January 1968 - The Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive was a huge military campaign of the Vietnam war. It was so named because it started during the Tet which is the Chinese new year. It began on January 30, and saw the North Vietnamese People’s Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front attack the Army of the Republic (South) Vietnam, the United States, and their allies. Surprise attacks were directed at command and control centers throughout South Vietnam. The extremely well organized campaign was the largest by either side up to that point.

At first there seemed to be no urgency on the defensive side, but as they quickly lost control of several towns and cities, the U. S. and South Vietnamese forces shook off their complacency and reassembled, pushing the North Vietnamese forces back, and dealing them heavy combat losses. The offensive only last a few months, and the U. S. claimed victory. However, General William Westmoreland, the commander of the war, asked the Johnson administration to call up the reserves and send 200,000 more American soldiers in order to help facilitate a South Vietnamese victory.

Americans were shocked by the offensive and Westmoreland’s request. Reports on the progress of the war had been consistently favorable, and the public was led to believe that the South Vietnamese were winning. The Tet Offensive and the striking visuals from it which were shown on the evening news told a different story; the Pentagon and President Johnson were accused of a “credibility gap” with regard to the conduct of the war. Moreover, the American public began to recognize that no matter how many troops the country sent, the North Vietnamese were willing to match that number. There was no light at the end of the tunnel. By March, 1968, confidence in the way the war was being prosecuted dropped by twenty percent.
The war was rending American society in several ways. Opposition to the war became more confrontational every day as massive protest were held on college campuses, at the Pentagon, and even the White House to berate Johnson’s policies. The Johnson administration posited that an increase in military strength as requested by General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara, would cost approximately 25 billion dollars over the next two years. As it was, American involvement in Vietnam had siphoned off money needed for the War on Poverty, and inflation was beginning to rise. The administration dared not ask to cancel the tax cuts passed in 1964. The military draft became increasingly unpopular—the African American boxer Muhammed Ali refused to be inducted—and thousands of students burned their draft cards or headed for Canada. Middle class, the well connected, and wealthy young men at America’s colleges and universities could hide behind student deferments, and so the poor and people of color bore the brunt of the draft.

The loss of confidence after Tet also had a tremendous impact on politics. Nineteen sixty eight was a presidential election year. While the president was the titular head of the Democratic party and expected to run for reelection, opposition in his own party was beginning to form. LBJ just barely beat United States Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) in the New Hampshire presidential primary, a contest which as the sitting president, he should have won handily. Robert F. Kennedy, the junior senator from New York, brother of the assassinated president, and Johnson’s nemesis, jumped into the race. Johnson’s worst nightmare had come true.

The Vietnam War took a toll on the black community. Ninety-six percent of blacks in Vietnam were enlisted in the Army and Marines, and they were disproportionally represented in combat units because of institutional racial inequality in America. Military records show that
7,262 blacks died in the Vietnam War. In the first two years of the war, black men were eleven percent of the soldiers in Vietnam, but more than twenty percent of the casualties. President Johnson ordered the military to cut back on the number of blacks in combat units after black leaders protested. Their casualty rate dropped to about twelve percent by 1969.

FURTHER READING

