THE PRESS IN VIETNAM AS AGENT OF DEFEAT:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

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In the years since the Vietnam War has ended, a belief has grown up that press coverage of the war so distorted the reality of what happened in South Vietnam that the American people lost heart and gave up. Modern technology "provided the press a means of indirectly involving the American public with the war on an almost hourly basis," the former U.S. Commander in South Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, observed in 1972. "The war was literally piped into the living room, bedroom, and kitchen of most Americans." Lt. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson (U.S. Army, Ret.) adds in his recent book, Vietnam at War, that the "constant force of destruction, suffering, and blood brought into American living rooms horrified and dismayed the American people." Recoiling, so the theory goes, the American public abandoned South Vietnam to its enemies.

A former American diplomat, Martin F. Herz, in The Vietnam War in Retrospect (1984), denies that news media coverage caused the failure in Vietnam, but still believes that the press played an important role. The emergence of high speed telecommunications, "including the rapid transmission of still pictures and moving pictures was significant," he says, "raising an entirely new question about our ability to win any future war, except perhaps a very short one" (p. 37). Harry Summers makes much the same point in his book, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context (1981). Westmoreland, in a recent talk at James Madison University, likewise emphasized the point. The impact of television on American public opinion was so powerful during the war, he added, that when Walter Cronkite announced during the Tet Offensive of 1968 that he believed the conflict was no longer winnable, the statement destroyed the American public's will to continue to resist the Communist aggression in South Vietnam.

Peter Braestrup's book, Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington (1977), especially in an appendix on public opinion by Burns Roper, argued convincingly that the public made up its own mind about the war, irrespective of what the press said. By roundly criticizing news coverage of the enemy's
1968 Tet Offensive, however, Braestrup strengthened the criticism of the press by adding scholarly weight to the contention that the news media lacked sensitivity to the true dimensions of what was happening in Vietnam. Thus, while Braestrup considered the bad reporting at Tet an aberration, Westmoreland and his allies turned it into a generalization. Maxwell Taylor, in his 1972 book *Swords into Plowshares*, for example, deplored the tendency of the press to construct sweeping conclusions from a few scattered facts. The defect, he implied, distorted the picture of the war that the press transmitted to the American public. Westmoreland considered the problem one of immaturity and lack of seasoning. Statistically, the newsmen reporting the war were young, he once told an audience. "Fifty-one percent were under 29 and, for the most part, they had little or no experience as war correspondents."

Other critics are less kind. Citing the "moralistic attitudes and political prejudices" of the press, a former correspondent in Vietnam, Robert Elegant, asserted in 1982, in a widely quoted article in *Encounter Magazine*, that it was the "collective policy" of the news media "to seek the victory of the enemies of the correspondents' own side" by "graphic and unremitting distortion" of the facts.  

A nurse who had treated civilian war victims at an Agency for International Development hospital near Saigon summarized the point of view of Westmoreland and those who agree with him in a recent conversation. The correspondents who visited her facility were, she said, little more than scum. "They always arrived with only one thought in mind—to interview napalm victims. When they found there were few, they would even step on the sick in their haste to leave the place. None ever offered to help, even when emergencies were in progress and the staff was obviously sick with overwork." Night after night, she continued, the newsmen frolicked at the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon, discussing their experiences and getting drunk.

Whatever the validity of such claims—and they are not, as Braestrup indicates, completely without merit—they tend to oversimplify a matter of extreme complexity. Taylor's comment about generalizations and Westmoreland's assertion that the Saigon correspondents were too young and inexperienced to cover so difficult a conflict, do little justice to reporters such as Jim Lucas, Homer Bigart, Jack Foisie, Keyes Beech, and Denis Warner, who had covered many wars and who, for all their age and experience, sometimes disagreed with generals such as Westmoreland and Taylor on matters that the military took for granted. A young reporter, less sure of himself, his abilities, and his sources, might, indeed, have been more pliant than an old timer such as Pulitzer Prize-winner Bigart, whose cynicism toward the war was proverbial. David Halberstam, for example, although later quite critical, tended to take the official point of view when he first arrived in South Vietnam in 1962.
So favorable was his work that the State Department quietly commended him to his employers at the New York Times for his accuracy and fairness. Bigart, on the other hand, judging from years of experience reporting wars, never had much good to say about either the war or the South Vietnamese Government. His last report from Saigon, indeed, predicted that the United States, because of South Vietnamese ineptitude and corruption, would shortly have little choice but to commit American troops to the conflict.

