

The Tet Offensive (1968)



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- After years of bloody war, the government continued to tell the American public that the U.S. military was on the verge of winning the war
- January 30, 1968
 - The NVA and Viet Cong launch the Tet Offensive
 - This massive surprise attack hit targets throughout South Vietnam and sent shockwaves through the U.S. population



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• Defending Khe Sanh

- The plunge in American popular support for the war began in mid-January 1968
 - NVA launched a major attack against Khe Sanh, a U.S. marine outpost in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam
 - Westmoreland had received intelligence that Khe Sanh might be a target in December
 - The Communist movements reminded Westmoreland of Dien Bien Phu
- By mid-January, an estimated 40,000 NVA troops had surrounded Khe Sanh
- January 21, 1968
 - NVA launch their attack
 - U.S. forces eventually push them back, but the NVA troops settled in for a long siege



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• The Tet Offensive

- The developing siege at Khe Sanh concerned American officials and military leaders
 - However, they continued to be publicly optimistic
 - Battlefield statistics and intelligence reports suggested that the Communists did not have strength to carry on the fight much longer
- Late January 1968
 - U.S. agrees to a temporary truce with North Vietnam so that all Vietnamese people could celebrate the Tet holiday
 - Tet = Vietnamese New Year
 - Regarded as the most important holiday in Vietnamese culture



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- The Tet Offensive

- January 31, 1968
 - Early in the morning hours, North Vietnam breaks the cease-fire agreement
 - More than 80,000 NVA and Viet Cong troops mounted simultaneous attacks on more than 100 cities, towns, and hamlets across South Vietnam
- North Vietnam hoped this surprise assault would spark a popular uprising against the South Vietnamese government and sweep Ho Chi Minh into power



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- The Tet Offensive

- News of the invasion stunned the American public
 - Over the next several days, televised images of the war made their way to living rooms across the country
 - Despite having seen images of the war for years, the images from the Tet Offensive gave the American people some dark glimpses into the conflict
- February 3, 1968
 - NBC Evening News showed shocking footage of South Vietnamese police commander General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong fighter in the street



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- The Tet Offensive

- These and other images convinced countless Americans that the war effort in Vietnam had gone seriously wrong



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Struggle for the South

- In the first few days of the Tet Offensive, NVA units stormed military installations, government buildings, and other strategic targets throughout the South
 - In Saigon, Communist forces attacked military bases, the presidential palace, the airport, and the government radio station
 - However, these victories failed to generate the popular revolt that the Communists expected
 - The South Vietnamese people generally remained on the sidelines, unwilling to join the Communists
- Because of the South's unwillingness to join, the momentum quickly shifted



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• Struggle for the South

- American and South Vietnamese forces launched a massive counterattack
 - Within days, the Viet Cong and NVA units were forced to retreat from nearly all of their positions across the South
- After a week, the only major city in Communist hands was Hue
 - NVA troops seized control of Hue on the first day of the Tet Offensive
 - After taking control of the city, the troops rounded up thousands of citizens believed to be enemies to their cause
 - These citizens were executed in brutal fashion and buried in mass graves



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• The Battle for Hue

- For the next ten days, the NVA terrorized the residents of Hue
- U.S. military leaders gathered reinforcements to help capture the city
- February 10, 1968
 - A combined force of U.S. Marines, Army Calvary, and South Vietnamese troops launched a counterassault to reclaim Hue
 - Communists mounted a stubborn defense of the city
 - Hue's streets quickly became battlefields



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• The Battle for Hue

- The bloody fight continued for the next two weeks
 - Fierce Communist defenses forced the American units to take control of the city one street at a time
 - The marines slowly advanced through the city, suffering heavy casualties in the process
 - Some estimates stated that at least one marine was killed for every three feet of ground gained
- The city of Hue suffered enormous damage in the fighting
 - NVA rockets and American bombs destroyed entire neighborhoods
 - The bodies of soldiers and civilians lined the streets
 - The Imperial Palace, an ancient section of the city, was reduced to rubble



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• The Battle for Hue

- February 24, 1968
 - Communist forces finally retreat from Hue
 - However, following the Communist retreat, South Vietnamese forces rushed into the city and murdered hundreds of civilians they believed sympathetic to the Communists
- In all, an estimated 10,000 people were killed in the Battle of Hue
 - Approximately 5,000 Communist fighters
 - 1,580 American casualties
 - 2,214 South Vietnamese casualties
- In addition, more than 75% of the population of Hue was left homeless by the struggle



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• American Victory or Defeat?

