

International Baccalaureate

HL History

Internal Assessment

**To what extent had the United States lost the Vietnam War by 1968?**

Total Word Count: 2191

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## Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will analyze the research question “To what extent had the United States lost the Vietnam War by 1968?” Two sources will be evaluated in-depth. The first of these is a primary source, a speech by Richard Nixon, Republican presidential nominee in 1968. This is relevant to the investigation as it gives insight into US political views at the time regarding the war and whether it was lost by 1968. The second is a secondary source, the view of the American historian, Gregory A. Daddis’ in his book *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* published in 2011. It is relevant to my research question as it is an academic appraisal of the state of the war in Vietnam by the late 1960’s with the benefit of hindsight.

A value of the origin of the speech is that it is given by Richard Nixon, one of the presidential nominees in 1968. This gives insight into the perspective of a leading politician in the US regarding the state of the war as the time as the speech was given on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1968. This speech was used to convince the American people that Nixon could end the war, and its purpose is of value as it alludes to the potential for defeat and humiliation. This content outlines the sentiments that would be popularly held as it attempts to rally support for Nixon.

A limitation of the origin is that the speech is given by a presidential nominee, and so he has a reason to make the war sound worse than it is to undermine his Democratic opponent. Nixon has a reason to exaggerate the situation to gain a political advantage which is a limitation of the purpose and content.

A value of the origin of the second source is that Gregory A. Daddis is a professional historian at Chapman University, and the military academy West Point in the US, and is an expert on the Vietnam War. Another value is that the book was published in 2011, therefore has the advantage of hindsight.

A limitation of this source is that Daddis writing in 2011 knew the outcome of the war after 1968 and may be prone to hindsight bias. While Daddis is an expert on the Vietnam war, there is the possibility that Daddis is influenced by his connections to the US army, as he is a retired colonel. The source also is a broad study of the entirety of the war and therefore may lack depth on whether the war was lost in 1968.

## Section 2: Investigation

The Vietnam war developed from a civil war between the Communist Vietcong and the Saigon Government in the south. The Vietcong were supported by the communist USSR and the PRC, while the Saigon Government was supported primarily by the US. US involvement escalated between 1961 and 1965 into a full scale war. Despite its technological and economic supremacy, the US struggled to defeat the communist forces, and by 1968 many commentators and historians argued that the war was indeed lost.

It could be argued that the US military had lost the war in Vietnam by 1968. US forces had a lack of experience, and were unable to capitalize as most troops deployed were raw recruits. This meant that they were inexperienced in the art of combat, as the training did not include fighting in the territorial conditions they were in<sup>1</sup>. The Vietnam war involved some of the most intense hand-to-hand combat in very difficult conditions. Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, in 1968, admitted that the US Army used military tactics that were appropriate to fighting more conventional enemies and not guerrillas.<sup>2</sup>

The US military was also unable to sustain key advantages it gained in regions such as Khe Sanh due to a lack of ground forces.<sup>3</sup> On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 9 days after the Tet offensive General Westmoreland relayed to Washington that the enemy had deployed an additional 16,000 to 25,000 troops in the area.<sup>4</sup> This build-up of forces posed a significant threat to the military operations being conducted in the Khe Sanh region and the US could not respond to this concentration of troops. Indeed, the PAVN was able to increase its recruitment from 78 battalions to 105 battalions. The ratio of US and ARVN troops to the PAVN troops declined from 1.7:1 to 1.4:1.<sup>5</sup> Communist forces had also been applying pressure to the cities of Hue and Danang, and threatened Highway 1, a major transportation route in the region.<sup>6</sup> McNamara foresaw, and had stated in December 1965 to the president, that he believed the war was lost militarily, and that the US should attempt a diplomatic solution to the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

It could also be argued that by 1968 the US had lost the political side of the war. The government had claimed that the enemy was not able to perform large military operations.<sup>8</sup> The view of the US public towards the war changed when the Vietcong

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne De Pennington, *Modern America: The USA, 1865 to the Present* (London: Hodder Murray, 2005),

<sup>2</sup> "Robert McNamara admits Vietnam War a mistake," video file, posted March 13, 2011, accessed October 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0enCCGBW3xc>

<sup>3</sup> 1. Marc Jason Gilbert and William P. Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 235.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 235.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 235.