Westmoreland's statistic itself is questionable. Of the 110 U.S. citizens accredited to report the war from Saigon in January 1966, the only date where ready figures are available, 38 were below the age of thirty and 72 above it. Thirty-seven were above the age of forty-one and eight were fifty-one or older. Similar statistics prevailed among the 170 non-U.S. correspondents present in Saigon at the time. One hundred and thirteen ranged in age from thirty to seventy years old. Since the make-up of the corps of correspondents in Saigon changed almost every day as new reporters arrived and others departed, it is possible that the average age was at times twenty-nine. Yet, the statistic is, once again, probably more imaginary than real. In the case of the January 1966 group, the average was obviously somewhat higher. The average mean age for all correspondents who served in Vietnam whose records survive in Army files is, indeed, 35.83.

In the same way, the idea that the war appeared nightly in the nation's living rooms and that the experience could only have soured the public on continued American involvement in South Vietnam fails to stand up before hard scrutiny. The few studies of the subject that have occurred to date show that while television news set part of the agenda for what people thought about, the judgments that resulted were complex in origin and hardly the product of some vague sense of horror conveyed by television news. In one study, researchers Richard R. Lau, Thad A. Brown, and David O. Sears found that the longstanding commitments and habits of a lifetime had a greater bearing on public opinion of the war than even ties of kinship. Examining the attitudes of Americans who had relatives serving in Vietnam, they found that the families of soldiers indeed paid more attention to the war than those who had few ties to it. The acceptance of official policy by those individuals, however, was more influenced by attitudes and preconceptions formed early in life—as expressed in political affiliations, degree of anticommunism, and sense of confidence in and support for the system of government that prevails in the United States—than by even their supposed concern for their loved ones.

Westmoreland's comment about the effect of Cronkite's word notwithstanding, evidence exists to support the contention that, rather than changing opinions within the viewing audience, television coverage of the war may
have reinforced those that already existed. Northwestern University researcher Lawrence Lichty thus found during a 1968 survey of public opinion that 75 percent of those who favored the war at the time considered Cronkite and the other network anchormen hawks while a majority of those who opposed it considered them doves.11

The number of people actually watching television news at the time when it was supposedly influencing public opinion against the war is also open to question. The Columbia University Survey of Broadcast Journalism for 1972 notes that in 1968, of 56 million television households present in the United States, fewer than half, 25.3 million, watched the news on any evening. The ratio decreased in the years that followed, reaching 24.7 million in 1972.12

Whether those who watched actually absorbed anything is also a matter of conjecture. According to a study underwritten by the National Association of Broadcasters in 1969, if television news supposedly provided an important source of information for the American public, fewer than half of those who watched were paying attention. Of 232 viewers who were asked, "What do you recall from tonight's broadcast," 51 percent failed to recall a single story out of an average of nineteen that had appeared. Of the 49 percent who could remember at least one, the commentary by Harry Reasoner or Eric Sevareid at the end of the program, in theory the most influential in terms of public opinion, was the least remembered.13

As for the violence that was presumably a daily feature of television news during the war, while a few vivid instances indeed appeared—the picture of General Loan executing the Viet Cong officer during the Tet Offensive comes immediately to mind—most of what the public saw bore little resemblance to the mayhem critics of the press presume. The reason comes from the nature of television news itself. Camera teams in Vietnam were composed of three men: a reporter, a cameraman, and a soundman. The gear they carried was cumbersome and dangerous to use in combat because the camera was difficult to operate from a prone position. Television newsmen therefore tended to show combat action from a distance or to depict its aftermath: soldiers moving into battle or firing at some vague target or pulling themselves together after an engagement. There was considerable commotion—rifles popping in the background, helicopters landing and taking off, smoke and dust—but little of the violence characteristic of Vietnam, in which a man stepped on a mine or fell into a booby trap. From August 1965 to August 1970, indeed, according to Lichty, of some 2,300 reports that aired on evening television news programs no more than 76 showed anything approaching true violence—heavy fighting, incoming small arms and artillery fire, killed and wounded within view.14

