**Turning Points in the Vietnam War**

**Viv Sanders takes issue with some all too common assumptions.**

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**Viet Cong troops pose with new AK-47 assault rifles and American field radios**There are two major issues concerning turning points in the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, both involving chronology. First, when and how did the US become irrevocably committed to large-scale intervention? Second, when did it become obvious that the US would have to de-escalate?

In the ever-growing US involvement in Vietnam from 1950 until 1968, the turning point is usually considered to be 1965, when President Johnson sent in American ground combat troops. However, it will be argued in this article that decisions taken by the Eisenhower administration during 1954-56 constituted a far more important change.

There is less controversy over the main turning point in the US decision to de-escalate. Most historians agree that it was the Tet Offensive in 1967. However, it will be argued here that the Tet Offensive was not a turning point but a clarification of issues that had been evident since 1954-56 and had led to the resignation of Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara in late 1967. It was with McNamara's resignation, rather than with Tet, that it became obvious that the US had to de-escalate.

**US Involvement in Vietnam: the first turning point**

Owing to the fact that it was Johnson who sent in the ground troops in 1965, the Vietnam War became known as ‘Johnson’s war’. The dubious nature of that attribution is implicitly acknowledged by historians who favour the ‘commitment trap’ thesis. According to this interpretation, Johnson of necessity honoured and then built upon a commitment bequeathed to him by three former presidents, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. An exit from that commitment would have damaged US credibility as an anti-Communist superpower.

Was there any point at which any of Johnson's three predecessors could reasonably have ended US involvement in Vietnam?

Harry Truman initiated the US involvement. From 1950 to 1953, he gave financial aid to the French colonialists as they struggled to re-establish control of Indochina in the face of opposition from Vietnamese Communists and nationalists. It could be argued that, up to 1953, the United States' commitment was simply a financial commitment to its French ally. On the other hand, as early as November 1950, a Defence Department official warned,

*we are gradually increasing our stake in the outcome of the struggle ... we are dangerously close to the point of being so deeply committed that we may find ourselves completely committed even to direct intervention. These situations, unfortunately, have a way of snowballing.*

In the early months of his presidency, Eisenhower continued Truman's policy of helping the French, but after the Geneva Conference of 1954, the great turning point in the US commitment occurred. Prior to 1954, US involvement in Vietnam had consisted of giving materials and monetary aid to the French. During 1954 the Eisenhower administration switched from a policy of aid to France to an experiment in state-building in what became known as South Vietnam.

By 1954 the war in Vietnam had become increasingly unpopular in France. The defeat of French troops by Communist forces at Dienbienphu left France exhausted, exasperated and keen to withdraw. At the international conference convened to discuss French Indochina at Geneva in May 1954, the French exit was formalised. Vietnam was temporarily divided, with Ho Chi Minh in control of the north and the Emperor Bao Dai in control of the south. The Geneva Accords declared that there were to be nationwide elections leading to reunification of Vietnam in 1956. However, US intervention ensured that this ‘temporary division’ was to last for more than 20 years.

The United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords and moved to defy them within weeks. Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, organised allies such as Britain in the South-east Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). The SEATO signatories agreed to protect South Vietnam, in defiance of the Geneva Accords, which had forbidden the Vietnamese from entering into foreign alliances or to allow foreign troops in Vietnam.

The Eisenhower administration encouraged Bao Dai to appoint Ngo Dinh Diem as his prime minister, and then proceeded to engage in ‘nation building’. Eisenhower and Dulles created a new state, in defiance (yet again) of the Geneva Accords and of what was known to be the will of the Vietnamese people. Eisenhower recorded in his memoirs that he knew that if there had been genuine democratic elections in Vietnam in 1956, Ho Chi Minh would have won around 80 per cent of the vote. In order to avoid a wholly Communist Vietnam, the US had sponsored an artificial political creation, the state of South Vietnam.

Within weeks of Geneva, Eisenhower arranged to help Diem set up South Vietnam. He sent General ‘Lightning Joe’ Collins and created MAAG (the Military Assistance Advisory Group) to assist in the process. The US also helped and encouraged Diem to squeeze out Bao Dai.

