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A 50-year Retrospective: How American Journalists Covered the Vietnam War, and the Lingering Aftermath

If facts are an endangered species, as they seem to be in today's public discourse, it is largely due to distrust of mainstream news media. Vietnam was not the only cause for that loss of trust, but it was a highly significant one. For many Americans, it was hard to accept that the world's greatest military power was defeated by a smaller and much poorer nation. And instead of looking at Vietnamese history and society for the real reasons for that defeat, many people looked only at American policy and actions. For half a century, one of the more prominent items on that list has been the cliche that unfavorable reporting, particularly the television coverage that is said to have "brought the horrors of war into American living rooms" every night, undermined public support and eventually forced a change in U.S. policy.

That belief has endured in part because it has been nurtured (though expressed in different tones of approval and condemnation) on both sides of the continuing national debate on Vietnam. Opponents of U.S. policy, and some journalists, have promoted the image of a courageous, independent press that opened the public's eyes to the true nature of the war, exposed the deceits of American military and political leaders, and eventually, through the force of an awakened public opinion, made it impossible for the government to keep pursuing an unsuccessful, shameful war. On the opposing side of the argument, those who supported the war have continued to describe Vietnam reporting as defeatist, even disloyal, consistently and unfairly reflecting a negative view not only of U.S. policy but of American soldiers as well. In this version, biased news coverage was a major influence, possibly a decisive one, in forcing the national leadership to abandon an effort that might, if reported differently, have been successful.

Those may sound like conflicting views, but they actually proceed from almost identical visions of history. Both versions picture the media as taking an ideological stand on the war and playing a key role in forcing a change in U.S. policy. They are alike in another respect, too: both arise more from partisan folklore than from any accurate memory of what print and broadcast journalists actually reported from Vietnam. As Charles Mohr, one of the most experienced and respected Vietnam correspondents, wrote some years after the war, "myth has tended to displace historical reality in contemporary perceptions of Vietnam journalism. . . . The more violent contemporary critics of the media profess to recall a journalism in which authority was cruelly and contemptuously flouted. They should go back and read the material."[1] Indeed, the general rule appears to be that the more virulent the criticism of Vietnam reporters, the less attention is paid to what any of them actually reported.

An early example of this was a 1981 article in *Encounter* magazine[2] by Robert S. Elegant, who accused his former colleagues in Vietnam of opportunistically parroting a "fashionable" left-wing view of the war and bearing responsibility not only for the defeat in Vietnam, but possibly for the subsequent fate of Angola, Afghanistan, and Iran as well. ("Maybe Jimmy Hoffa and Judge Crater, too," CBS reporter Morley Safer commented after reading Elegant's diatribe).[3] In 18 pages of recrimination, though, Elegant gave no more than three or four specific examples, and even those lacked dates or the names of specific authors or news organizations. In the entire article, only two stories were described specifically enough to be identifiable, and one of those descriptions was verifiably incorrect in almost every detail.

Elegant's most incendiary charges—that "most [correspondents] became partisans for Hanoi, or, at least, against Saigon and Washington," that correspondents "were moved by the . . . conviction of American guilt" and were inclined "to look upon Hanoi as a fount of pure truth," and that they raised "the expectation . . . of peaceful, prosperous development after Saigon's collapse"—are offered with no examples or other evidence at all. Many years later, a few weeks after the writer Michael Herr died, Elegant wrote in the *Times* that Herr's widely acclaimed book *Dispatches* "triggered the demonisation of the Saigon regime in the U.S. media, which senior North Vietnamese generals later averred had been their biggest strategic asset."[4] In fact, *Dispatches* was not published until 1977, two years after the war ended, so it could hardly have influenced North Vietnam's strategy or the outcome of the war. That made Elegant's comment unusually easy to disprove. But it was actually fairly typical of many criticisms that Elegant—a former correspondent himself—and others have promoted over the years that directly contradict or ignore the factual record.

Other examples of completely unsupported charges abound. When the Library of America published a handsomely bound two-volume collection of Vietnam journalism in 1998,[5] right-wing critics greeted it with bitter denunciations. One of the most lathered attacks was delivered by a writer named Algis Valiunas, who wrote in *Commentary* magazine that with only a few exceptions, the reporters whose work appeared in the anthology reflected "basically a single vantage point—the vantage point of those for whom an American defeat would spell moral victory, even a victory for morality itself."[6] However, like Elegant, and despite having more than 1,500 pages of material to draw from, Valiunas failed to provide his readers with even a single quotation illustrating that viewpoint. The one quote apparently intended to support Valiunas's thesis was from a 1966 article by Neil Sheehan, who acknowledged troubling doubts about the human cost of the war and ended by expressing the hope that "we will not, in the name of some anti-Communist crusade, do this again." But Valiunas left out the rest of Sheehan's conclusion: "Despite these misgivings, I do not see how we can do anything but continue to prosecute the war... If the United States were to disengage from Vietnam under adverse conditions, I believe that the resulting political and psychological shockwaves might undermine our entire position in Southeast Asia... We shall have to continue to rely mainly on our military power, accept the odium attached to its use and hope that someday this power will bring us to a favorable settlement." It is hard to see how even the most partisan critic could construe that as favoring an American defeat.[7]