Military rules and those of the networks contributed to the lackluster nature
of much television reporting of the war by eliminating categories of violence that might have been offensive either to military families or to the public at large. By agreement between the U.S. Military Assistance Command in South Vietnam and the television networks, to keep the relatives of soldiers in the field from learning of a loved one's death in combat from an evening news program rather than through an official notification, recognizable pictures of American dead almost never appeared on television in the United States.\textsuperscript{15} The American public thus saw the feet but never the faces of its dead on the nightly news. The networks, meanwhile, cut film that showed too much violence rather than lose viewers to another channel. Even in the case of the famous Loan film, editors removed the last few seconds of footage to keep the public from seeing the final throes of the victim and the blood spurting from his head.\textsuperscript{16} What the public saw, therefore, in the absence of faces and gore, was hardly the carnage that critics of the press have tended to allege. In fact, the action scenes from any episode of the popular television dramas "Gunsmoke" and "Kojak," carefully paced and filmed for effect, were probably more brutal than all but a few of the most explicit films from Vietnam.

None of that is to say that reporters always observe the niceties. On the contrary, as the nurse perceived, war correspondents, almost by the nature of their work, have tended historically to harden themselves to the painful realities going on about them. The famous war correspondent Richard Harding Davis provides an example. He dined luxuriously every evening at the beginning of World War I, after spending the day with the troops in the field reporting Germany's invasion of Belgium.

As in any profession, that a few of the Saigon correspondents were unethical also goes without saying. A CBS News report narrated by Don Webster in 1967 in which a U.S. Army enlisted man severed the ear from the body of a dead enemy soldier comes to mind. Although incidents of that sort indeed occurred in Vietnam, the episode was hardly the spontaneous atrocity Webster described. The reporter's cameraman, John Smith, had persuaded the soldier to perform the act, had furnished the knife, and had then photographed the scene. That Webster was not present at the filming was, perhaps, a partially extenuating circumstance, but the newsman should have checked his facts before delivering the report.\textsuperscript{17}

Any attempt to reason from incidents of that sort to the general depravity of the news media nevertheless succumb to the very temptation Taylor accused the press of indulging. They substitute the part for the whole. Unverifiable rumors persist to this day in official circles, for example, that a well-known correspondent reported the Cambodian Incursion of 1970 while safely ensconced in his Saigon hotel room. That one newsman may have proved deficient in integrity, however, hardly diminishes the sacrifice of the twenty-
five newsmen of varying temperaments, opinions, and degrees of professionalism who perished during the Incursion or shortly thereafter while observing events first-hand.\(^\text{18}\)

The suggestion lingers, in that light, that much of the animosity toward the press displayed by former officials and others originates as much from newsmen's failure to perform as those individuals wished as from any defect in their lifestyles or commitment to generally accepted standards of fairness. "We begged them to write about our situation and the desperate condition of our patients," the nurse said, her voice quaking with anger. "We lacked everything—sufficient medicine, modern equipment, enough doctors and nurses, even beds. But no articles ever appeared. The reporters were too busy promoting their careers by writing the popular stuff."

The nurse was nevertheless more than a little accurate in her portrayal of the newsmen's attitude. Public affairs officers in Saigon had tried almost from the beginning of the war to interest reporters in the sort of story she wanted told. A number had responded but few of the resulting essays ever appeared in print or on television in the United States because editors and producers had concluded early on that the American public was more interested in what was happening to American soldiers than in anything having to do with the South Vietnamese or their government. A scattering of articles on the subject thus appeared over the years, along with a number that criticized inadequate American efforts to assist the South Vietnamese people, but few reporters ever pursued the topic with much consistency. They knew the attempt would be a waste of time.\(^\text{19}\)

Editors could be criticized by both pro and antiwar spokesmen for taking that approach, but their decision in fact reflected the direction of American policy in South Vietnam. As Neil Sheehan's recent book, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (1988) shows, despite the attention the U.S. Government supposedly gave to winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people, ethnocentric American policymakers clearly valued their own nation's efficiency and know-how over South Vietnam's seeming ineptitude and slowness. That a hospital assisted by the U.S. government could, for example, be in dire need of many necessities is of itself a commentary on American priorities. Yet it also took until 1969 for the United States to replace the obsolete M-1 rifles employed by South Vietnamese infantrymen with the newer M-16, even though those soldiers often suffered greater casualties than their American counterparts and were the ones ultimately responsible for the long term viability of their nation. For American policymakers as for the press, in other words, it was an American war. The press was merely more blatant in its exhibition of that fact.