<sup>7</sup> "Hardtalk: Robert McNamara (BBC 1998)," video file, posted December 21, 2012, accessed October 10, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WpCV9\\_a170](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WpCV9_a170).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109



launched the Tet offensive in 1968.<sup>9</sup> When communists were filmed in the US embassy in Saigon and this was aired on national television in the US, people were horrified.<sup>10</sup> On January 30<sup>th</sup> 1968 the Vietcong along with the NVA launched an attack that took the army of the south and the US military completely by surprise. The Vietcong launched an attack on multiple towns and villages at the same time.<sup>11</sup> This was initially successful and the Vietcong took control of several major cities in the South. This clearly demonstrated to the public that the Communists could in fact still perform large and effective operations.<sup>12</sup>

In 1964 the Government had missed an opportunity to find a way to possibly negotiated peace.<sup>13</sup> The US government was concerned that the North Vietnamese would enter talks from a position of strength and did not pursue negotiations. The US military backed this decision.<sup>14</sup> The Historian Andrew Birtle describes General Westmoreland, the commander of the US Military Assistance Command from 1964, as a man who ignored political aspects and pacification in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> The Johnson administration lost its political support from the US public and had not engaged in political solutions to the war. President Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to run for president and announced this on March 31<sup>st</sup>. stating that "it is true that a house divided against itself by the spirit of faction, of party, of region, of religion, of race is a house that cannot stand."<sup>16</sup> On August 8<sup>th</sup> 1968 presidential nominee Richard Nixon accepted the republican nomination. In his speech he stated that the economic and military power of the US had been used ineffectively in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

However, there is evidence to suggest that the Vietnam war was not lost militarily by 1968. In 1965 President Johnson approved Operation Rolling Thunder, the comprehensive bombing of north Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> He approved this operation after McNamara, encouraged him to do so after visiting South Vietnam. Between March 1965 and November 1968, 153,784 bombing attacks were conducted by the US Air force, along with another 152, 399 carried out by the US Marines.<sup>19</sup> On 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1967, it was announced by the department of defense that 864,000 tons of

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<sup>9</sup> "Tet Offensive Shakes Cold War Confidence," History, last modified 2012, accessed November 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/tet-offensive-shakes-cold-war-confidence>.

<sup>10</sup> James Willbanks, "Shock and Awe of Tet Offensive Shattered U.S. Illusions," *US News (USA)*, [Page #], accessed 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/01/29/shock-and-awe-of-tet-offensive-shattered-us-illusions>

<sup>11</sup> "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Tet Offensive, 1968," *Office of the Historian*, last modified 2012, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/tet>.

<sup>12</sup> *No Sure*, 134

<sup>13</sup> Joanne De Pennington, *Modern America: The USA, 1865 to the Present* (London: Hodder Murray, 2005), 196-206.

<sup>14</sup> De Pennington, *Modern America*

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal*, [Page #], accessed May 3, 2016, [http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/PROVN\\_Westmoreland.pdf](http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/PROVN_Westmoreland.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not to Seek Reelection" (speech, White House, March 31, 1968)

<sup>17</sup> Richard Nixon, "Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech" (speech, Republican National Convention, Miami Beach, FL, August 8, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Charles E. Neu, *America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945-1975* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2005), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Wayne Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back: The United States Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966-1973* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 303.

bombs had been dropped on Northern Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder. At the end of 1967 there were 485,600 US military personnel in Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> This was a considerable commitment of US personnel. General Westmoreland petitioned to receive more troops to continue to expand his military offensive tactics.<sup>21</sup> In December 1967, Westmoreland reported that the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam "...at all levels is gaining momentum".<sup>22</sup> In 1967, Westmoreland gave a speech to the US congress and stated that all Vietcong attacks had failed due to the "courage and bravery" of the US military.<sup>23</sup> He intended to use and exploit this momentum in 1968 to pursue an offensive strategy based on two main objectives and principles: firstly to seek out and destroy communist forces and infrastructure across the entire spectrum of the enemy threat, and secondly assist the Saigon Government in a major pacification and nation-building program.<sup>24</sup> Westmoreland believed the time had come for an all-out offensive operation. Officials from the White House supported his confidence in the power of the military. A senior officer serving in the Mekong Delta told reporters in early January "I think we have the force to win. We have gained the upper hand."<sup>25</sup>

National Security Advisor Walt Rostow believed that Hanoi would be inclined to negotiate a settlement before the presidential election in November 1968.<sup>26</sup> In November, North Vietnamese regiments assaulted American and South Vietnamese forces near Dak To, an outpost in the northern Kontum province. The North Vietnamese suffered heavy losses, with American troops reporting around 1,644 Northern troops dead.<sup>27</sup> It proved that US troops could not be pushed back. In addition, the Tet offensive in January 1968 was a military failure for the Northern Vietnamese army. While the Offensive allowed the Vietcong to take control of some cities, after the initial attack American forces rallied and were able to retake the majority of towns.<sup>28</sup> An article in the Washington times states that the US won militarily, but lost politically, and that the defeat of the communists during the Tet offensive was wrongly reported to the US people.<sup>29</sup> This caused the military to incur doubts from the political establishment when it was still strong and able to win the war.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, the US still had the political will to win the war in 1968. At the beginning of 1968 a general public poll was conducted, and found that the majority of Americans did not approve of how President Johnson was handling the war. However, even though the public felt this way, 60% of Americans favored military

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<sup>20</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>21</sup> "The Tet Offensive," US History, last modified 2016, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/55c.asp>.

