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Review Essay

Losing Cronkite

Russell Crandall

Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam

Mark Bowden. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017. \$30.00.
624 pp.

The Vietnam War (TV miniseries)

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, directors. Distributed by PBS, 2017.

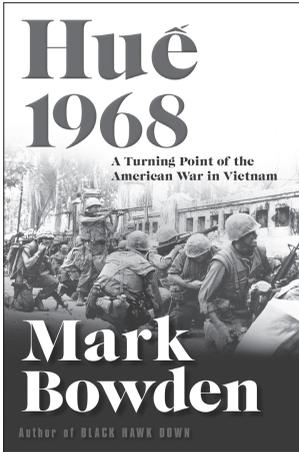
Out of nearly 20 years of war in Vietnam, 1968, remembered for the Hanoi-led Tet Offensive, is understandably seen as America's year of living dangerously. Less recalled by history, but perhaps equally fateful, was the year 1965. Until then, America's stake in Vietnam had been portrayed as a secondary, even tertiary, strategic component of the global struggle against the spread of communism. Before 1965, president John F. Kennedy had insisted that Vietnam was to be *their* war, not *ours*, though he was willing to provide significant military and development assistance to president Ngo Dinh Diem's regime, as well as military advisers. Even this limited involvement would require a swelling logistical military force as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) continued to struggle against a foe that proved to be more formidable than expected.¹

Vice president Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the American presidency in 1963 after Kennedy was felled by Lee Harvey Oswald on an awful November day in Dallas, Texas. Taking the helm of a bereaved nation,

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Johnson assumed responsibility not just for Kennedy's domestic priorities – among them the space programme and civil rights – but also for Vietnam (*Hue 1968*, p. 23). Holdovers from Kennedy's inner circle, such as national security advisor McGeorge Bundy, insisted that Johnson had only two options: commit the United States to the war, or get out of Vietnam. He opted to do the former.²

Elected president in his own right in 1964, in 1965 Johnson expanded the United States' combat-troop commitment to Vietnam from nothing before



March to encompass the two Marine battalions for defensive operations requested by General William 'Westy' Westmoreland, whom Johnson had selected as chief of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Monthly draft calls increased from 17,000 to 35,000, and by the end of the year, Johnson had sent 184,300 troops to Vietnam – a rate that doubled in 1966.³ As Johnson told the nation in late July when announcing the deployment of an additional 44 combat battalions, 'I have asked the commanding general, General Westmoreland, what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me.

And we will meet his needs ... We will stand in Vietnam.'⁴

The year 1965 also marked the start of a ferocious bombing campaign labelled *Operation Rolling Thunder* by the Pentagon. The campaign was originally slated to last two months; it endured for the remainder of Johnson's years in the White House. (Napalm was approved for use on 9 March 1965, a few days after the start of the bombing.) The Pentagon would go on to fly more than three million sorties, representing the biggest use of airpower in the history of warfare. Most of the ordinance was dropped on Vietcong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) targets in South Vietnam.

Speaking at Johns Hopkins University on 7 April 1965, Johnson acknowledged that 400 Americans had 'ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil'.⁵ (By the war's end on 30 April 1975, the number of American dead had reached 55,220). Yet in 1965, *Time* magazine named General Westmoreland its 'Man of the Year'. At the time, about two-thirds of Americans stood

behind Johnson's maximalist gambit, but they wanted the war to be over quickly, and at minimal cost in terms of blood and toil.⁶ Westmoreland himself – a decorated veteran of the Second World War and the Korean War, and later the superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point – reasonably expected that he would achieve a decisive victory. On 16 November 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley, only one American troop was killed for every ten casualties of the NVA, convincing Westmoreland that his forces could defeat their undersized foe through attrition.⁷

The surprise of Tet

As America's long war in Afghanistan constantly serves to remind us, even the most localised of conflicts can sometimes become the Roach Motels of the great powers: they'll check in, but they won't check out. In 1965, the United States checked in to a once peripheral conflict that quickly became a national crusade spanning four presidential administrations. It did so, as famed directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick point out in their sweeping PBS documentary, *The Vietnam War*, on the basis of 'fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and Cold War miscalculation'.⁸ The administration was determined to make the world safe for democracy, and anxious to maintain America's global credibility (the latter aim not unrelated to the former). As Lyndon Johnson stated on 28 July 1965, 'If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in an American promise, or in American protection.'⁹