The attitude of the news media in covering Americans first, indeed, says
more about the relationship that existed between the press and the U.S. Government during the war than stories about the bias and lack of professionalism of the Saigon correspondents. For although critics of the press can cite an impressive number of erroneous, unfair news reports, few advert to the fact that the great bulk of war reporting by American correspondents reproduced the official point of view.

Reporters during the early years of the war, for example, criticized U.S. tactics and strategy but never argued about the wisdom of the American presence in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland's background briefings for the Saigon correspondents thus always received favorable coverage until the general addressed Congress in 1967 in an attempt to establish that President Johnson's policies in Southeast Asia were succeeding. Prior to the event, his credibility was so great that his words often appeared in U.S. newspapers without attribution or significant editing. After it, reporters became more cautious and analytical. The general was no longer just a soldier doing his duty. He had entered the political sphere.

In the same way, until Harrison Salisbury's revelation in 1966 that American aircraft had caused major damage to purely civilian targets in North Vietnam, newspapers in the United States largely ignored the story, even though Le Monde and other major European periodicals made a point of it. Reporters and editors, in that case, while perhaps unwilling to accept official assertions that American pilots were pinpoint accurate in their bombing, were just as unwilling to become the purveyors of what seemed to them mainly enemy propaganda. Only when an American reporter with stature as a journalist gave the story respectability would they accept it, and even then they backed off when they discovered that he had himself accepted enemy claims uncritically.20

Press coverage became negative after the enemy's Tet Offensive in February 1968, but by that time the American public's view of the war had itself begun to shift. Over the previous two years, as John Mueller's book War, Presidents, and Public Opinion (1973) has shown, American acceptance of the conflict has consistently declined in step with the rise in American casualties, falling some 15 percentage points each time total American killed and wounded rose by a factor of ten. In other words, when total casualties from all causes went to 1,000 to 10,000 or from 10,000 to 100,000, public regret grew by about 15 percent. The reaction occurred regardless of whether the war appeared to be going well or poorly and in spite of anything favorable or unfavorable that the press and television had to say. A similar parallel between casualties and public opinion occurred during the Korean War, when television news was still in its infancy.21

As the public turned, doubts began to arise within the U.S. Government,
especially in the Department of Defense. Despite military avowals that progress was occurring, official analysts disputed the United States’ ability to kill enough of the enemy to have much effect on his will to continue the war. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in particular, questioned whether the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the enemy’s Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was capable of cutting off the supplies enemy forces needed to go on fighting indefinitely.22

The misgivings of policymakers and official analysts gave rise to a number of controversies within the government. Observers within the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued with the Military Assistance Command over whether the number of the enemy’s large unit attacks was increasing or decreasing. The Central Intelligence Agency and General Westmoreland’s planners in Saigon wrangled incessantly over which portions of South Vietnam’s population should be included in the enemy’s order of battle. In the end, the doubts festering just beneath the official optimism in Washington had a profound influence upon the willingness of Johnson administration officials to accept the Saigon correspondent’s erroneous conclusions over Westmoreland’s assurances that the Tet Offensive had been an American victory.23

When President Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential campaign to begin the process of negotiation, he contributed to the sense of disillusion rising within the country by removing himself as spokesman for those who favored a military solution in South Vietnam. From then on, opposition to the war by disciplined members of the president’s party in Congress became much more politically acceptable than in the past. As opposition to the war became respectable and moved from the fringes of society to the American elite, the press, which reads the nation’s leadership for indications of what is newsworthy and acceptable, covered the trend.24

Daniel Hallin of the University of California, San Diego, has demonstrated the effect in his book The Uncensored War. Where prior to the Tet Offensive spokesmen for the war predominated over critics in television news reports by a ratio of 26.3 to 4.5 percent, after Tet the critics achieved a rough parity of 26.1 to the supporters’ 28.4. The change came not because television news producers had made some arbitrary decision to promote the opposition but because the sources in government they had cued to for news had begun to switch sides. Forty-nine percent of all domestic criticism of government policy on the war appearing on television, according to Hallin, thus came from public officials of one sort or another, while only 16 percent originated from reporters themselves in commentaries and interpretive digressions. Thirty-five percent of the rest came from sources such as antiwar activists, soldiers in the field, and the man in the street.25 An element of editorial judgment was, of course, involved in the selection of whose opinion to air, but as Max Frankel
of the *New York Times* put it, when protest moved "from the left groups, the anti-war groups, into the pulpits, into the Senate . . . , it naturally picked up coverage. And then naturally the tone of the coverage changed. Because we're an Establishment institution, and whenever your natural constituency changes, then naturally you will too."26