The French exit meant that Eisenhower could have dropped Truman's commitment in Vietnam. Truman had aided the French, and the French had got out. American credibility was not at stake, for it was the French who had lost the struggle. However, the French withdrawal from Vietnam was seen by Dulles as a great opportunity for greater US involvement. ‘We have a clean base there now, without the faint taint of colonialism,’ said Dulles, calling Dienbienphu ‘a blessing in disguise’. When the Eisenhower administration created South Vietnam, Truman's commitment had not been renewed but recreated, with a far greater degree of American responsibility.

American observers and the Eisenhower administration had great doubts about Diem's regime. Vice President Richard Nixon was convinced the South Vietnamese lacked the ability to govern themselves. Even Dulles admitted that the US supported Diem ‘because we knew of no one better’.

‘Magnificently ignorant of Vietnamese history and culture,’ according to his biographer Townsend Hoopes, Dulles proceeded to ignore the popularity of Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese desires, in favour of the unpopular Diem, a member of the Christian minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. Back in 1941, Dulles had said that ‘the great trouble with the world today is that there are too few Christians’. In the East Asian despots (Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, Syngman Rhee in South Korea, and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam), all of whom were Christian, the US had found men with whom it felt it could work. After all, as Dulles said, the US had Jesus Christ on its side, and needed allies who believed likewise.

The Eisenhower administration was well aware of Ho Chi Minh's popularity. However, it was not Vietnam itself that mattered, but Vietnam's position as a potential domino in the Cold War. In the 1954 speech in which he had introduced his famous ‘domino theory’, Eisenhower had said that if Vietnam fell to Communism, other nations might follow.

Given that the US came very close to dumping Diem in 1955-6, it is interesting to note the important role played by relatively minor and/or ignorant American figures in Diem's survival and in this great turning point in US involvement in Vietnam. Influential Senator Mike Mansfield, leader of the Democrats in the Senate, had been a professor of Japanese and Chinese history. Congress considered ‘China Mike’ to be their expert on Vietnam, although, as he modestly admitted, ‘I do not know too much about the Indochina situation. I do not think that anyone does.’ Despite his acknowledged ignorance, the Catholic Mansfield had been greatly impressed when he met Diem in the United States in 1950. Mansfield's support was vital when the Eisenhower administration considered dropping Diem in 1955. Eisenhower and Dulles did not want to incur congressional wrath by deserting the senator's protégé.

In *A Bright Shining Lie*, journalist Neil Sheehan opined: ‘South Vietnam, it can truly be said, was the creation of Edward Lansdale.’ Dulles sent covert CIA operative Lansdale to help create the South Vietnamese state soon after the Geneva Conference. Lansdale gave Diem support and advice, including a memo headed, ‘HOW TO BE A PRIME MINISTER OF VIETNAM’. British novelist Graham Greene based a destructive American do-gooder character in his novel *The Quiet American* on Lansdale. Lansdale, like Mansfield, lacked any real understanding of Vietnam.

Despite all the doubts, the Eisenhower administration stuck with Diem. By the end of Eisenhower's presidency, there were nearly 1,000 US advisers helping Diem and his armed forces. Under President Kennedy, the number of advisers rocketed to around 16,000, which renders suspect claims that, had he lived, Kennedy would have got out of Vietnam.

Some historians consider that Kennedy had a last, great opportunity to extricate the US from Vietnam in 1963. Johnson felt that when the Kennedy administration colluded in the autumn 1963 coup against Diem, the United States' moral responsibility in and commitment to Vietnam greatly increased. Having helped depose one South Vietnamese leader, the US had an even greater obligation to support his successors. The US colluded in Diem's overthrow because of the unpopularity of his government and its consequent ineffectiveness in opposing Communism in South Vietnam. In the spring of 1963, the American media had covered the Buddhist protests in South Vietnamese cities such as Saigon. Americans had been shocked to see Buddhist monks burning themselves to death in protest against the oppressive regime of the Catholic Diem. The US had urged Diem to halt the religious persecution. It could be argued, therefore, that when Diem ignored American advice that he should reform, the US had a great opportunity to exit Vietnam without losing face or credibility. On the other hand, Diem had ignored American warnings to introduce reform for almost a decade. Any sudden US rejection of Diem and ending of the US commitment in 1963 might have raised questions as to why the US had supported Diem's unsatisfactory regime for so long.

