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Part 1

While some would argue that the Tet Offensive was the major turning point in the Vietnam War, there are many other events that occurred in the late 1960's that were just as significant. Back home in the United States we were in the midst of the civil rights movement, anti-war protests started gaining momentum, and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did nothing more than add tension to a volatile situation.

The timing of the Tet Offensive was crucial, not because Tet is the most important Vietnamese holiday, but because it came shortly after General Westmoreland had given his "the end is in sight" speech. During his speech, 'Westy' claimed American and South Vietnamese forces were gaining the upper hand on the Viet Cong. This gave people in the United States the impression our side was winning the war. The aftermath of the Tet Offensive, had a devastating effect upon the American public, many people at home, watching nightly television news, were appalled by the carnage they saw - some believed the Communists had won and the U.S. had lost.

The overall support for the Johnson administration's claims that we were fighting to stop communism in Southeast Asia was widely supported earlier in the decade, however, during the Tet Offensive the shooting of a Viet Cong by a South Vietnamese Police Chief was captured in a graphic photo and dispersed through all media. People were starting to take notice and opposition to the war increased. The United States was fighting a war at home, and a war halfway across the globe, and many were unaware of the impact this conflict would have on our society in the years to come.

From reading Barry Zorthian's entry in Christian Appy's Patriots, the reader is presented with Zorthian's opinions about how the media's coverage of the war changed during and after the Tet Offensive. After General Westmoreland "gave a very strong tribute to the bravery of the soldiers and their victory over the Viet Cong...He (Westmoreland) was heavily criticized for claiming success over the VC at the embassy and saying everything was under control. But he was talking to his troops, not the world" (p.291) The media had sent mixed signals by correctly reporting Westmoreland's words (to his troops), only to accompany them with headlines about the numerous VC attacks in and outside of Saigon.

“You write about what you see...the front page of the Washington Post showed a very vivid picture of dead Viet Cong on the embassy lawn.”. Zorthian makes the point that, the reporters were on the front line during that embassy attack, and were not writing stories from press releases, they WERE the story. Media coverage became more graphic and less edited, which brought the nightmares of war into American living rooms every night. Going from ‘we’re winning the war’ one morning, to very well organized Viet Cong attacks in 40-plus locations overnight, to dead Viet Cong on the embassy lawn, to Eddie Adams AP Photo of South Vietnam’s Police Chief General Loan’s execution of a Viet Cong in broad daylight.

These images and conflicting stories were devastating. For the first time, American people began to really question our involvement in Vietnam. It was no longer a quiet issue and many were left doubting our government. This had a huge impact on the war at home. Television and news media brought the horrors of war into America’s living room every night. So while the Tet Offensive may have been one of the may turning points of the war, the impact of the images and stories of the Vietnam War remain with us today.

Part 2

The ‘ending’ to a war can mean very different things. It can be as simple as defining the important events that took place leading to the end of a conflict, or it can be specific dates such as September 2, 1945 - the day Japan surrendered ending World War II, or for some, it’s an individual and personal decision to find or make their own ending.

For Steve Sherlock, and many other Vietnam soldiers, their ‘ending’ came by way of throwing their medals on the front steps on the US Capitol in Washington DC. Sherlock tells his story in Christian Appy’s book, Patriots, and it gives a quick insight to how the impact of war can change the soldier fighting it. Once a “super war supporter”(p. 425), Sherlock’s doubts started in the racially-charged aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination when his unit was sent to Washington DC for riot control, “About three quarters of our platoon were black or Hispanic and they’d all just come back from Vietnam...It just didn’t feel right to be there and Vietnam was somehow connected to it” (p.425)

Once in Vietnam, he was in a “state of neutrality” (p.425) and found himself questioning the United States involvement and whether it was right or wrong to be there. After being interviewed for signing an antiwar petition that simply said, “Fuck War” (p.426), he was sent to an infantry platoon near Danang where a long firefight

with the NVA ensued. In the aftermath, Sherlock says, “The captain wanted an accurate body count...We had killed seven, and had three prisoners. The next morning...they had this medal ceremony. Two guys got silver stars and I got a bronze. This other lieutenant said to me ‘Man, you’re really lucky...you got it on the first day in this unit’”.

While out on patrol a few weeks later and surveying the bodies of their enemies, Sherlock made the comment, “I hope the rest of them got away...and we didn’t have any more fights.” (p. 426) This angered his Captain, who replied, “Your job is to destroy the Communists...they are not people. They’re the enemy and you’re the reason we’re losing this war. You’re a coward and a traitor.” and Sherlock was relieved of his command and charged with evasive action. “I was willing to fight, I just had always hoped we didn’t have to.” (p. 427)

After returning to the United States in 1970, he became involved in the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against War) movement, “For me it was a very good experience... People were supportive. They understood ...that our having served in it gave us some credibility and moral authority.”(p.426) During the DC protest, the purpose was to “focus public attention on veterans who actually fought in Vietnam...and that it wasn’t unpatriotic to be fighting against a wrong or harmful policy.” (p. 428) So along with hundreds of other decorated Vietnam veterans in what Sherlock called a “peace army”, he lined up and threw his medal “over the barricade and stepped away.”(p.429)

Turning in his medal may have ‘ended’ the Vietnam war for Steve Sherlock, but it opened new chapters in his life. He would go on to be the founder of the ASA (Aid to Southeast Asia), which is a non-profit organization that donates medical supplies and equipment to hospitals in Vietnam.

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