Image 1: Reporters take taking notes at a daily US military press briefing in Saigon popularly called the “five o’clock follies (though later conducted at 4 o’clock). This photo was taken during the “Christmas Bombing” campaign in December 1972, a moment of particular tension between

journalists and the military spokesmen who refused to answer nearly all of the reporters' questions about the bombing. Photograph is by Neal Ulevich, (all rights reserved). Used with his permission.

Those who have followed Charley Mohr's injunction to "read the material" have found little to support the notion of a press that was ideologically hostile to the U.S. effort in Vietnam. The army's own official history of media relations[8] shows that while journalists and military authorities were involved in frequent arguments, hardly any of these had to do with the rights or wrongs or basic national purposes of U.S. policy. Daniel C. Hallin's survey of newspaper and TV reports from Vietnam, reported in his 1986 book, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* leaves the same impression. [9]

Of the disputes documented in these and other studies, many had much the same character as similar disputes in previous wars—demands by the press, resisted by the military, for quicker or fuller disclosure of new tactics, weapons, or military policies. These, and the inevitable frictions that rose from time to time over late or incomplete or at times inaccurate official reports on specific battles, were for the most part transitory controversies, well within the boundaries of the normal, familiar, and expected ups and downs in any relationship between reporters and official sources.

Reporting My Lai

The impression that news reports from Vietnam were consistently anti-military or portrayed American soldiers in an unfavorable light is also largely mythical. The major U.S. atrocity story of the war, the murder of several hundred Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai, received extensive coverage but only after the army filed court-martial charges against 1st Lt. William Calley a year and a half after the massacre. Far from leaping to report on a war crime by American soldiers, the major news media took a very gingerly approach to the My Lai story. Seymour Hersh, the Washington-based freelancer who first uncovered the true nature of the charges against Calley, could not find a major news organization that was willing to publish his story, and finally distributed it through a tiny, almost unknown agency called the Dispatch News Service.[10] No major U.S. publication had been willing to publish the My Lai story a few months earlier when it was offered by Ron Ridenhour, the Army veteran whose letters to his congressman and top military officials touched off the Army's own investigation of the massacre. [11] Nor did any of the newspapers or magazines that Ridenhour approached make any effort to follow up the story on their own.

American journalists in Vietnam played no role in disclosing the My Lai story, although Radio Hanoi, whose broadcasts were monitored by U.S. news or-

ganizations, reported the killings just a month after they took place. The broadcast accurately named the place and the approximate casualty toll but misidentified the U.S. division involved. According to the official Army history, correspondents in Saigon did not question the U.S. command's denial and dismissed the report as enemy propaganda,[12] leaving the story unreported until Hersh broke it 18 months later.

The reporting of My Lai, by and large, presented it as an aberration, not as the typical conduct of U.S. troops in the field. In general, atrocities against civilians never became a consistent theme in Vietnam reporting. Correspondents who spent much time in Vietnam could hardly avoid encountering abuses short of murder that were perhaps not the rule but certainly not unusual—careless destruction of fields and crops and civilian houses, casual killings of farm animals, rough treatment of civilians during forced relocations of villages. But these were rarely considered worth covering. Nor was there extensive or regular press attention to the impact of the extraordinarily heavy use of bombing and artillery in support of U.S. military operations. I am aware of no statistical proof, but it seems likely to me—and odd—that American print and broadcast media gave more attention to the issue of civilian casualties under U.S. bombing in North Vietnam, where reporters normally could not go, than to civilian casualties in the villages of the South, where they could.

An example was the treatment of troubling official statistics announced after Operation Speedy Express, a six-month campaign waged by the U.S. 9th Infantry Division in late 1968 and early 1969 in three densely populated provinces in the Mekong delta. The division claimed to have killed nearly 11,000 enemy soldiers but recovered only about 700 weapons—about one-fourth of the usual ratio of captured weapons to enemy dead. The questionable figures did not become a major news story or the subject of extensive press investigation at the time, but were reported routinely by most news organizations, despite the clear possibility that they were an indication of heavy civilian losses. Two years later, when *Newsweek* correspondents in Vietnam put together a long, detailed report alleging that large numbers of innocent villagers were killed or wounded by U.S. bombing or shellfire during Speedy Express, the magazine's editors held the story for months and then printed only a truncated version.[13] Even after *Newsweek*'s piece appeared, other U.S. media did not pursue the story.

