

A Case Study of Vietnam War from the Perspective of Individual Power in History: Analysis of Leaders Make Events

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Abstract: The question of whether leaders make events or events make leaders in history seemed to never come to a concrete answer. The reflexivity of this question highlights that perspectives matter, thus a definite conclusion that meet the expectation of all historical research cannot be made. The Vietnam War was one of the critical historical events in American history, and it has largely altered the future of USA at an international level in terms of foreign policies and also at a domestic level since it influenced the US presidency by setting up a commitment trap ^[1]. The relationship between leaders and events in the history will be discussed in this essay by talking about the succession of presidency in USA ^[1] during the Vietnam War. Moreover, making an attempt to show the possibility of leaders can portrait future development of events based on their unique personalities and thinking.

Keywords: Vietnam War; USA; Presidency; Personality

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1. Introduction

Looking back at the world's history, the origin and cause of the famous events always implies struggles between leaders. The great man's theory emphasizes on the role of a leader to portrait an event. At the same time, the evaluation of inevitability was also prevalent among historians, which reveals the complex nature of the relationship between leaders and events. However, some cases in history may be able to display the feasibility of the theory under certain circumstances. In this case, a classic war episode can be the example to explain how leaders and events exert impact on one to another.

The Vietnam War provides a valuable case study under the framework of US legislation system. The US constitution was never a dictatorial system ^[2], and the ideal democracy allows congress to make decision with reference to the public's will. However, during the Vietnam War, it was known that US presidents possessed executive privilege from 1950 to 1969 ^[3]. The executive privilege was founded around 1950 and was claimed to have the final say in making key decision during the emergent situation ^[4], which was not contradictory with the rights of congress. However, by deliberately hiding information from the congress and the public, US presidents during the Vietnam War was able to execute policies ^[5] with this political privilege and still fit into the traditional US political system at the same time.

2. Context of the discussion

The Vietnam War, a long and painful 20 years of fighting initially started by France, later became a conflict solely between American and Vietnamese forces ^[6]. This is one of the classic and crucial war episodes in the history in context of the cold war. In the strong desire to maintain the order of Asia and prevent the further spread of communism was constant. Leaders during this period believed that it is necessary to act against communism in order avoid being another country that is affected by the Red Scare—a widespread of communism globally. As a result, the consequent decisions of presidents during the US involvement in Vietnam War led to the direct deterioration of the position of USA both in Vietnam and on an international level. Their strategies were not only reactionary but also spontaneous, with the strong personal understanding of the nature of the Vietnam War which has caused political and military changes to alter the direction of Vietnam War. Under the cold war superpower, decisions of presidents were distinct that it both sped up the deterioration of US reputation and increased the permeant historical impact on Vietnam as well.

As a result, this essay will discuss how leaders were able to alter the effect of events by using their unique strategies during the Vietnam war, therefore showing the power of unique characters of leaders on the events.

3. Eisenhower and division

The Vietnam War was once a valuable tool for presidency when Eisenhower was in power. However, it resulted in a permanent and traumatizing ideological division for the Vietnamese due to the effect of his policy. Eisenhower cleverly used the war as an opportunity to gain the public's support when he was the candidate of the president. He made himself a president with claims of providing the most appropriate solution to Vietnam War. In order to meet the expectations of the public, he quickly announced the Geneva accord ^[7] to post free elections in order to provide a resolution that was fair superficially ^[8]. The Geneva accord resulted in temporary harmony and established short-term effectiveness since both sides ceased fire before the free election. However, this actually made the placed USA in a more difficult situation in the war to make further decisions. This short-term peace that Eisenhower utilized as a way to make himself the president resulted in further debts which the USA had to pay after the war for the later development.

Unlike the Korean war, the proportion of population of communist side in the northern region of Vietnam was largely inferior to the pro-US population in the southern region ^[9]. Hence, free election was never successfully carried out and Vietnam was completely divided as a result. North Vietnam people believed that the USA wanted to take this opportunity to cover up their motives of eliminating communism totally. Based on the population proportion, the south would definitely win the election and the northern government will no longer be able to be official. Moreover, the former US coups which directly overthrew the leaders who were in opposition to the USA ideologically in Latin American countries such as Guatemala has instilled fear among the North Vietnamese as well. This implicates that the Northern government can still be overthrown by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ultimately even if they win the election. In this way, Eisenhower's Geneva accords did not actually serve as a peace term but as a trigger to further hostility from people against the south Vietnamese government.

