The Vietnam War – Morale and Protests

Loss of Moral

General Westmoreland believed that the North Vietnamese failure of the Tet Offensive gave him the ideal opportunity to win the war. All he needed, he said, was 206,000 more troops. President Johnson, who had already sent 500,000 American soldiers to Vietnam, did not agree. He was so shaken by Tet that he refused the general’s request and brought him back to America to be Chief of Staff. Westmoreland argued in later years that he had been cheated of victory. He wrote later in 1976, “It was like two boxers in the ring, one having the other on the ropes, close to a knockout, when the apparent winner’s corner inexplicably throws in the towel.”

On March 31, 1968, President Johnson made a televised speech from the White House in which he said, “I am taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict.” To get North Vietnam to negotiate, Johnson called a halt to the bombing campaign of North Vietnam. The realization that there would now be no final victory damaged U.S. military morale, or fighting spirit. Soldiers saw no sense in risking their lives for an unwinnable war.

Many soldiers decorated their equipment with peace signs and antiwar slogans, such as “We are the unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary, for the ungrateful.” Now U.S. officers who ordered men on dangerous missions ran the risk of being fragged – killed by their own men using fragmentation grenades. The army reported 1,016 “fragging” cases between 1969 and 1972, resulting in 86 deaths and over 700 injuries. U.S. Army medic George Cantero said, “If somebody gives you orders that would kill you and your squad...then you eliminate them, because that’s the only way you’ll get another officer. And, it’s better that one of them goes instead of all of you.”

M26 fragmentation grenade

1. How did General Westmoreland feel about the U.S.’s position after the Tet Offensive?

2. What was President Johnson’s reaction to the Tet Offensive?
3. What effect did President Johnson’s speech have on U.S. troops?

4. What is fragging?

My Lai

One effect of low morale was that U.S. soldiers took out their anger and frustration on Vietnamese civilians. The most shocking case was the massacre at My Lai. In March 1968, Charlie Company of the American Division’s 11th Infantry Brigade received word that Viet Cong guerrillas had taken control of My Lai. Led by Lieutenant William L. Calley, the unit was sent to the village on a search-and-destroy mission on March 16. At the time, morale among U.S. soldiers on the ground was dwindling, especially in the wake of the North Vietnamese-led Tet Offensive. Charlie Company had lost some 28 of its members to death or injuries, and was down to just over 100 men. Army commanders had advised the soldiers of Charlie Company that all who were found in My Lai could be considered Viet Cong or active Viet Cong sympathizers, and ordered them to destroy the village. When they arrived, the soldiers found no Viet Cong, but rounded up and murdered up to 500 civilians—mostly women, children and old men—in an extremely brutal fashion, including rape and torture. Lieutenant Calley was reported to have dragged dozens of people, including young children, into a ditch before executing them with a machine gun. Not a single shot was fired against the men of Charlie Company at My Lai. The army attempted to cover up the massacre, but it was revealed by the press in November 1969. Lieutenant Calley was sentenced to life in prison but President Nixon pardoned him after three years.

1. What happened at My Lai?
The Anti-War Movement

From 1964, there was a growing anti-war movement in the United States. It began in the universities with teach-ins (anti-war lectures and debates). Opposition came from many different groups, including students, campaigners for African-American Civil Rights, members of the hippie “counter-culture,” churches, and Vietnam veterans. Although the anti-war movement received great publicity, polls showed that most Americans continued to support the war as long as victory seemed likely. Patriotic conservative Americans were disgusted to see people waving the North Vietnamese flag at demonstration.

Opposition to the war was fueled by the draft that was enacted during the Vietnam War. This is when men are required to serve in the Armed Forces of America. Thousands of Americans refused to serve preferring the possibility of going to jail. Many burned their draft cards in protest. The most famous draft dodger was heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who was stripped of his title as a result. Explaining his refusal to serve, Muhammad Ali said, “I got nothing against no Viet Cong. No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger!”

Dr. Martin Luther King made many anti-war speeches. In April 1967, he accused the government of “taking the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest, Georgia and East Harlem.”

One of the most outspoken opponents of the war was the movie star Jane Fonda. In 1972, Fonda visited Hanoi, making speeches denouncing U.S. soldiers in Vietnam as war criminals. She posed in a North Vietnamese helmet and sat on an anti-aircraft gun used to shoot down American pilots. Many Americans saw her as a traitor, and nicknamed her “Hanoi Jane.”
The most powerful opposition came from Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). This group was founded in 1967 by former soldiers who had fought in Vietnam and now viewed the war as wrong. They held meetings and protest marches, where many threw away the medals they had won. By 1971, VVAW had around 11,000 members.

As the war continued, protests were marked with increased violence from demonstrators and police. In May 1970, confronted by rock-throwing demonstrators at Kent State University, National Guardsmen opened fire on the crowd, killing four students and wounding nine others.

The increased number of protests and anti-war movement in the United States only fueled the morale of the NVA and Viet Cong. Colonel Bui Tin of the NVA said, “Every day our leadership would listen to world news… to follow the growth of the American antiwar movement. Visits to Hanoi by people like Jane Fonda… gave us confidence that we should hold on in the face of battlefield reverses (losses).”

**Direction:** Choose one of the following topics to research and complete one (1) of the following options.

- Muhammad Ali as a “draft dodger”
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his anti-war views
- Jane Fonda aka “Hanoi Jane”
- Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW)
- Kent State University Shooting

**Option 1:** Using the internet, research one of the provided persons or events and write a minimum of one and a half (1.5) pages, typed, 12 point font, double-spaced, paper to present to the class. You must include one (1) picture. Do not plagiarize or copy-and-paste.

**Option 2:** Research one of the provided persons or events, write a movie script, and act it out for the class. You can use any of my props and “hire” classmates to fill the cast if needed. It must be at least two (2) minutes long. Remember – the focus of your script should be to teach the class.