In the context of the Cold War and with 16,000 American ‘advisers’ in Vietnam at his accession in 1963, it was exceptionally difficult for Johnson to repudiate his predecessors' legacy in Vietnam, particularly as he had not been elected president in his own right. The increasing vulnerability of American personnel to Vietcong attack triggered a unanimous decision within the Johnson administration to escalate the involvement in early 1965, when Rolling Thunder commenced and the first American ground troops were sent in. By 1968, they numbered around half a million.

While it could be argued that Kennedy had the opportunity to leave Vietnam in 1963, it is difficult to find a date at which it could be argued that Johnson had a similar opportunity. In defence of Kennedy, the US had invested nearly a decade of monetary aid, men and materials in the Saigon regime by 1963. Most importantly of all, the US had invested its credibility in ‘nation building’ – something that had not been the case under Truman or until Eisenhower rejected the Geneva Accords in 1954. According to historian David Anderson, writing in 2005, ‘the Eisenhower administration trapped itself and its successors into a commitment to the survival of its own counterfeit creation’, the new ‘state’ of South Vietnam.

Thus Eisenhower's rejection of the Geneva Accords and his ‘nation building’ in South Vietnam constituted the greatest turning point in the US involvement in Vietnam, the point of no return. This turning point is a microcosm of the reasons why the US got involved and why the US was unsuccessful in Vietnam. That small country was not seen as a nation in its own right and with its own aspirations. Instead it was seen, after the Korean War, as the place where Communism had to be stopped. Vietnam was a victim of the Cold War. American policy-makers acted with little understanding of the country and forced unpopular and unimpressive rulers upon half of it for nearly two decades.

**US Withdrawal from Vietnam: the second turning point**

In January 1968 North Vietnamese regular forces and Communist guerrillas launched an offensive on the cities of South Vietnam. This attack took place during the Tet holiday, the most important festival in the Vietnamese calendar. Despite clear signs that an offensive was imminent, the Americans were taken by surprise. Eventually, after several weeks of bitter fighting, America troops and the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) regained control of the cities but found that the Saigon regime had lost ground in rural areas.

Before the Tet Offensive, the number of American troops had been rising ever since the first 3,500 landed on the beaches of South Vietnam in spring 1965. By late 1967, there were around half a million American troops in South Vietnam. After Tet, President Johnson rejected General Westmoreland's request for more troops. This seems to be the conclusive proof that Tet forced the Johnson administration into a re-evaluation of US policy.

This second great turning point has attracted far more interest and controversy than the first, perhaps because Americans are more interested in why they failed to win the war than why they got into it. Yet there are several great controversies concerning Tet. The first is whether it was a US military defeat or victory.

After Tet, Johnson began the process of de-escalation of the US involvement in Vietnam. This has led many to suggest that Tet must have been a military defeat for the United States. Some, however, point out that the Communists were eventually driven back from the cities and argue that this constituted an American military victory. While disagreeing over their relative importance, they claim that a combination of the media, the public and the politicians ‘lost’ the victory and forced the de-escalation. The Communist forces certainly suffered greatly during Tet: they lost nearly 60,000 men, which was not far off the total number lost by the Americans during the whole of the war. Communist credibility took a great blow. The Communists claimed to be a liberation force, but there had been no popular uprising on their behalf in South Vietnam.

On the other hand, there are those who claim that Tet demonstrated the limits of American military power. US military power could reassert the Saigon regime's hold on South Vietnam's cities, which the offensive had shown to be tenuous. Yet, after five years of US combat, the Communists remained capable of staging a massive offensive, and the South Vietnamese population was no more inclined to fight for the South Vietnamese regime.

On balance, therefore, it would seem that, militarily, Tet proved that the US could just about maintain the status quo and that there was military stalemate.

The second key controversy is whether the media turned Tet into a psychological defeat for the United States.

Several journalists believe that ‘for the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined, not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the TV screen.’

Johnson had complained about increasingly ‘poisonous reporting’ since 1965. Were the media biased as he suggested? Sometimes the media distorted the truth, but more often than not this was due to pressures of time and/or lack of available knowledge. For example, one of the most famous photos of the war showed a South Vietnamese general shooting a bound and very youthful-looking Communist captive in the head during Tet. This photo made many Americans consider their ‘ally’ as distasteful as their enemy. It was later discovered that the captive was a VC death-squad member who had just shot a relation of the general, but it was the first distasteful impression that stuck. Often the media simply showed it as it was, as when pictures of Vietcong in the grounds of the US embassy at the start of the Tet Offensive were relayed all over America.