The wider issue of how U.S. firepower was used, and its effect on civilians, though raised incessantly as a rhetorical point during the debate at home, was seldom if ever the subject of careful, diligent inquiry by reporters in Vietnam. To this day, information on the real effect of American tactics and the true extent of civilian casualties remains fragmentary and ambiguous.

No Mount Suribachi in Vietnam

Though the record does not support the view that journalists were consistently hostile to American soldiers, many veterans remember the coverage that way. Why that is so became a bit clearer to me a number of years ago, when a Marine Corps veteran came up to me after listening to a panel of journalists discuss Vietnam reporting. He wanted to show me a magazine he had brought with him, open to a photograph he saw as an example of negative coverage. I didn't make a note of the magazine name or issue date so am not certain, but I believe the photo was from the siege of Con Thien. It showed a young marine in a bunker, quite close up, crouching next to a sandbag during an artillery or rocket attack. He was facing the camera and his eyes and taut face perfectly showed the tension and fear of that situation. I was mystified that anyone could find that photo hostile. I thought it was a great war picture, full of empathy and compassion, exactly capturing the experience of waiting for that next round to come in.

As the veteran went on speaking, though, I realized that what bothered him wasn't what was in the picture, but what was not in it. It wasn't heroic. It wasn't triumphant. And I thought, this guy didn't want to see a picture of marines sweating out incoming rockets in a bunker in Vietnam. He wanted to see them raising the flag over Iwo Jima. He didn't want to remember Con Thien or Khe Sanh; he wanted to remember Mount Suribachi. There wouldn't have been much point in telling him that his problem was with what happened in his war, not with those who covered it. It wasn't our fault that there was no Mount Suribachi moment in Vietnam. No journalist could take a picture of a heroic victory that didn't happen. Possibly he understood that, as a matter of cold fact. But emotionally, I suspect, he looked at the picture and felt disparaged by the photographer who took it, the magazine that printed it, and by extension all the journalists whose reporting showed him that young marine (and himself) as a victim, an image of fear or maybe even brave endurance, but not the victorious hero he had gone to Vietnam to be. And if in his mind that image was hostile, one could argue with his logic — but not his emotions.

Reporting Elusive Progress in the War

There is a kind of parallel, I believe, between that personal grievance and the larger debate about the policy impact of Vietnam War reporting. The idea that journalists were consistently sympathetic to the Communist side and slanted against Americans is verifiably false. But in the same way they did not picture U.S. troops as victorious, they did not show U.S. policy as victorious either. Instead, news coverage over time increasingly framed the war as a stalemate. That conflicted with the growing need of U.S. policymakers and military commanders

to convince the public — and possibly themselves — that their efforts were succeeding. That, I believe, was a far greater cause of controversy, mistrust, and ill will between reporters and officials than any ideological disagreement. Like everything else about Vietnam this too is debatable, but there's a reasonable case that in this respect, reporters described the war more accurately than the government did.

Sympathy for the Enemy?

If the impression of the media as aggressively hostile to U.S. soldiers is a myth, what about the impression of the media as sympathetic and positive toward the enemy?

Here, if anything, there is even less basis for the critical folklore. Far from conveying a favorable view of the enemy, American correspondents, particularly those reporting for television, hardly conveyed any view of the enemy at all. American reporters in Vietnam focused almost entirely on U.S. military activities; the Vietnamese Communists appeared in their stories for the most part only as the opposing force on the battlefield, otherwise unexamined and unexplained. Daniel Hallin's survey turned up not a single television report "that dealt primarily, or at any substantial length, with the political tactics, history, or program of the North Vietnamese or the NLF."[14] The performance of print media on this subject was only marginally better.

