started to pray 'Dear God, if you exist...' and then on day I just ceased to believe. I just was finished."

This shift in society's faith in government was not just about the war, but because the war was contentious and LBJ and Nixon were devious in how it was handled, the war became a focal point and rallying cry for questioning authority. I can see reasons for why it took so long for the anxiety and distrust of the public to turn the direction of government. Three or four years after developing a concrete sense of doubt in the government he was still in love with his nation and still wanted to act in ways that he saw as patriotic. "...still patriotic... I decided I would go join the Peace Corps...", but even that establishment fostered his disillusionment by denying him his first amendment rights.

For the American presence in Vietnam the turning point was a loss of moral on every front. Our military establishment lost moral because they felt betrayed by the civilian leadership and the public. Our public lost moral because they realized that the government was manipulating them to a degree and in a manner that questioned the validity of our own sense of democracy. Our soldiers lost moral because they were sprung from a disenchanted public, forced to go by an unfair selection process, and given no viable moral cause or goal. The turning point that I see in this story is not so much a turning point in the eventualities of the conflict, but instead a turning point in the view of American essence. The pessimism introduced into the body politic of the American system during the late 1950's and 1960's eventually undermined the blind faith that we had in our leaders

Closure for a conflict like the Vietnam War is hard to find in the traditional sense. The treaty that was signed in 1973 was not a decisive end of the war, or even a true end of our own involvement. I think that for the American public we can only find an end to such a sullied era of our own history in the taking of responsibility, and the acceptance of culpability.

My favorite example of this is Daniel Ellsberg. His perspective on the war is so sharp and well conceived. In considering the policy makers of a 23-year period He questions how such smart people could have driven themselves into such a position. I really appreciated that he asks this question in its own reflection by

referencing it this way, "And they had to be secret about it because the public wouldn't have accepted it without much better prospects...". He illustrates one of the greatest liabilities of a revolving leadership beholden to an often moody and ill-informed public. "Vietnam showed that American leaders were psychologically unwilling to negotiate a solution that would be called defeat by some people, even if the American people could have lived with it very well."

What is important about his accounting of the war, and specifically about how he finally reconciled himself with it, is in the taking of responsibility. When he made the decision to "...do anything that was non violent and truthful." He decided to expose the motivations and failures of conscience that had led us into the morass in Vietnam. His motivations were not political but were instead selflessly societal. He was making the decision to place the power back into the hands of an informed public at great personal cost. His courageous decision to expose the government to the people was a pivotal step in reestablishing our national sense of identity. Every society must have ties of common values to hold itself together. For the United States our common values are in the Democratic process. The true price that the American nation paid during the Vietnam War era was a loss of faith that institution. People like Ellsberg deserve credit for beginning the process of rebuilding our confidence in our Democratic institutions. I recognize that this is a poor example of an ending to the war for the people of Vietnam, but American closure is ongoing and will come with a sense of self-respect. Those honorable sacrifices, like Ellsberg's, made to bring truth back to the debate are where that closure began.

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