



## **Comments on Panel 53**

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**Jeffrey Kimball**

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## Comments on Panel 53: Roundtable: A Look Back as the Tet Offensive Turns Forty

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Chair: **Jeffrey Kimball**, Miami University

“The Tet Offensive and Hanoi's Revolutionary Strategy”

**Pierre Asselin**, Chaminade University of Honolulu

“Soviet Biscuit Factories, Chinese Financial Grants: North Vietnam's Economic Diplomacy During and After the Tet Offensive”

**Harish Mehta**, McMaster University

“Saigon in the Aftermath of the Tet Offensive”

**Lien-Hang Nguyen**, University of Kentucky

“Tet, Rolling Thunder and the Education of Clark Clifford”

**Brian Clancy**, University of Western Ontario

Commentator: **Randall Woods**, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville I

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Welcome to Panel 53, Session VIII. "Roundtable: A Look Back as the Tet Offensive Turns Forty"

My name is Jeffrey Kimball, and I will be chairing and commenting.

I'm sorry to announce that **Lien-Hang Nguyen** of the University of Kentucky withdrew because of a unexpected schedule conflict.

I've asked the panelists for to confine their opening, formal remarks to fifteen minutes in order to allow time for audience questions and additional discussion of their topics by the panelists. The order of formal presentations is as follows: **Pierre Asselin**, **Harrish Mehta**, and **Brian Clancy**. I will introduce each when it is his turn to speak. Following their formal presentations, I will offer brief comments, mainly in the form of questions and suggestions. Then we will open the discussion to questions and remarks from you, the audience.

My comments:

Thank you panelists for your very fine, informative, interesting, and important papers, from which I have learned much. I have no serious criticisms and will confine my remarks at this point to an observations and suggestions.

Using Vietnamese sources, Pierre's paper focuses on internal conflicts between factions of the Politburo in Hanoi and suggests that Hanoi's hard line vis-à-vis Washington was

caused by the victory of the so-called Left over the so-called Rightists moderates and that -- in contrast to an article by Lien-Hang Nguyen -- this turn toward militancy took place in 1963 rather than in 1965. He also argues that the militant turn killed chances for negotiations with the United States.

Harrish's paper develops new Vietnamese evidence showing that in contrast to conventional wisdom China continued to be North Vietnam's biggest supplier of grants and matériel after 1968. While discussing internal division in the Politburo, he suggests or implies that objective external diplomatic and military realities vis-à-vis China and the Soviet Union fueled these divisions. Thus, on the matter of the causes of militancy, Pierre and Harrish seem to be at odds. I also want to point out that as Brian reminds us, the United States was also moving in a more militant direction from at least 1963 on, a fact that surely must have influenced Hanoi. In other words, there was some action-reaction going on, and perhaps there's a chicken and egg causal issue here. I hope that Pierre and Harrish would briefly address my understandings of their papers and their apparent differences?

Brian's paper brings lots of new American evidence to bear on the question of the timing of Clifford's conversion from hawk to dove, so to speak, and the role he played in altering the course of U.S. Vietnam policy. Of course, one thing his paper shows is that there were internal divisions within the U.S. policymaking establishment, as well as in Vietnam. Perhaps this is normal in wartime in any country.

Before closing my remarks, I want to observe that however much internal ideological or personality divisions influenced policy decisions on both sides, the 1968 Tet Offensive drove home the point to both sides that the war was deadlocked. I have argued previously that by 1967, both sides suspected it was deadlocked, but Tet drove the point home to key decision makers as well as their constituents. In the history of war, deadlocked wars come to an end, usually a negotiated end, only when the hawks ,first, realize that the war is militarily deadlocked, and, second, only when they decide that the costs of persisting in their current course are too great, and, third, when they understand and accept that their chances of an acceptable outcome are better with a negotiated cease-fire than with continued war. (None of these generalities apply when seriously irrational, impractical, incompetent, or psychologically disordered people are making decisions. I don't think this was the case in 1968. In 2007, yes, but not 1968.) Tet, and its psychological and material impact on both sides, brought both sides to the first realization. The second and third realizations would come later, during the Nixon administration ? but only after the war had been further prolonged.

So, at some point, I'd appreciate it if we heard the panelists' thoughts about this thesis.

Three other quick observations.

-Re negotiations: to all three authors: Hanoi did not close off the negotiation route after 1963 or 1965, and Washington pursued negotiations at least as early as 1966. The problem, I believe, is that Washington laid down impossible demands. Furthermore, in their writing, the panelists should be more specific about the demands or specific positions of both sides.

-Question for Pierre and Harrish: how would you compare the quality of evidence on the Vietnamese side with that on the American side? In other words, are we reading tea leaves in the case of the Vietnamese documents? These documents do not seem to be policy or decision papers. In Pierre's case, they are internal Party papers, probably designed to rally the "base"? the faithful and the doubtful.

-Finally, let's all of us stop using the labels "revisionism" and "revisionist" in referring to historiographical schools and political-ideological factions. Why do I say this? These labels mean different and opposite things when applied to different groups and only the most inside of insiders know what these very esoteric terms mean.

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