

# The Reporter Who lost the War: An In-depth Look at Walter Cronkite's Report on the Tet Offensive and its Long-Term Effects

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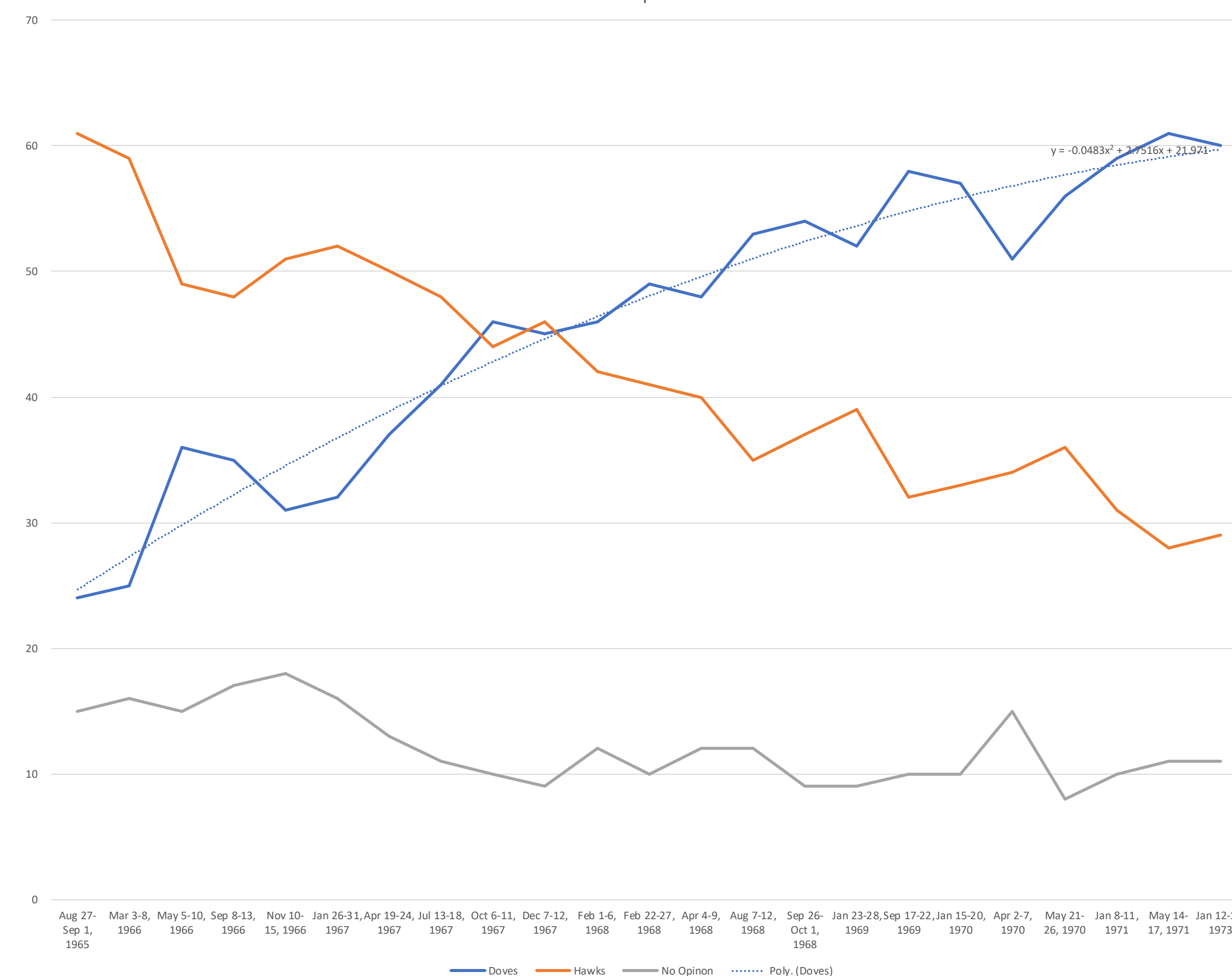
## The Claim:

“They [the Vietnamese Communists] lost over 100,000 of their troops, killed in the Tet Offensive in 1968. And Walter Cronkite turned that into a defeat for the United States.... That’s how history turned. History turned because it was redefined by liberal media people and has since then been redefined by historians.” - Congressman Steve King, 2008.

## Conclusion:

Steve King's claim reflects the psyche of a lot of Americans, who earnestly believe that Walter Cronkite gave an untruthful report of the Tet Offensive, declared it a loss for the Allies, and then turned public opinion against the Vietnam war. This claim is false. We see that Cronkite never declared it a loss, and that his report was quite accurate. Further, we have objective data collected from Gallup polls that show the report did not turn the public against US involvement in Vietnam, as public opposition had steadily increased ever since troops had been deployed in 1965.

American Public Opinion Over Time



Visual of the Gallup Poll Data

## Actual Events of the Tet Offensive:

In January 1968, at the start of the Tet holiday (Vietnam’s lunar new year), the Vietnamese Communists launched coordinated surprise attacks on American military installations, small villages, and five major South Vietnamese cities, including Saigon and Hue. The estimated number of Vietnamese Communist casualties is 32,459, not 100,000. The ratio of Vietnamese Communists casualties to Allied American and South Vietnamese casualties ended up being 9.6:1.



<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walter-Cronkite>

## How Did His Report Shape Public Opinion?

Thanks to Gallup Polls, we can track how the opinion of the American public changed over time. The polls show that the number of people who believed the war was a mistake had been steadily growing since the troops were deployed in Vietnam in 1965. When graphed, we see that this rate does not change following Cronkite's report in 1968. Unlike Steve King's assertion, objective data demonstrates that Cronkite's report did not turn the public's opinion against the United States. With "Hawks" being those who approved of the war and "Doves" those opposed it, we can make a visual representation of this data.

## Cronkite's Report:

Cronkite's Report featured interviews with American soldiers. Some mentioned they were discouraged by the events, one stating that the Vietnamese Communists had worsened South Vietnam's refugee problem and damaged its economy. However, it was clear from the report that the Vietnamese Communists had taken massive casualties, leading one general to state that the Vietnamese Communists would not be able to last long before needing to switch tactics. At the end of his report, Cronkite states, “We would like to sum up our findings in Vietnam, an analysis that must be speculative, personal, subjective. Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I am not sure. The Viet Cong did not win by a knockout but neither did we... To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic if unsatisfactory conclusion”. He never stated it was a loss, he only stated that there were no clear victors, which was reflected by the soldiers he interviewed.

## How Accurate Was The Report?

In recent years, we have been able to access the journals and plans from the masterminds behind the Tet Offensive, General Van Tien Dung and Communist Party Secretary, Le Duan. They state that their short-term goal was to, “shatter the morale of the puppet army”. Their long-term goal was to use the attack as a platform to “carry out the general offensive—general uprising to overthrow the reactionary government in South Vietnam”. The attack was not successful enough to complete their long-term goal, but it did prove that they were capable of launching an effective, large-scale attack, their biggest at that point. This demonstrated that the time America had spent in Vietnam was ineffective, as it was no closer to victory. Therefore, Cronkite's description of the situation as a "mired stalemate" is reasonable. There was no clear-cut winner at the time.