With the hostile predisposition of the north against the South, Eisenhower's next decision directly made the division irreversible. Due to the extreme unpopularity of corrupt pro-US leader Diem, Eisenhower withdrew the election. This further fueled the tension between north and south, leaving the northern and southern government as their own entities. This is the end of the last chance to integrate north and south into one official government, which means this ideological divide with the strong element of hostility remained in both sides and even left post-war hostility in two sides. However, the escalation of tension did not stop here. In order to pursue more satisfying result to show his ability to tackle the communist power,

Eisenhower turned the direction to offer Diem more military strategies. He tried strengthening the power of Diem as the pro-USA leader by using Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and national buildings^[10], aiming to use this as the last strike to end the war with US's victory. Those policies confirmed the suspicions from North Vietnamese and left the impression that North and the South will never be able to work together with the strong anti-communist preference.

Eisenhower put US into the war with the intention of earning more credibility during his presidency. However, it resulted in almost a permanent division among the Vietnamese and led to the long-lasting hostility of the northern communists not only towards the South but also until recent years, the USA. Once the USA withdrew from Vietnam due to the exhaustion of President Nixon, the North immediately started to take over the south government and the chaotic situation lasted for another 20 years^[7]. Basically, this division that Eisenhower brought into Vietnam caused disunity of the country, which left citizens in Vietnam in constant dispute and trauma^[11] without any political or social stability.

4. Johnson and Operation Rolling Thunder

To handle the previous obstacles that Kennedy left in Vietnam, President Johnson was elected as the one who was tough enough to handle communist hardliners. Johnson was able to picture of the costly prize for further involvement in the war and started to find ways to end the war while maintaining enough personal credibility. Although previous presidents did want to show the strength to combat the communist power, they shirked back from the direct military involvement in the war due to fear of condemnations by US citizens as well as the international community. As a result, during the past presidencies, leaders made most of military actions covert

in order to avoid being the one to impair US's reputation that was already being questioned by the international community after a series of political involvements in Latin America.

However, Johnson took the step to exert direct military involvement. He realized the military weakness of the South Vietnam government due to the low military expertise in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)^[12], believing the war would never end if there were no strong military intervention. He pursued the fast and powerful intervention to eliminate his enemy in the North Vietnam, feeling that strong military enforcement can achieve the goal to contain communism and earn the credibility as the unshakeable president to exit the war with victory.

As a consequence, Johnson decided to send troops rather than military adviser, and command direct and huge investments^[13] for US assistance on military equipment in Vietnam to serve as the foundation of the Rolling Thunder policy^[14]. As the large-scale strategic bombing military action, Rolling Thunder targeted every region when there was a sign of the Vietnamese or Viet Cong. The Rolling Thunder^[15] was somewhat effective since it was able to combat people who were using guerilla tactics to hide in the forest. However, it turned forest, towns and even cities into battlefields^[4] with countless casualties, which lead to not only death of communists but also their own soldiers and innocent mass populations. At this point, the USA was facing numerous international condemnations. The accusation of the brutality of his policy combined with the direct military intervention made the US reputation reach a low point internationally, especially under the circumstance that international community was aware of the growth of communism as the general will of the Vietnamese people.

The situation worsened when Hanoi launched an attack against south Vietnam during the Tet festival. Johnson continued to actively supply military aids, but still was not able to ease the waves of rising communist forces during the war. Tet Offensive in 1968^[16] revealed that communism was not alleviated even with the strong military intervention, which was a fact known by Johnson himself and also all the soldiers who fought during the attack. In other words, Johnson's action directly revealed the truth of the war to the public, leading to a rise in opposition domestically. This was the starting point for the USA to

question the meaning of their involvement in the Vietnam War, in the sense that there was no necessity for their involvement in the war and it brings little benefits for the USA themselves.

Retired veterans displayed the realistic situation to the USA and spread it to the global sphere. The fact that the USA was never really in a favorable place in the war was fully displayed into the sight of the world. Consequently, the media sought for a resolution from Johnson, and that was the place that Vietnam War was titled as “Johnson’s War”^[17]. The actions of Johnson served as the turning point for value of Vietnam War since it is no longer a useful tool to consolidate the power of presidents anymore but a costly burden. If there was no direct and costly military intervention decision that was made by USA, the intentional cover of US role in Vietnam War would not be revealed so quickly, which would not lead to the quick and urgent need to end the involvement.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although there was a presence of the commitment trap as one cause to offer leader a chance to come to the rise of power in the case of Vietnam War, the progressive development of the war was due to unique strategies from each president. Leaders are not only able to alter the development of events, but also have the ability to utilize their modification on the battlefield of the Vietnam War to reach political aims based on their own incentives and leave a permanent effect on an international level^[18]. Admittedly, there was a certain element of chance, but during the war, both the consolidation of their own power and the adjustment with the international surrounding, was directly influenced by the unique character of each leader. Their way of consolidation of power ultimately lead to different orientations of development, and the impacts were both directly on the ground and extends even until after the event has ended.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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