Not much more coverage was given to America's South Vietnamese allies. From time to time, journalists took a look at the Saigon government and army and reported critically on matters such as corruption and poor battlefield performance. Such stories caused considerable heartburn among U.S. diplomats and senior commanders, as the army's public affairs history shows. Rather than stemming from pro-Communist sources or ideological opposition to U.S. policy, though, those stories most often reflected the opinions and comments of American officers and soldiers in the field, whose attitude toward their Vietnamese ally was, as anyone who was there can testify, almost universally one of uncomplicated (and in many ways uninformed) contempt. Very few of those critical reports reflected any sympathetic understanding of South Vietnam's circumstances or much effort on the reporters' part to explain why its army and other institutions were as fragile as they were. [15]

This point is hardly ever mentioned in polemics for or against Vietnam reporting, but it has occurred to me that the American government's extensive and persistent effort to persuade journalists that the South Vietnamese regime was competent, democratic, popular and effective, when it was patently none of those things, may have been a major cause of reporters' distrust and the loss of official credibility. Thinking back on my own experience reporting from Vietnam in the

last three years of the war, I can recall being misled or misinformed much more often by civilian embassy or USAID officials downtown than by the military spokesman's office. I believe many of my colleagues, at least at that stage of the war, may have felt the same.

Nor, finally, was American reporting from Vietnam ideological in the sense of challenging the basic Cold War premises or assumptions of U.S. foreign policy. From time to time, journalists questioned whether the South Vietnamese regime was democratic enough to merit the U.S. effort and sacrifice on its behalf, but that question was raised, almost always, on such narrowly defined issues as the lack of opposition in the 1971 South Vietnamese presidential election, or whether the Saigon regime held political prisoners. Few reporters tried to put those issues into the context of South Vietnam's experience and circumstances and the nature of South Vietnamese society. Nor did such reports dispute the conventional American views of communism or that the U.S. was engaged in a necessary worldwide strategic and political competition with the Soviet Union.

Another Myth: Bringing the "Horrors of War" into American Living-rooms

There is a related mythology of Vietnam journalism that reaches similar conclusions about the media's impact on policy but pinpoints technology, not ideology, as the main cause. This is the "living-room war" theory, arising from the fact that Vietnam was the first war to receive extensive coverage on television. By bringing the violence and destruction of war into millions of American homes every night, it is argued, television horrified the public and eventually eroded support for the war.

This idea, too, was expressed by commentators on both sides of the Vietnam debate. Many years ago I heard the late Fred Friendly, the former CBS News executive and eminent guru of media criticism, tell an audience at Johns Hopkins University that if TV cameras had followed U.S. armies across France in 1944, the Allies might never have reached the Rhine because the television-viewing public at home, in shock and horror at the carnage, would have demanded a halt to the campaign. In a similar vein, Ben J. Wattenberg, the neo-conservative columnist, once warned that democracies face a problem in sustaining support for long wars because "every bit of the horror that any war produces is in everybody's living room the next day"[16] (an observation that may be received with some skepticism by anyone who has actually attended a war).

Like the image of an ideological press, that of the "living-room war" appears to be based more on folklore than on fact. Of more than 2,300 television news reports from Vietnam in the five years from August 1965 to August 1970,

one study found that only 76 showed actual scenes of "heavy fighting, incoming, with dead or wounded seen." Another survey reported that only about three percent of evening news stories in 1968-73 showed actual combat, and only two percent showed dead or wounded.[17] The Army's official history of military-media relations says that "despite isolated instances to the contrary," television's coverage of the war "was most often banal and stylized."[18]

The same point was made by the *New Yorker*'s TV critic, Michael J. Arlen, who observed in a 1982 article that the televised images he recalled were seldom graphic or shocking:

> *What I remember most clearly . . . is the nearly total absence on the nightly network news broadcasts of any explicit reality of the war—certainly of any of the blood and gore, or even the pain of combat. In fact, it seems to me that what a television viewer of the Vietnam War saw—at least for the first two-thirds of its duration—was a nightly stylized, generally distanced overview of a disjointed conflict which was composed mainly of scenes of helicopters landing, tall grasses blowing in the helicopter wind, American soldiers fanning out across a hillside on foot, rifles at the ready, with now and then (on the soundtrack) a far-off ping or two, and now and then (as the visual grand finale) a column of dark, billowing smoke a half mile away, invariably described as a burning Vietcong ammo dump.*[19]

Similarly, Daniel Hallin, after reviewing a sample of television reports over seven years of American involvement, wrote that most of the TV coverage consisted of:

> *routine battle coverage (several days old because most film was shipped by air); reports on technology; human-interest vignettes about the troops; occasional "light" stories about such trivia as what it is like to parachute out of an airplane; and many speeches and press conferences, relatively few of which were of real historical significance. When one looks at it all in a concentrated period of time, it is clear that a great deal of television's coverage had no significant value as information about the war.*[20]

With only slight qualification, the same description could apply to most print coverage of the war as well.