By the end of 1967, however, what had been a small resistance movement confined to the faculty salons of universities and Quaker Meeting Houses coalesced into a formidable political movement. On 21 October 1967, upwards of 100,000 citizens took to the streets of Washington to protest America's involvement in the Vietnam War.¹⁰ The following month, more than 35,000 anti-war protesters convened in front of the White House and the Washington Monument.¹¹ A solid majority of Americans still supported the war, but most now rejected Johnson's management of it, and the president was confronted by protesters wherever he went. Even those who had ostensibly supported Kennedy's inaugural vow to 'pay any price' and 'bear any burden' to check the advance of communism were jumping ship. Most

painfully for Johnson, Robert F. Kennedy was mulling his own presidential run to outflank the incumbent Democrat on the Vietnam problem.

For Johnson and Westmoreland, such behaviour was patently unpatriotic and gave succour to a determined North Vietnam. In January 1968, reporter Stewart Alsop, known as a hawk on Vietnam, quoted a 'high-level official' (quite possibly Westmoreland himself) who predicted that, in a few months, even the most cynical of reporters in Saigon were 'going to have to admit that we are definitely winning this war' (*Hue 1968*, p. 35). Passing through Washington in November 1967, Westmoreland told the National Press Club that, 'With 1968, a new phase is now starting. We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view.'¹² He explained that the United States' new strategy was to equip and train the ARVN so that American forces would become 'progressively superfluous'.¹³ Back in Saigon, a giddy US Embassy invited people to 'come see the light at the end of the tunnel' at its New Year party. A subsequent *Washington Post* headline ran, 'War's End in Sight – Westy' (*Hue 1968*, p. 39).

Despite this public optimism, Westmoreland and his generals believed that Hanoi was up to something. They were correct: the North Vietnamese were preparing to launch a major military campaign timed to coincide with the Tet (Lunar New Year) holiday in January 1968. As journalist Mark Bowden explains in *Hue 1968*, Hanoi planned to 'attack from without and from within'; the campaign was to be at once an 'offensive' and an 'uprising' that would end the war in the North's favour (pp. 9, 54). It was to be carried out mostly by NVA troops who had infiltrated the South. In a brilliant covert operation that one US officer described as a 'logistical miracle' (p. 54), the NVA invaders were aided by the clandestine communist National Liberation Front – including, most critically, its South Vietnam-based military wing, the VC.

In the final months of 1967, Hanoi succeeded in moving tens of thousands of soldiers (both NVA and VC) into position in the South (p. 54). (Pentagon intelligence operatives themselves observed heavy traffic in late 1967 along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that meandered in and out of neighbouring Laos and Cambodia.) These forces feinted major attacks on US bases across South Vietnam, including Khe Sanh, Da Nang, Con Tien and Pleiku, in the belief that the MACV would respond by reinforcing these targets. Westmoreland

fatefully opted to bolster American troop levels in I Corps Tactical Zone, the most northern section of South Vietnam that bordered the demilitarised zone (DMZ) dividing it from North Vietnam. Most critically, Westmoreland bet that Hanoi was going to centre its offensive around a massive attack on the Marine combat base in the remote locale of Khe Sanh. Hanoi would then, according to this logic, attempt to deal the Americans their 'Dien Bien Phu', just as the Viet Minh (the precursor to the NVA) had done to the French in 1954, in a victory that had expedited France's humiliating withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Westmoreland was convinced that the mortar shells that fell on Khe Sanh on 21 January 1968 were but the opening salvos in a massive offensive against the base. He even went so far as to consider the possible use of nuclear weapons to hold on to it.¹⁴