- In the days and weeks following the Tet Offensive, a great debate rose in America

• Victory?

- Many military leaders and supporters of American involvement in Vietnam claimed the attack had resulted in a major defeat for the North Vietnamese
- The joint American-South Vietnamese response had resulted in a punishing counterattack that produced heavy NVA and Viet Cong casualties
- Also, the U.S. crippled the deadly Viet Cong network
 - Viet Cong activity in the South declined heavily following Tet
- Finally, the Tet Offensive failed to spark a general rebellion among the South Vietnamese



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• American Victory or Defeat?

- In the days and weeks following the Tet Offensive, a great debate rose in America

• Defeat?

- Despite American victories and advances, the Tet Offensive destroyed American support for the War
 - Weeks before Tet, the Johnson administration had repeatedly stated that victory was near
- The Tet Offensive proved that North Vietnam remained a dangerous enemy
- Many Americans decided that victory over the North was still years away and that it could only be attained through thousands of American lives and billions of American dollars
- Tet became a major turning point in how the war was viewed and how it was conducted



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• American Victory or Defeat?

- Today, many people believe that American leadership lied about the situation in Vietnam in order to keep support for the war from declining
- Others believe that American leadership simply underestimated the strength and resolve of the North Vietnamese
- U.S. General Robert Komer:
 - *“We were not engaging in deception. We genuinely believed at the end of 1967 that we were getting on top...This wasn't public relations, this wasn't Lyndon Johnson telling us to put a face on it. We genuinely thought we were making it. And then boom, forty towns get attacked and the American public didn't believe us anymore.”*



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• The Siege of Khe Sanh

- As the Tet Offensive died down, the siege of Khe Sanh continued
 - Each day, NVA troops slammed the base with heavy fire
 - Trapped marines returned fire as best they could from their locations
 - Primary U.S. Weapon: Air bombing campaign known as Operation Niagara
 - An almost constant aerial assault
 - Dropped an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 tons of bombs and Napalm



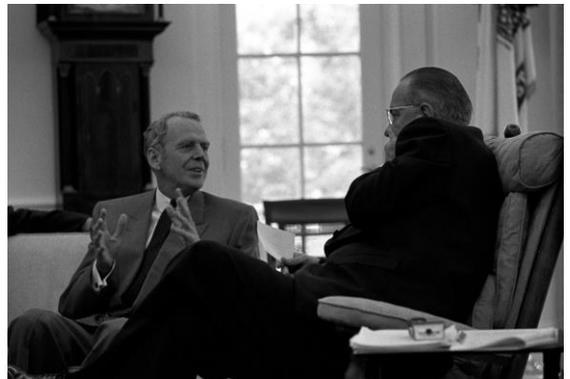
The Tet Offensive (1968)

- The Siege of Khe Sanh
 - Despite heavy bombing from the U.S., the NVA maintained their siege
 - Blasted the base with rocket attacks and sniper fire
 - Also dug a system of tunnels through the hillsides surrounding the base
 - NVA artillery and poor weather forced the U.S. to resupply the base through parachute drops
 - As the weeks dragged on, conditions inside Khe Sanh deteriorated
- After 47 days, the NVA withdrew from the areas surrounding Khe Sanh
 - Initially, the U.S. expressed great satisfaction with the successful defense of the base
 - Eventually, the marines voluntarily abandoned the base, setting fire to it as they left



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Clifford Evaluates the War Effort
 - The Tet Offensive forced the Johnson administration to reassess U.S. progress in Vietnam
 - On March 1, 1968, Westmoreland requested another 206,000 troops to be transferred to Vietnam
 - Rather than immediately grant the request, Johnson assigned newly appointed Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford to study it
- Clifford had supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam throughout the previous years
 - However, as he talked with military leaders and analysts, he began to change his mind
 - Later admitted that the weeks following Tet greatly altered his perception of the war