A Lasting Legacy of Mistrust

Writing in a professional journal in early 1999, an Army colonel declared: "The military and media . . . are `natural enemies' and that will never change."[21] "Enemies" might be an overstatement, but it's evident that a deep distrust became ingrained in the relationship between journalists and military professionals—largely if not entirely a legacy of the Vietnam experience, now passed down to reporters and soldiers of a new generation. In the 1983 invasion of Grenada, the task force commander ordered a complete ban on coverage for the first two days of the operation, with the implausible explanation that correspondents' safety could not be guaranteed. In the Panama landing in 1989, reporters assigned to the official "pool" complained that they were kept under tight control and largely denied first-hand access to the fighting. Similar complaints erupted about press policies in the first Gulf War, when an elaborate system of controls required correspondents to travel with military escorts and submit their reports to often heavy-handed military censorship. In the following years, U.S. military commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan followed the practice that became known as "embedding," letting reporters accompany U.S. units but requiring them not to report information that might compromise present or future operations.

If the image of a hostile press in Vietnam is so inaccurate, why did the coverage arouse feelings so strong they continue to embitter military and government relations with the media for decades after the war? I believe there were two principal reasons. First, journalists in Vietnam failed to report the success that was politically important to U.S. leaders and emotionally and professionally important to military commanders in the field. And second, reflecting the domestic debate, reporters from a fairly early stage treated Vietnam policy not as a matter of national consensus but as an issue of legitimate political dispute, so that—in contrast to the automatic tone of patriotic support in coverage of previous wars—opponents of this war and their views were given equal legitimacy with the positions taken by the national leadership and its spokesmen.

The first issue, I believe, was a far greater cause of controversy, mistrust, and ill will between reporters and officials than any ideological disagreement. Not right away, but beginning almost imperceptibly in 1967, after two and a half years of U.S. military escalation, reporters in Vietnam began to portray the war as stalemated, or at least one in which a successful conclusion did not seem to be in sight. U.S. leaders at home, whose need to vindicate their decisions grew rapidly along with the growing casualty lists, saw the widening perception of stalemate as potentially devastating to public support.

The divergent views of officials and journalists reflected a problem common to both: the difficulty of measuring progress in the circumstances of this

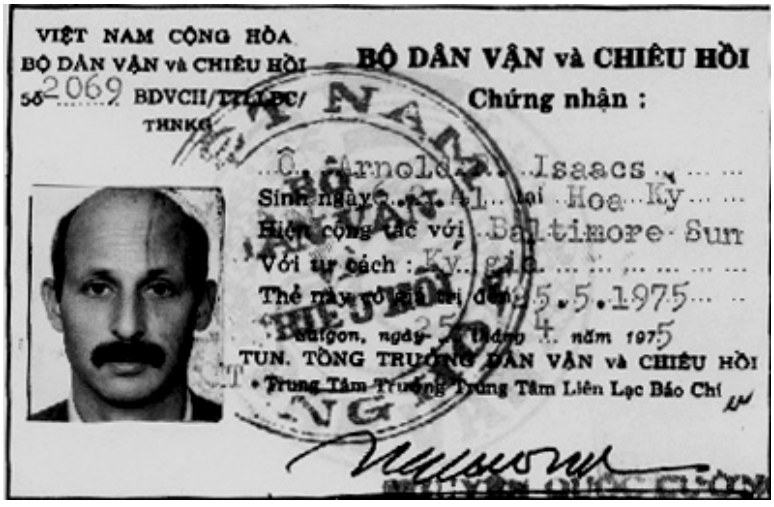
particular conflict. To demonstrate success in a war without front lines or clearly defined gains or losses of territory, military commanders had to fall back on highly suspect claims of enemy casualties—a category of information traditionally exaggerated, as one critic pointed out, ever since the Biblical Samson's "body count" of a thousand foes he slew with the jawbone of an ass.[22] Reporters and cameramen, meanwhile, increasingly sent home descriptions and images of a war "whose dominant impression was of soldiers fighting again and again over the identical terrain, without advancing or retreating or winning or losing, without any apparent relationship to any other battles before or afterward, and without visible movement toward a decisive result."[23]–an impression, just as US leaders feared, that eventually began to exhaust American patience. Like everything else about Vietnam this too is debatable, but a strong case can be made that in this respect, reporters came closer to the truth than the government did.

In late 1967, the Johnson administration's growing need to convince the public that the fighting was not deadlocked led to—among other public-relations efforts—the orchestration of Gen. William Westmoreland's appearances at the National Press Club and other highly visible forums to tell Americans that the war was being won. But Westmoreland's claims that the enemy's "guerrilla force is declining at a steady rate" and that "he can fight his large forces only at the edges of his sanctuaries" [24] came back to haunt him, and the administration, when the Tet offensive of 1968 burst out barely two months later.

