Examining the Tet Offensive as a key turning point in the Vietnam War

IB History SL Internal Assessment

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**RQ:** *Examine the Tet Offensive as a key turning point in the Vietnam War.*

# Section A: Identification and evaluation of sources

The investigation conducted within this internal assessment revolves around the question - ***Examine the Tet Offensive as a key turning point in the Vietnam War***.  
  
Stanley Karnow’s *Vietnam: A History* has been one of the most influential books for historians to date and provides a very complete, balanced, view of the entire Vietnam conflict - from the French occupation, to the fall of Saigon.  
  
James R. Arnold’s book *Tet Offensive 1968: Turning point in Vietnam* , on the other-hand, focuses on the Tet offensive itself. Due to his background, he has varied perspectives that alter from others.  
  
These two sources complement each other as they provide necessary context as well as in-depth details into the conflict. Moreover, they provide contrasting viewpoints in certain areas.

## Vietnam: A History *Stanley Karnow, 1997*

The origin of the source is incredibly valuable as the historian, Stanley Karnow, is well reputed with degrees from Harvard (Literature and History), Sorbonne, University of Paris, and Ecole des Sciences Politiques. Karnow was also active *during* the war, as writer for various publications including Time Magazine, Life Magazine, the Washington Post, and NBC News, earning a *Pulitzer* prize in history (among other awards). Therefore, being one of the journalists actually reporting on the war, increases the book’s value. However, this is also a limitation, as his perspective will inevitably be from the side of the media.  
  
The purpose of Karnow’s book is also quite valuable, as *Vietnam: A History* and its accompanying documentary are "widely regarded as an essential, even-handed summation" of the events that occurred during the war. Therefore, it can provide a balanced overview of the war from its origins. However, it’s limitation is that the focus is on the political aspects of the war.

## Tet offensive 1968: Turning point in Vietnam *James R. Arnold, 1990*

The origin of this book is from James R. Arnold, a military historian who has written over thirty military history books and is renowned by the Army Historical Foundation winning the Distinguished Writing Award three times. This makes the source valuable as he is reliable. However, the limitation is that Arnold, specialized in military history, and hte book seems to have a bias towards that perspective. An example being in chapter: "The Press Reaction," where Arnold implies that the press was disingenuous by stating that "Within fifteen minutes... an Associated Press (AP) reporter had typed out the first bulletin announcing the attack". This is further supported by the explicit statement that "the Press undoubtedly distorted the significance of combat". These statements are contrary to other sources. Hence, a limitation.  
  
The purpose of this source is to provide insight into the Tet offensive specifically. It is valuable as it provides information about the various ramifications of the offensive. hat being said, the content has some limitations. While providing a valuable perspective, the book does not provide the opposing point of view (specifically in reference to the media).

# Section B: Investigation

On January 31st, 1968, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the American Forces experienced the largest offensive in the sixteen years of the Vietnam War. The Tet truce was a ceasefire that was to take place during the Vietnamese harvest festival celebrating the arrival of spring. The offensive came as a shock to the ARVN and US as North Vietnamese forces simultaneously attacked over one hundred major cities in the South. People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Vietcong (VC) forces were able to reach deep into South Vietnamese territory, extremely close to the heart of American operations in Saigon, which became a battlefield. The effect of the ramifications of the Tet offensive were vast. Firstly, the United States was humiliated as their intelligence services did not anticipate the attack. Secondly, the US and South Vietnamese suffered a massive loss in moral leading to inefficiency later in the conflict. Lastly, the American media’s propagation of the Tet offensive resulted in a massive increase in anti-war sentiments - though there is debate over whether the media manipulated public opinion or not (Mirror Theory)  
  
Firstly, the United States being unprepared for the Tet Offensive was a huge embarrassment to the government and its intelligence services. "The Tet offensive came as a brutal surprise to President Johnson and all of his advisors" (George Christian - Presidential Aide). The fact that the government was oblivious and unaware of such a massive attack was the first major failure. This was echoed in Walter Cronkite’s Vietnam Report where he indirectly questions the government and "how could the Vietnamese communists have mounted this offensive with such complete surprise." This was a major failing of the government’s intelligence agencies and reflected poorly on their overall efficiency. Coupled with the fact that the US was spending an exorbitant $30 billion in military costs alone (and was operating on a $25 billion deficit) while spending a fraction of that amount on domestic social welfare. For every bomb dropped, the US paid $9.60, for every citizen, they paid only $0.10 in Medicare expenses[[1]](#footnote-1). In 1965, ’The Great Inflation’ was the reality as the American public had to fight through poverty. This showed the American public the effectiveness of their tax dollars and the priorities of their government resulting in a massive increase in public opposition to the war. With this deterioration in public support, the administration had less leeway to enact new initiatives. LBJ assembled a Tet Task Force, headed by Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, in order to prioritize and make strategic decisions. To this end, it shows that the Tet Offensive forced a complete restructure in the American political landscape in terms of military commitment as "even a defensive war would be unpopular".  
  