Given the animosity that developed between the administrations in power and the military on the one hand, and the news media on the other, why did government fail to invoke some sort of censorship during the war? An incident that occurred in 1969, shortly after Seymour Hersh wrote the first major news story on the My Lai Massacre, suggests a reason. For months, the administration of President Richard Nixon had considered actions to intimidate what it regarded as its main opponents in the press. There would be "no sacred cows," President Nixon told his advisers. Katherine Graham of the *Washington Post*, David Sarnoff of NBC, William Paley and Frank Stanton of CBS, and Arthur Sulzberger of the *New York Times* were all to become the subjects of intense scrutiny by the Internal Revenue Service.27 Meanwhile, the Justice Department would levy antitrust suits against major television networks and newspapers to curb what the administration considered monopolistic business practices.28

My Lai changed those plans. Shortly after the story broke, the White House Director of Communications, Herbert Klein, noted in a memorandum to the president's assistant, H. R. Haldeman, that the "case could develop into a major trial almost of the Nuremberg scope and could have a major effect on public opinion. . . . I called [Attorney General] John Mitchell this morning and suggested that special care be taken that the Justice Department does not move in any actions which might be regarded as intimidation of the media during this particular period of time. He assured me he was aware of the problem."29 Although there is no indication of whether the White House went forward with the tax audits, the administration in fact postponed its antitrust actions until the fall of 1971, when My Lai was less of an issue.

In that case, as throughout the war, both military and civilian administrators required a free and unfettered press to communicate their views credibly to an American public and Congress that were often prone to believe the worst of officialdom. As the commander of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp told the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earl G. Wheeler, in 1965, "We can get away with concealing mistakes from the press some of the time, but by no means all of the time." The lack of credibility that would result if a cover up came to light "could cause problems far more serious than result from the revelation of occasional mistakes.30

The alternative was also hardly as bad as it seemed. Although the Saigon correspondents were sometimes abrasive, few were willing to risk access to
their official sources by revealing information they had promised to withhold. Some sensitive facts did appear, yet the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam was never able to establish that the information had been of any value to the enemy. In many cases, reporters had pieced together information already on the public record. In others, the enemy had sources of his own that were far more reliable.

In the end, what happened in Vietnam between the U.S. Government and military on the one hand, and the news media on the other was symptomatic of what happened in the United States as a whole. At the beginning of the war, the main elements in American society moved in a direction that represented the greatest perceived good, toward the containment of Chinese and Soviet ambitions in Southeast Asia by taking a stand in South Vietnam. Although prone at times to believe the worst of officialdom, the American news media both reflected and reinforced that trend, replaying official statements on the value of the war and supporting the soldier in the field if not always his generals. With time, under the influence of many deaths and contradictions, directions changed. Significant portions of the leadership in American society moved to repudiate the earlier decision. Cueing to that trend if not to its sources within the elite, the press again followed suit but the U.S. Government and military lacked the ability to do the same. Remaining behind in South Vietnam to retrieve whatever national face they could, those of their members most emotionally tied to the failed policy fixed their anger upon the news media, the most visible exponent of the society that appeared to have rejected them. The recriminations that we see today became the most inevitable result.


The views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the author and do not represent the positions of either the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.


4. The nurse telephoned author in July of 1987. He was so taken with her comments that he lacked the presence of mind to take down her name and telephone number. He hopes that the reader will excuse his lack of historical methodology as a temporary lapse and accept
the quotation as an honest, very personal testimony to the complexity of a highly emotional issue.


8. The Center of Military History has constructed a rough database for the correspondents accredited to the Military Assistance Command. The youngest of the nearly six thousand reporters for whom records exist was seventeen years, the oldest seventy-four.


13. Ibid.


15. The Military and the Media, ch. 8.


18. For a list of the newsmen see, Braestrup, Big Story, p. iii.


20. These episodes are documented in The Military and the Media.


23. See The Military and the Media, chs. 15, 16.


25. Ibid.


27. John Erlichman, Handwritten Note of Meeting with the President, 23 November 1969, Nixon Papers, White House Special Files, Erlichman, Notes of Meetings with the President, box 3, 1969 JDE Notes (3 of 4).

See also: Memo, Herbert G. Klein for John Erlichman, 5 October 1971, Nixon Papers, White House Special Files, Klein, name File 69–72, box 2, Haldeman III (2 of 2).