Tet led to a whole new debate between journalists and civilian and military leaders—a debate that continues, if at diminished levels of intensity, more than 50 years later. The conventional view of press critics was that journalists reported the offensive as a great defeat for the U.S. and South Vietnamese when it actually represented the war's most significant military victory and thus disheartened the American public at a crucial moment. There is no doubt that in the early hours and days of the offensive, some reports were inaccurate and unduly alarmist (though it's likely that reports through official channels had the same character). But subsequent recriminations over the reporting of Tet, as on Vietnam reporting in general, have often reflected a highly inaccurate caricature of how the offensive was actually portrayed. As Charles Mohr pointed out, "the domestic audience did not wait for press analysis before drawing its own sweeping conclusions: that the public had been misled by official optimism and that years of war had not weakened the Communists. And the press, on the whole, did not draw such conclusions." Mohr went on to note that he did not know of a single case in which a Vietnam-based journalist called Tet a military defeat. "The real indictment," he concluded, "seems to be that journalists did not instantly declare it an unambiguous allied victory and thus squelch war revulsion in the United States. After much reflection, I cannot see how the media could have done that."[25]

Tet's impact on American public opinion—indeed, the entire subject of public attitudes on Vietnam—is too complex a subject to be adequately examined in this essay. But the notion that mistaken and defeatist reporting on a single campaign over a period of a few weeks during a seven-year war caused a previously supportive public to turn against the war does not stand up under even rudimentary examination. Polls documented a decline in support for U.S. policy during the offensive; however, that backing had begun diminishing well before Tet (which is why the administration launched its "we-are-winning" publicity campaign in late 1967). Moreover, the drop in support during Tet cannot be attributed only, or even chiefly, to the way the fighting was reported. Another powerful influence on public attitudes was the sudden rise in U.S. losses (2,000 battle deaths in the first month alone); as a good deal of research has shown, during both the Korea and Vietnam wars, public doubts rose with casualty rates virtually independently of any other battlefield or home-front events.[26]

It is also simplistic and inaccurate to pose a straight cause-and-effect connection between public disenchantment following Tet and the policy change leading to U.S. disengagement from the war. To begin with, of those who expressed doubts about the war after Tet, many, possibly even the majority, favored more military action, not less. Possibly more significant than the shift in public attitudes was that Tet energized many inside the Johnson administration who, for various reasons, had already begun to favor disengagement. The offensive, and the ensuing proposals from military leaders to put even more men and resources into the war, gave dissenters inside the government a chance—which they seized—to try to turn the policy around.


VIỆT NAM CỘNG HÒA
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BỘ DÂN VẬN và CHIÊU HỒI
Chứng nhận :
Arnold Isaacs
Hoa Kỳ
Baltimore Sun
5.5.1975
Saigon, ngày 4 tháng 4 năm 1975
TUN. TỔNG TRƯỞNG DÂN VẬN và CHIÊU HỒI
Trung Tâm Trưởng Trung Tâm Liên Lạc Báo Chí

Image 2: The author's press card from the Republic of Vietnam's military command (South Vietnam). The card indicates that it was set to expire five days after the capitulation of that government to communist forces on April 30, 1975.

Reporting a Stalemated War

Once disengagement became the policy, it was even harder for American officials to show progress or to present national goals in ways that would revive or preserve public support. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger describes U.S. policy from 1969 on as an attempt "to pursue a middle course between capitulation and the seemingly endless stalemate that we [the Nixon administration] had inherited."[27] No doubt Kissinger did not intend the implication his words carried—what could lie "between" stalemate and capitulation, after all, except a delayed, slow-motion defeat? But however it was phrased, the new American goal made it far more difficult to justify the deaths of 15,000 more American soldiers, not to mention the far larger loss of Asian lives, for such a purpose. To more and more Americans—not least to soldiers in the field, who were now expected to risk being killed or wounded for no better reason than that their government wanted to withdraw them gradually rather than immediately—the war made less sense than ever.

Inevitably, the reporting from Vietnam reflected the changed circumstances. Earlier images of "the efficient American war machine moving inexorably toward victory," Daniel Hallin wrote, were "supplanted to a large extent by an image of war as eternal recurrence, progressing nowhere."[28] To American military commanders in the field, more sorely in need than ever before of some kind of positive motivating force for their thankless mission, that image grew even more frustrating.