Secondly, the Tet offensive had huge ramifications on North Vietnam itself. The attack was a disaster for the North Vietnamese, losing much of their high level leadership and around 40,000 of their troops. Moreover, most of the land seized during the offensive was subsequently reclaimed within a day by the US and the ARVN. Yet, the effects on the South Vietnamese and Americans were much more dire. While the South was effectively able to repel the attack, it made the war ’much closer to home.’ South Vietnamese people started to doubt the government (as can be seen in Cronkite’s interviews). People did not feel safe in their own homes and felt their government could not protect them, leading to a sudden increase in anti-war sentiments. American troops, on the other hand, felt "discouraged" as where once was safe and secure was now a death zone . The troops, with already low morale due to the hardships of the war (many of being conscripts), were beaten down even further. This resulted in complete disarray in the military, post the Tet offensive with *fragging* - the practice of throwing a fragmentation grenade into a tent or residence, most typically an officer or superior. There were long term ramifications to the military’s effectiveness as "the army was to a large extent hollowed out" (John Guilmartin, a retired Air Force officer). This lead to a huge drop in the effectiveness of the USMC and the army, as they were now on the back foot.  
  
This war of attrition had eroded the troop’s will to fight as they became aware of their future reality: "continued sacrifice without apparent end." Battles such as Hué City were some of the worst examples, leaving an "impression of desolation, [and] utter devastation" . Moreover, this discontentment among the troops led to one of the worst atrocities committed during the war. On March 16th, 1968, US Army troops killed over 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians during a routine ’Search and Destroy’ mission. Images of this massacre furthered disdain for the conflict among the public.  
  
Lastly, The media used these battles and atrocities to their advantage in order to propagate anti-war sentiments. Vietnam was the first televised war, with blood, bodies, and bombs being broadcast directly into the living rooms of millions of Americans and billions around the world. The world watched as the United States dropped 643,000 tons of ordinance during *Operation Rolling Thunder* just as they saw pictures of Vietnamese children covered in napalm in the street (*Napalm Girl*). The media heavily utilized these images to propagate their disapproval of the war. However, there is historical debate over the objectivity of the media during the conflict. Mirror theory argues that reporters "unconditionally followed the doctrine of objective journalism". Dr. Daniel Hallin (Professor of Communication at the UC San Diego), argues that the media only took on a non-objective stance once the upper-class started voicing their discontent. Hallin further argues that this was the catalyst in propagating dissent among the public to transfer from "the fringes of society into its main stream."  
  
Hence, one cannot overlook that the media had a hand in propagating anti-war sentiments. Legendary presenter Walter Leland Cronkite Jr. famously pronounced the war "unwinnable," at the end of his February 27th, 1968 CBS broadcast . The Tet offensive created the perfect storm for the media, broadcasting the aforementioned ineptitude of the intelligence service and the effectiveness of tax dollars being spent in the conflict. This created a mistrust towards the government, with approval ratings for the Johnson administration plummeting to sub-40% post the Tet offensive. This was initially perpetrated the day the offensive took place as Arnold states that the "AP’s [Associated Press] insistence that the VC had entered the embassy further undercut the credibility of official statements" when referring to the controversy over whether VC forces entered the American Embassy in Saigon. This when coupled with the leaking of government documents such as the *Pentagon Papers* showed the government’s deception to the public, and completely eradicated the public’s trust (towards the government). Additionally, this complete destruction of government credibility post the Tet offensive led to a large increase in anti-war protests, with the news of potential peace talks leading to an increase in approval for the administration. However, it should also be recognized that the Tet offensive acted as a catalyst for anti-war media, not as a instigator as they existed prior to the event.  
  
In conclusion, the Tet Offensive was in fact a turning point in the Vietnam War. It significantly escalated anti-war sentiments and dealt a major blow to US military effectiveness. More importantly, the drastic increase in public opposition to the government meant that it was infeasible to continue the war, leading to peace talks. The media played a substantial role in instigating and propagating these anti-war ideals. Thus, the Tet offensive was massive, both in execution and outcome and was one of the most important reasons for the complete American withdrawal from the war in 1969.

# Section C: Reflection

Throughout my investigation, I faced many challenges. It was difficult to gain access to primary and original sources, since due to the pandemic, I was not able to visit any Museum, Embassy, or Library. Instead, I was forced to scour the internet for documents. Sources such as the *US Federal Budget* were easily accessibly while others such as Cronkite’s broadcast - were challenging to find. I believe utilizing all sources significantly helped my understanding of the time period and enriched my analysis.  
  
Another problem I faced was the sources were either with an argued point-of-view or locked into a specific one. For example, sources from the Associated Press, which was notoriously anti-war, only showed the public view of the United States at the time. Therefore, I had to investigate official government sources such as the *Pentagon Papers* and the CIA’s released documents to try and gain a more objective, or even pro-war, view. In order to counteract these biases, I looked at a wide variety of sources to try and develop my understanding. I believe the two sources I chose, and their overlap was beneficial, as I was able to analyze their alternating view points and develop my own perspective.  
  
I also faced the challenge being of minimal availability of Vietnamese sources from the time. Additionally, had I been able to source these documents, they most likely would have been tainted, due to being under a regime that favored propaganda above all. It would not show the true Vietnamese view, instead being a glorified one.  
  
Lastly, I had to deal with my own personal bias. Being an American Citizen, I may have unintentionally increased the credibility of the American side over the Vietnamese one. However, by-the-same-token, I may have been unnecessarily harsh on the US as the perspective I have been taught, being educated abroad, was that the US as the aggressor. Thus, I may have had an emotional and intellectual bias towards or against the United States.  
  
This all being said. I feel that this investigation will overall have an element of bias. The role of a historian, in my opinion, is to provide an accurate *recollection* of events. The fact of the matter is, this recollection of events is subject to the time period that we are living in. This is why debates such as Mirror Theory arise, and in my opinion, no unilateral truth. Rather, these biases should be acknowledged and made known to the reader.

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1. This was calculated by using the US federal budget for 1968 in conjunction with population statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-1)