For Hanoi, though, Khe Sanh was but a distraction before a much larger general and surprise offensive in the South. Among the more than 100 targets that were hit during the offensive was Saigon, where guerrilla commandos attempted to raid the US Embassy's compound. For American officials, the raid, while sobering, was not a calamity. To the Americans watching the real-time television coverage at home, however, it appeared as though the city was falling.¹⁵

The Battle of Hue

Another target was the religiously and culturally important metropolis of Hue, the third-largest city in South Vietnam with a population of 140,000. In the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, upwards of 10,000 NVA and VC comrades emerged from their clandestine lairs to attack the imperial city. Achieving total surprise on the back of an American and ARVN intelligence failure of the highest order, the NVA and VC captured the city within hours. Only a couple of posts manned by outgunned ARVN fighters inside the citadel (a massive compound measuring more than two square miles and surrounded by walls more than 24 feet high) and the US Army advisory force just to the south held out. It took more than three weeks of especially destructive urban combat – the bloodiest of the war, with 10,000 combatants and civilians killed and 80% of the city reduced to rubble – for American and ARVN forces to eject the invaders.

Westmoreland's obsession with Khe Sanh, the only US base *not* to be targeted in the Tet Offensive, and his dismissive attitude to Hanoi's military prowess made it 'almost impossible' for him to recognise, much less admit to, the implications of the offensive (p. 221). Once the dust settled, he described it as 'suicidal', suggesting that, in Bowden's words, it 'had been a disaster – *for them*' (p. 221). The body counts backed this up: more than 37,000 enemy troops had been killed in only the first couple of weeks of the offensive. Yet Tet had obliterated the Pentagon's assumption that Hanoi lacked the troops and materiel to do anything much below the DMZ. At Hue, the enemy had actually held land.

The domestic blowback was to come not just from predictable voices such as anti-war senator Eugene McCarthy, who sought to unseat Johnson in the Democratic presidential primary, but also from establishment figures such as Michigan governor and future Republican presidential candidate George Romney. 'If what we have seen in the past week is a Viet Cong failure,' Bowden quotes him as saying, 'then I hope they never have a victory' (p. 317). Speaking in Chicago on 8 February 1968, Robert Kennedy described Vietnam as a 'deepening swamp' (p. 317). 'It is time for the truth,' he said. 'It is time to face the reality that a military victory is not in sight and it probably will never come.'¹⁶ A month later, he announced his run for the presidency.¹⁷

For his part, Johnson kept up the can-do attitude, at least publicly. 'With typically folksy charm,' writes Bowden, 'the president admitted that Tet might have surprised, say, as he put it, a sergeant asleep with a beer in his hand and his zipper down, or perhaps even with a woman on his lap', but he added that 'he was satisfied that Westmoreland's intelligence and preparation had been superb' (p. 224). One seasoned Washington reporter, Max Frankel, asked the president if he had underestimated General Vo Nguyen Giap, the NVA commander. 'I always *overestimate* General Giap', responded Johnson. 'You see what he did to the French. He is extremely able' (p. 224).

Johnson was technically correct when he noted that the people of South Vietnam had not, as Bowden puts it, answered 'Uncle Ho's call for a general uprising'. But for all his optimism, he still admitted to the press

that 'I go to bed every night feeling that I have failed, because I couldn't end the conflict in Vietnam' (p. 225). He ultimately seems to have accepted that a light no longer flickered at the end of the tunnel. Just weeks after the Battle of Hue ended on 2 March, he made the momentous announcement that he would not seek re-election. In June, he promoted Westmoreland to Army Chief of Staff. The new MACV chief, General Creighton Abrams, opted not to reinforce the Khe Sanh base where Westmoreland had so confidently expected the final showdown. In November, the Republican Richard Nixon was elected president on a platform of honourably ending Johnson's war in Vietnam.