The disputes on whether the war was being won or not, and others like it, cannot explain the depth of feeling on this issue. For many years, it was impossible to spend much time talking with veterans or professional soldiers without encountering the extraordinary bitterness many of them still felt toward the media—a resentment which they almost invariably directed at the reporting from Vietnam, but which actually had much more to do with the reporting on the debate at home. To understand that resentment it is necessary to remember that before Vietnam, the model of war reporting was that of World War II. The generals and colonels who led the American army into Vietnam remembered from their own experience, and younger soldiers had absorbed an institutional memory of, a war that was automatically accepted as a just national cause and war correspondents who wrote about "our forces" and "our men" and identified fully with the objectives and efforts of the armed forces to which they were attached.

The hardship and sacrifice of American soldiers were the same in Vietnam as in earlier wars; yet it was evident to all of them that they did not get the same sympathy and support their fathers had received in World War II. The difference was in society, but it was expressed through the media, which placed Vietnam in the "sphere of legitimate controversy," as Daniel Hallin calls it,[29] meaning that

spokesmen and arguments for and against the war were handled in the tradition of "straight" or objective reporting. In that tradition, the convention of journalistic "fairness" required that both sides be covered and that reporters not give the appearance of judging one right and the other wrong.

From the viewpoint of those engaged in a sharp national policy debate, and even from the viewpoint of the general public, there was logic in this journalistic approach to Vietnam. But from the viewpoint of a soldier in danger of being killed or wounded, who was told he had to accept those risks in the service of his country, it was hard to swallow the idea that opponents of national policy should be given equal legitimacy with the country's elected leaders and senior military commanders. In the "province of objectivity," journalists quoted Jane Fonda against U.S. bombing policy and the Secretary of Defense on behalf of it without judging between them, to cite a somewhat extreme case; such objectivity could not be expected to seem justified or appropriate to the pilots who were flying through North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire, or to their colleagues in uniform in the other services. It was hard not to sympathize, even if one saw the issue differently. Some years after the war, in a class I visited at the Army War College, one student—a lieutenant colonel who, like most of the others in the room, had served in Vietnam as a brand-new lieutenant—raised his hand and commented that he and his comrades had found the reporting of the war "unhelpful" and "unbalanced." He said this with a kind of tight-lipped, icy civility suggesting he would have liked to use considerably stronger language. It was obvious that most if not all of the other officers in the class felt similarly. I confess that I did not much like the way I must have sounded when I attempted to explain that I and my colleagues in Vietnam did not consider that our responsibility was to be helpful to those being shot at. Possibly, I suggested, unbalanced reporting was not the real complaint; it might also be that the military in Vietnam—with the memory of the supportive and partisan journalism of World War II as their model—had actually gotten balanced reporting, and didn't like it. Nor, obviously, was it possible for the press to report a victory that did not occur.

I do not think I was wrong about journalism's obligations. But I cannot think those officers were wrong, either, in feeling that they deserved respect and support, not just even-handed "objective" reporting, from the press and the other institutions of the country whose uniform they were wearing. I would like to think that some of the officers in that classroom were able to understand that a reporter might conceive his obligations as I did and at the same time, as a citizen and as a man, respect their service and their profession. But I could certainly understand it if they didn't.

It is obvious that in a very broad sense the country did not offer the sympathy, appreciation and honor its soldiers earned in Vietnam, even if the policy

they fought for was unwise and ultimately unsuccessful. The media's coverage of the war, even when it was perfectly accurate, reflected that, adding to the pain nearly all Vietnam veterans felt. That, I believe, is the true source of the enduring bitterness on this issue, and the mythology that feeds it.

A Final Verdict: U.S. Media and Military Both Missed the Real Story

If the charges of slanted, unfair, damaging and erroneous reporting commonly directed at Vietnam journalists are largely mythical, that does not mean the American media can take much satisfaction in how they did report the war.

Despite all the acres of newsprint and miles of TV film devoted to Vietnam, American journalism largely failed to give its readers or viewers even the most rudimentary understanding of the war's real issues and true nature. Television in particular, but also the print media, focused on U.S. troops in the field and U.S. policy debates at home to the almost complete exclusion of the Vietnamese realities that were, in the end, decisive. During many years of heavy coverage, American consumers of Vietnam news learned practically nothing about Vietnam's past, about the traditions or program or structure of beliefs on the Communist side, or about the character and qualities of the South Vietnamese government and army. To reexamine that reporting is to realize that the real story on the relations between the U.S. government and media is to be found not in their disputes, but in the failure of historical understanding that was common to both sides. Despite their many disagreements, American officials and journalists shared a profound cultural and political blindness about the war —a blindness that prolonged mistaken policies and led, in the end, to a disaster that was all the more tragic because we still have not learned the lesson it should have taught. Instead, in the 50 years since the Vietnam war ended, we have created a world in which facts are weaker and truth is vastly more fragile than anyone could have imagined in 1975. In that world, traditional journalism is far less influential, one voice in a loud chorus that floods us, in ways that did not exist in the Vietnam era, with meaningless noise and misinformation. How that will ultimately affect policymaking and world events we do not yet know, but the outlook is not promising.