If the media were guilty of untruthful or inaccurate reporting so were the US authorities in Saigon. From Saigon, the military, the CIA and Ambassador Bunker all assured Johnson and the press that the US was winning the war in autumn 1967. The Johnson administration therefore conducted a public relations offensive to ensure that the American public were aware of this. General Westmoreland claimed, in convincing fashion, ‘We are winning a war of attrition now.’ The media covered the public relations offensive, apparently without great anti-war bias, because polls showed the public responded favourably to the optimistic reports. However, coverage of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 exposed the credibility gap between what the Johnson administration and the military were saying about winning in Vietnam and what was actually happening there.

Those who believe that there was ‘poisonous reporting’ of the war consider that the media played a big part in turning the American public against the war. Polls showed a steady decline in support for the war throughout 1967, but Johnson's public relations offensive in the autumn of that year stabilised the statistics, suggesting that if there was biased news coverage it had failed to influence all Americans. Support temporarily rose during the initial patriotic fervour when the Tet disaster occurred, but the downward trend began again soon after Tet. Had the US been winning the war after five years of escalation, there is no doubt that media coverage would have shown it. As it was, the US was not winning and this was demonstrated during the Tet Offensive. If there was a psychological defeat, it was more likely due to the fact that the war looked unwinnable, not to media bias.

The third key issue is whether Tet made the Johnson administration decide to get out.

Before Tet, the Johnson administration had been escalating the US involvement. After Tet, the escalation halted and Johnson declared that he would not stand for re-election but would concentrate upon bringing peace to a divided United States and to Vietnam. These basic facts suggest that it was Tet that made Johnson change course. On the other hand, it can be argued that there were signs of this change of course before Tet. The great architect of increased US involvement under Kennedy and Johnson, Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, had decided to leave the administration in November 1967, tearfully cussing ‘the goddamned Air Force and its goddamned bombing campaign that had dropped more bombs on Vietnam than on Europe in the whole of World War II and we hadn't gotten a goddamned thing for it.’

In late 1967, Johnson's advisers, including the group of military and civilian experts known as the ‘Wise Men’, disagreed with McNamara's advice that escalation should cease. Tet convinced the Wise Men that the war was unwinnable and that escalation should cease. Yet probably, like McNamara, they would have come to that conclusion eventually, even without Tet.

The Tet Offensive brought together and exacerbated several trends that were evident in the American conduct of the war and in the response of politicians, the media and the public. It showed that after three years of Johnson pouring in US troops and aid to South Vietnam, the Communists still had the power to launch a massive offensive that sent the Americans and ARVN reeling for several weeks. It showed that the Saigon government did not have popular support and could only maintain control of its own cities and even its own capital with massive US assistance. The Tet Offensive accelerated the decline in support for the war amongst the American people, the media and administration officials. In all these ways, it could be argued that Tet was a turning point in American policy in Vietnam, although it is perhaps far more persuasive to contend that Tet simply clarified and confirmed ideas that had been increasingly evident beforehand.

**Conclusion**

Whereas the Tet Offensive merely clarified and accelerated existing trends, the other turning point that we have considered was far more dramatic. While the Tet Offensive showed up existing trends, Eisenhower's creation of a South Vietnamese state constituted a dramatic break with the past. The US became deeply involved in the war because the Eisenhower administration set up South Vietnam during 1954-5. Problems that were evident then (stemming from an unpopular South Vietnamese regime created, dominated and sustained by the US) were still evident during the Tet Offensive. In that sense, the main responsibility for US involvement and failure to win the war lay not with Johnson but with Eisenhower. This was not ‘Johnson's war’. It was ‘Eisenhower's war’, and Eisenhower's actions and assumptions had ensured that it would never be a successful one.

**Issues to Debate**

* Was Eisenhower or Johnson more responsible for producing the Vietnam War?
* What evidence is there that biased reporting hastened the US withdrawal from Vietnam?
* What was the significance of the Tet offensive?