Check-out time

For millions of viewers, *CBS Evening News's* Walter Cronkite, the 'avuncular dean of TV anchors', was a reliable and patriotic source of information about America's war in Vietnam. According to Bowden, Cronkite had 'no moral qualms' about the war, at least at first:

He thought the effort was overly ambitious – trying to win a war not just militarily but *politically*, trying to win the peace and the battle at the same time – but he felt the effort was a worthy one, and while skeptical, he supported it. (p. 364)

Even as the morass deepened, Cronkite's experience as a war correspondent during the Second World War made him more willing to dismiss the contrarian dispatches of fellow journalists reporting from the rice paddies, jungles and mountains of Vietnam. Thus, when the 'first reports of Tet rattled off the teletypes' at the CBS offices in New York on 1 February 1968, Cronkite was apoplectic. 'What the hell is going on?', Bowden quotes him as saying to his producers. 'I thought we were winning the war?' (p. 223). Hours later, he reported to the nation that 'bitter' warfare was occurring in Hue. The next day, while reporting that the allies had claimed to 'have broken the back of the five-day-old communist offensive in South Vietnam', he added, 'dispatches out of that pathetic country tell a somewhat different story' (p. 223). Bowden tells us how Cronkite came

to question whether, if the information being released on Tet (and especially on Hue, the battle that most directly contradicted the Pentagon's positive spin about Tet being a catastrophic flop) was untrue, it was possible that information he had duly reported in the past had been fictional as well (p. 365).

Within a few weeks, Cronkite made a reporting trip to Vietnam to see for himself how the war was going. His team's darkest suspicions – fears, really – about a disguised calamity were reinforced by the numerous airstrips that were closed across the country, and the group's inability to gain permission to visit Khe Sanh, which was supposedly too dangerous. The anchorman interviewed Westmoreland, who assured him that the fight for Hue had concluded with an allied victory. Cronkite subsequently travelled to the city himself, concluding more or less instantly that Westmoreland's interpretation of the battle was a hill of beans. Returning to the US, he prepared a special *CBS News* programme called 'Who, What, When, Where, Why: Report from Vietnam' (aired on 27 February 1968), in which he declared:

We have been too often disappointed with the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and in Washington to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds ... It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out ... will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.¹⁸

Bowden tells us in his prologue that the Battle of Hue was a critical juncture, 'not just in that conflict, but in American history'. After Hue, the question Americans were asking was no longer how to win the war, but how to get out. Meanwhile, they would 'never again ... fully trust their leader'.

* * *

Speaking with NPR's Terry Gross in September 2017, Ken Burns acknowledged that he and co-director Lynn Novick had no idea what they were

getting themselves into when they first embarked on what became a ten-year project. 'We went in, both of us, with this kind of arrogance about it, and immediately had that blown out of the water,' Burns said. 'We realized we knew nothing.'¹⁹ Perhaps because of this, their 18-hour documentary rests on a diversity of sources and presents a range of historical interpretations. By contrast, Bowden's story of how and why America lied to itself relies upon a surprisingly small number of sources, almost all of which present the conventional criticisms of the war. Bowden himself asks whether the interviews he conducted with participants in the Battle of Hue added much to what we already knew about the battle (p. 564). He does a tremendous job recounting the events of the battle, but so too do a dozen or so previously published first-person and journalistic accounts – all of which he mentions. It seems fair to suggest that Bowden's historical contribution may be less significant than his lengthy source notes and savvy marketing materials appear to indicate.

Another quibble with Bowden's approach is that, while his subtitle suggests that Hue was 'A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam', it is really the Tet Offensive as a whole, and not just Hue, that deserves that label. Yet the author does little to differentiate the significance of one from the other – indeed, he often appears to conflate the two.

Bowden seems all too ready to rehash the conventional historical interpretation of Vietnam that takes as axiomatic an American effort that was both cynical and negligent. This is not to say that monumental blunders were not committed, or that the outcome of the American intervention was anything other than a failure. But the Burns–Novick documentary makes clear that there was so much more to the *why* and *how* of the Vietnam tragedy than some sources are prepared to admit. The directors force us to consider, for example, the possibility that the United States checked in to the war out of a genuine sense of duty and sacrifice. It is therefore reassuring that 13 million people are reported to have watched the first episode of *The Vietnam War*.²⁰ At a time when nuance and subtlety seem to have been abandoned in American political debates, it is worth remembering that the country is capable of overcoming even its deepest divisions to take a careful look at itself.