<sup>22</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>23</sup> "General Westmorland on Vietnam (1967)," video file, posted May 3, 2014, accessed October 10, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MF\\_emSW3ko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MF_emSW3ko).

<sup>24</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>25</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>26</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>27</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133-135.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*

<sup>29</sup> *Washington Times*, April 16, 2004

<sup>30</sup> "Winning in Iraq . . . and Vietnam," *The Washington Times*, August 26, 2005,

escalation and involvement rather than peace and military curtailments.<sup>31</sup> In a speech given by General Westmoreland in 1967, it was stated that the communist forces would execute village chiefs and take civilians hostage in the south.<sup>32</sup> This helped sway political opinion about the war, and this is reflected in speeches given at the time.<sup>33</sup> The US not only maintained support for the war within its own country, but also had the support of foreign leaders, particularly in Southeast Asia. The Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman concluded, "The American decision will go down in history as the move that prevented the world from having to face another major conflagration."<sup>34</sup> The Prime Minister of New Zealand declared that US commitment meant, "We can thank God that America at least regards aggression in Asia with the same concern as it regards aggression in Europe—and is prepared to back up its concern with action."<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, militarily the US could have continued to fight the war in Vietnam after 1968 as it had not been militarily defeated. However, politically, domestic public opinion was turning against the war after the Tet Offensive. While, the majority of US generals, including General Westmoreland, thought that victory was still possible, the election of Richard Nixon who sought a withdrawal from Vietnam, meant that the political battle had been lost by the end of 1968.

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<sup>31</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring*, 133

<sup>32</sup> "General Westmorland," video file.

<sup>33</sup> "Vietnam War Overview," last modified July 18, 2012, accessed September 4, 2016, [http://www.authentichistory.com/1961-1974/4-vietnam/1-overview/4-1964-1968/1965\\_Sec\\_of\\_State\\_Deans\\_Rusk\\_on\\_Bombing\\_North\\_Vietnam.html](http://www.authentichistory.com/1961-1974/4-vietnam/1-overview/4-1964-1968/1965_Sec_of_State_Deans_Rusk_on_Bombing_North_Vietnam.html).

<sup>34</sup> "Vietnam War Overview."

<sup>35</sup> "Vietnam War Overview."

## Section 3: Reflection

I believe that in researching this question I have gained a better understanding of some of the problems that historians face when writing their accounts. I have attempted to include both primary sources and secondary sources, and draw evidence from a range of perspectives on the war in Vietnam by 1968. I was aware of the fact that many of the sources, particularly contemporary opinions tended to be subjective, however I attempted to find balance with regards to sources that argued the war was lost in 1968 and those that asserted the war could still be won at this point.

One obstacle was this is a controversial topic. Primary statements from the US general in the field, Westmoreland, were prone to exaggeration of the military strengths the Americans had, and how a military victory was achievable. In addition, the speeches and public statements given by President Johnson and his secretary of defense Robert McNamara would also support this perspective as they were responsible for the intervention and could not admit the war was lost. Another challenge was the contradictions in the views expressed by key figures, for example, Robert McNamara stated that the US could have won the war in 1968 whilst he was in office<sup>36</sup>, however, in the last decade McNamara claimed that the war was a mistake, that the US could not have won and that this was clear by 1968.<sup>37</sup> A further challenge was the lack of available primary sources from the perspective of the Vietnamese. I also found that most of the sources that I accessed were written by US historians and were based on US intelligence sources. An example of this is Gregory A. Daddis, an American historian, who's views may be affected by the nature of the information he gathered while researching the war.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the US historiography of the Vietnam war was impacted by the context of the cold war. US revisionist historians writing in the 1970's that argued the war was lost, may have a negative view of US intervention due to the domestic impact of the war.

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<sup>36</sup> "Robert McNamara," video file.

<sup>37</sup> "Robert McNamara," video file.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brush, "Book Review – No Sure Victory, by Gregory A. Daddis," HistoryNet, last modified June 28, 2011, accessed November 2016, <http://www.historynet.com/book-review-no-sure-victory-by-gregory-a-daddis.htm>.



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