The Tet Offensive (1968)

• Clifford Evaluates the War Effort

- Clifford was also stunned to learn that U.S. military leaders had no clear plan to win the war
 - Because of this, Clifford began to believe that a U.S. military victory in Vietnam would be impossible
 - Clifford also believed another increase in troops would trigger another outburst of turmoil and protest across America
 - Because of this realization, he declined Westmoreland's request for more troops
 - *"I was more conscious each day of domestic unrest in our country. Draft-card burnings, marches in the streets, problems on school campuses, bitterness and divisiveness were rampant"*



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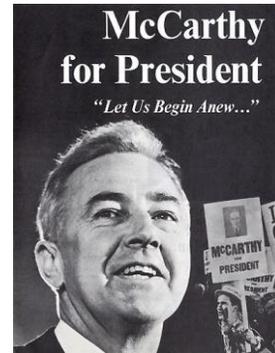
• Johnson and the Wise Men

- Clifford's recommendation surprised the President
 - Johnson called a meeting of his closest advisors, the "Wise Men" to see if they felt differently
 - One by one, they reluctantly agreed with Clifford's view
 - Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson bluntly stated that an American victory would take at least five more years and require huge new increases in soldiers and money
 - The gloomy opinions of the Wise Men stunned and angered Johnson
- Johnson became increasingly worried that the Vietnam War was destroying his Presidency
 - He desperately wanted to believe the U.S. could win the war with one final push
 - However, he began to feel his dreams of victory were doomed



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Johnson's Surprise Announcement
 - Criticism of the Johnson administration continued to increase
- In addition to the criticism, Johnson was dealt political challenges as well:
 - March 12, 1968 – Eugene McCarthy came within a few votes of upsetting Johnson in the New Hampshire Primary
 - This showed that the controversy over Vietnam had greatly weakened Johnson's political position
 - March 16, 1968 – Robert F. Kennedy announces his candidacy for President
 - A harsh critic of Johnson's Vietnam policies who vowed to end the war if he were elected
 - Many viewed Kennedy as a serious challenger to the Democratic nomination



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Johnson's Surprise Announcement
 - At the end of March, Johnson made several Vietnam-related announcements:
 - General Westmoreland was transferred to Washington to serve as the Chief of Staff to the U.S. Army
 - Decided that 13,000 additional troops would be sent to Vietnam
 - March 31, 1968
 - Johnson addresses the nation on television
 - Announces a major cutback in the bombing of North Vietnam
 - Called for negotiations with the North to end the Vietnam War
 - Ended the speech with a shocking announcement: He would not seek and would not accept a nomination for another term as President



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- King & Kennedy Assassinated
 - The months following Johnson's announcement were difficult ones for the American public
 - April 4, 1968 – Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee
 - This violent death outraged African Americans across the country and sparked a flurry of riots in American cities
 - June 5, 1968 – Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated in Los Angeles after winning the California primary
 - August 28, 1968 – Riots erupt outside of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago
 - The riots and attacks by Chicago police are televised across the country
 - Also, the war raged on in Vietnam, despite calls for peace negotiations
 - Many Americans believed the entire country was spinning out of control



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Nixon Wins the Presidency
 - The 1968 Election saw Vice President Hubert Humphrey (D) against Richard M. Nixon (R)
 - Humphrey campaigned on a platform of peace, but many voters could not separate him from President Johnson
 - A week before the election, President Johnson attempted to help Humphrey win the election by announcing a complete halt to all bombing in North Vietnam
 - However, Nixon narrowly defeated Humphrey in the election



The Tet Offensive (1968)

- Nixon Wins the Presidency

- As Nixon prepared to take office, Americans hoped that he would be able to guide the nation out of Vietnam and heal the divisions across the country
- *“Americans had voted for what they perceived as a solid law and order Republican candidate who also promised peace in Vietnam. After a year that had brought the Tet Offensive, two assassinations, inner-city riots following the King murder, and the Chicago convention, the public wanted an end to the war and strife at home.” - Elizabeth Becker*

