

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #35

In the war of political will, North Vietnam had the advantage. President Johnson and his advisors grievously underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese commitment to unify Vietnam and expel the United States. Ho Chi Minh had warned the French in the 1940s that “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.” He predicted that the Vietnamese Communists would win a war of attrition, because they were willing to sacrifice all for their cause. While the United States fought a limited war for limited objectives, the Vietnamese Communists fought an all-out war for their very survival.

Just as General William C. Westmoreland was assuring Johnson and the American people that the American war effort in early 1968 was on the verge of gaining the upper hand, the Communists again displayed their tenacity. On January 31, 1968, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet), the Vietcong defied a holiday truce to launch assaults on American and South Vietnamese forces throughout South Vietnam. The Vietcong unleashed a massive, well-coordinated assault. Timed to coincide with Tet, the offensive struck 36 provincial capitals and 5 of the 6 major cities, including Saigon. The old capital city of Hue fell to the Communists. Vietcong units temporarily occupied the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. General Westmoreland proclaimed the Tet offensive was a major defeat for the Vietcong, and most students of military strategy later agreed with him. In strictly military terms the Tet offensive was a failure with very heavy Vietcong losses. While Vietcong casualties were enormous, however, the impact of the events on the American public was more telling. The psychological effect of the Tet offensive was devastating. Television brought into American homes shocking live images: the American embassy under siege; and the Saigon police chief placing a pistol to the head of a Vietcong suspect and executing him. The Tet offensive made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war. How could an enemy on the run manage such a large-scale, complex, and coordinated attack? Just before Tet, a Gallup poll found that 56% of Americans considered themselves “hawks” (supporters of the war), while only 28% identified with the “doves” (war opponents). Three months later, “doves” outnumbered “hawks” 42% to 41%. *Time* and *Newsweek* soon ran antiwar editorials urging American withdrawal from Vietnam. Walter Cronkite, the dean of American television journalists, confided to his viewers that he no longer believed the war was winnable. President Johnson reportedly said, “If I’ve lost Walter, then it’s over. I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.” Without embracing the peace movement, many Americans simply concluded that Cronkite was correct – the war was not winnable. Polls showed that Johnson’s popularity had declined to 35%, lower than any president since Harry Truman’s darkest days. Civil rights leaders and social activists felt betrayed as they saw federal funds earmarked for the war on poverty siphoned off by the expanding war. In 1968 the United States was spending \$322,000 on every Communist killed in Vietnam. The poverty programs at home received only \$53 per person.

The Tet offensive was a turning point in the war. It undermined Johnson and discredited his war policies. During the early part of 1968, President Johnson grew increasingly embittered and isolated. It had become painfully evident that the Vietnam War was a never-ending stalemate. Secretary of Defense Clifford reported to Johnson that a task force of prominent soldiers and civilians saw no prospect for a military victory. Robert Kennedy was reportedly considering a run for the presidency in order to challenge Johnson's Vietnam policy. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota had already made the decision to oppose the president in the Democrat primaries. When the 1968 presidential primary season got under way in March, antiwar students rallied to McCarthy as a candidate. He polled 42% of the vote to Johnson's 48% in the New Hampshire primary. It was a remarkable showing for a little-known senator. Each presidential primary thereafter promised to become a referendum on the president's Vietnam policy. In Wisconsin, scene of the next primary, Johnson's political advisors forecast a humiliating defeat for him. One of them stated: "We sent a man [to campaign for Johnson], and all we've heard from him since is a few faint beeps, like the last radio signals from the Bay of Pigs."

Despite his troubles with foreign policy, Johnson remained a master at reading the political omens. On March 31 he went on national television to announce a limited halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and fresh initiatives for a negotiated cease-fire. Then he added a dramatic postscript: "I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President." Discouraged and physically exhausted, President Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek re-election. The Vietnam War had sapped his spirit to that degree.

Although American troops would remain in Vietnam for five more years and the casualties would continue, the quest for military victory had ended. Now the question was how the most powerful nation in the world could extricate itself from Vietnam with a minimum of damage to its prestige.