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released in 2022. Isaacs is also the author of *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy*, and an online report, *From Troubled Lands: Listening to Pakistani and Afghan Americans in Post-9/11 America*. Following his career in daily journalism, along with writing numerous articles and reviews for various print and online publications, he spent a number of years teaching or conducting training programs for journalists and journalism students in more than 20 countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. His website is www.arnoldisaacs.net and he can be reached at aisaacs@mindspring.com. This article is an updated, expanded and substantially revised version of an essay originally published in a public policy journal, *The Long Term View*, Vol. 5, no. 1. (2000), which ceased publication in 2010.

Notes

[1] Charles Mohr, "The Media," in George K. Osborn et al., eds., *Democracy, Strategy, and Vietnam: Implications for American Policymaking* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987), 179, 182.

[2] Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War," *Encounter*, August 1981, 73-90.

[3] Morley Safer, "How to Lose a War: A Response from a Broadcaster," in Harrison E. Salisbury, ed., *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 158.

[4] Robert Elegant, "Lives Remembered: Michael Herr," *The Times,* July 16, 2016, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/michael-herr-vt5f6jwlq#:~:text=Michael%20Herr.%20Robert%20Elegant%20writes:%20Michael%20Herr's,of%20the%20Saigon%20regime%20in%20the%20US. This article appeared in the London *Times,* thus employing the British spelling of "demonization."

[5] *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism, 1959-1968* and *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism, 1969-1975* (New York: Library of America, 1998).

[6] Algis Valiunas, "Innocents Abroad," *Commentary*, November 1998, 70-74.

[7] Neil Sheehan, "Not a Dove, No Longer a Hawk," *New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 1966, reprinted in *Reporting Vietnam*, Vol. 1, 315.

[8] William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988) and *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996).

[9] Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[10] See "Seymour Hersh," at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seymour_Hersh#My_Lai_massacre. Accessed January 5, 2025.

[11] Ron Ridenhour was a former member of Calley's platoon. He transferred out before the massacre and tracked down every member of his old platoon he could and asked them what happened. He and his family members sent what Ridenour learned to officials in Washington, which eventually reached the Pentagon. See https://whistleblower.org/whistleblower-rights/who-was-ron-ridenhour. and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_L._Haeberle. Accessed January 5, 2025.

[12] Hammond, *The Military and the Media,* 223-224.

[13] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 399-400.

[14] Hallin, *The "Uncensored War,"* 155-56.

[15] Perhaps the most exhaustive and authoritative examination of South Vietnam's weaknesses is Frank Scotton's *Uphill Battle, Reflections on Viet Nam Counterinsurgency* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2014). Scotton, a civilian U.S. government official, was stationed in Vietnam for more than a decade with only a few interruptions, spanning the entire period of American involvement. He traveled extensively in the Vietnamese countryside, usually unaccompanied, during those years. His book, drawn largely from first-hand observations, documents the devastating effects of corruption, incompetent leadership and abuses of power that fatally undermined South Vietnam's war effort. Specifically on corruption, often cited as the regime's most toxic flaw, see also Arnold R. Isaacs, "Can Corruption Lose Wars?" *Cicero Magazine*, February 19, 2015, at https://ciceromagazine.com/features/can-too-much-corruption-lose-wars/. Accessed January 5, 2025.

[16] Ben J. Wattenberg, "Too Bad for Our Side: War is a Video Game," *Public Opinion* August-September 1982, 60.

[17] Both surveys are cited in Lawrence W. Lichty, "Comments on the Influence of Television on Public Opinion," in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) co-published by University Press of America, 1984), 158.

[18] Hammond, *The Military and the Media*, 387.

[19] Michael J. Arlen, "The Air: The Falklands, Vietnam, and Our Collective Memory," *The New Yorker*, August 16, 1982, 73.

[20] Hallin, The *"Uncensored War,"* 209.

[21] Col. Barry E. Willey, "The Military-Media Connection: For Better or For Worse," *Military Review*, December 1998-February1999, 15.

[22] Cincinnatus [Cecil B. Currey], *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era* (New York: Norton, 1981), 86.

[23] Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (updated edition, Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Co., updated edition, 2022), 396.

[24] Quoted in Hammond, *The Military and the Media,* 334

[25] Mohr, "The Media," 183.

[26] For example, see John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973).

[27] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 288.

[28] Hallin, *The "Uncensored War*," 176.

[29] Ibid., 116.