Notes

- 1 In one distressing battle that took place in the Mekong Delta, not far from Saigon, in January 1963, a few hundred communist guerrillas obliterated a US-supported, well-armed ARVN force that was ten times larger. See John Mason Glen, 'Was America Duped at Khe Sanh?', *New York Times*, 1 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/opinion/was-america-duped-at-khe-sanh.html>; Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, 'Books of the Times: Early Second-Guessers on Vietnam', *New York Times*, 6 November 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/06/books/books-of-the-times-early-second-guessers-on-vietnam.html>; and Kyle Hadyniak, 'How Journalism Influenced American Public Opinion During the Vietnam War: A Case Study of the Battle of Ap Bac, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the Tet Offensive, and the My Lai Massacre', Honors Thesis, University of Maine, Spring 2015, <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=honors>.
- 2 Glen, 'Was America Duped at Khe Sanh?'.
- 3 '1965: US Orders 50,000 Troops to Vietnam', BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/28/newsid_2754000/2754033.stm.
- 4 Lyndon B. Johnson, press conference, 28 July 1965, transcript available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27116>.
- 5 Lyndon B. Johnson, 'Peace Without Conquest', address at Johns Hopkins University, 7 April 1965, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26877>.
- 6 A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954–1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 372.
- 7 Glen, 'Was America Duped at Khe Sanh?'.
- 8 See Ernest B. Gurguson, 'Good Faith, Decent People, and Fateful Misunderstandings', *American Scholar*, 26 September 2017, <https://theamericanscholar.org/good-faith-decent-people-and-fateful-misunderstandings/#>.
- 9 Johnson, press conference, 28 July 1965.
- 10 See David Smith, 'How This 1967 Vietnam War Protest Carried the Seed of American Division', *Guardian*, 21 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/21/1967-vietnam-war-protest-american-division>.
- 11 As part of this same protest, renowned novelist Norman Mailer was arrested for joining a 'rag-tag group of acid-dropping activists' in their attempt to levitate the Pentagon. It seems their attempt failed. Peter Manseau, 'Fifty Years Ago, a Rag-Tag Group of Acid-Dropping Activists Tried to "Levitate" the Pentagon', *Smithsonian*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-rag-tag-group-acid-dropping-activists-tried-levitate-pentagon-180965338/>.
- 12 William C. Westmoreland, National Press Club Address, 21 November 1967, quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 105.
- 13 Stephen B. Young, 'The Birth of

- “Vietnamization”, *New York Times*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/opinion/the-birth-of-vietnamization.html>.
- ¹⁴ See Glen, ‘Was America Duped at Khe Sanh?’; and Nina Tannenwald, ‘Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, August 2006, http://www.watsoninstitute.org/pub/vietnam_weapons.pdf.
- ¹⁵ See Steve Atlas, ‘The Tet Offensive Shocked the Entire Nation and Permanently Changed US Attitudes Toward the Vietnam War’, PRI, 11 October 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-10-11/tet-offensive-shocked-nation-and-permanently-changed-us-attitudes-toward-vietnam>.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Farquhar, *A Treasury of Great American Scandals* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 110.
- ¹⁷ ‘Robert F. Kennedy Announces Run for Presidency’, 16 March 1968, <http://www.history.com/topics/robert-f-kennedy/videos/robert-f-kennedy-announces-run-for-presidency>.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in ‘Final Words: Cronkite’s Vietnam Commentary’, NPR, 18 July 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=106775685>.
- ¹⁹ Terry Gross, ‘In “Vietnam War,” Ken Burns Wrestles with the Conflict’s Contradictions’, NPR, 21 September 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/09/21/552575164/in-vietnam-war-ken-burns-wrestles-with-the-conflict-s-contradictions>.
- ²⁰ ‘Roughly 13 Million Watched Opening of Burns’ Vietnam War Doc’, Associated Press, 12 October 2017, <https://www.wthr.com/article/roughly-13-million-watched-opening-of-burns-vietnam-war-doc>. It is likely that these viewers were overwhelmingly American, though no breakdown is currently available.

