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VIETNAM AND THE PRESS

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The Vietnam War was and is a potent political symbol, a montage of discrete, contradictory, and arresting images seared into our individual and collective psyches: a Buddhist monk in flames, a South Vietnamese officer coolly blowing the brains out of a captured Vietcong, an American flag being burned. While for many Vietnam is remembered through direct, personal experiences, for most people the war was and is known only through experiences mediated by others. As the primary mediator of images of the war, the press holds unparalleled power—the power to decide what the war means.¹

Questions about the role of the news media during the Vietnam era are as common as questions about the war itself. Was the press simply the chronicler, the unbiased eyes and ears of a nation, or did it systematically distort reality? Did the press reflect the changing national mood about the war or did it cause the shift? Did the press act as national conscience or national traitor? Was the press an independent voice or a mouthpiece for the White House, radical students, or Hanoi?

This essay presents arguments and evidence which directly address these questions. Overarching these particular concerns, however, is the more encompassing theme of how the Vietnam experience included both an extension of past press-government relations and an important turning point in that relationship. By understanding the role of the news media in our Vietnam involvement, we can reach a deeper understanding of what the role of the press is in America, and of what it should be.

The Press in America

The Conflicting Roles of the Press What is unique about press coverage of Vietnam is not that it broke with prior traditions of press-government relations, but that because of the length and the nature of the war, it fit so many different traditions. The Vietnam experience points out the inherent contradictions that always plague the American press. Understanding these contradictions is the first step in understanding the role of the press during the Vietnam War.

Did the press accurately portray the war, or was coverage biased? One must first ask what *accurate* and *biased* mean. Each soldier's experience was different in Vietnam. The war varied by region, season, and year.² The war *was* different depending upon whether it was viewed from Washington or Berkeley, Hanoi or Saigon, Quang Tri or Dong Hoi. The war *was* different depending upon whether it was viewed through the eyes of an American or a Vietnamese, a private or a general, a student or a soldier, a peasant or a businessperson. Even given unlimited resources, information, print space, and airtime, the press could not present the Vietnam experience "accurately." It was impossible. Rather than ask if the Vietnam experience was covered accurately, we must ask the more modest question, were there factual errors? Instead of asking was the coverage biased, we must ask, from whose perspective(s) was the coverage biased, for what reasons, and to what end?

Most of the debate over coverage of Vietnam concerns issues of interpretation rather than fact, errors of omission rather than commission. The exception to this involves counting—how many Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers there were and how many of them were killed. It is clear that the United States military, intentionally or not, systematically underreported the strength of the opposition and overreported the number of "kills." It is also clear that the press corps, with few exceptions, accepted these official numbers and reported them dutifully to the American public until the Tet offensive.

The reporting of enemy strength and body counts points to important continuities with past press-government interactions. First among them is the dependency of the press on the very institutions it covers. This is particularly true for government, whose access to and control of information is superior to that of the press. It is also especially true in foreign affairs coverage (since due in part to cultural and language barriers, alternate sources are lacking), and during a war (since control of information is even more tightly maintained). Deadlines add to this dependency, since reporters and editors must depend on the more accessible, official stories and have less time to question them or check out alternate sources. Naturally, such deadline pressures are more intense in foreign affairs coverage.

Secondly, the press is restrained by its own loyalty. Reporters, editors, and producers are citizens, often even patriots. Their tendency when reporting on international affairs, especially during wartime, is to avoid sabotaging the national interest, even to aid that interest through the content and style of coverage. Hence, all other things being equal, the inclination is to report what the government wants reported.

A third factor shaping media coverage is economic interest. Even if journalists, editors, and producers are not superpatriots, they know that appearing unpatriotic does not play well with many readers, viewers, and sponsors. Fear of alienating the public and sponsors, especially in wartime, serves as a real, often unstated tether, keeping the press tied to accepted wisdom.

Why, then, is the press often blamed by politicians, academics, even journalists, for undermining the war effort, for turning the public against the war in Vietnam, and for distorting our image of the war? The answer to these questions lies in a set of traditions that conflict with those just discussed. While the press has a tradition of national loyalty, it has a competing role as “watchdog” of government. While the press is constrained by economic interests, it is also motivated by a desire to inform the public as best it can. And finally, while the media traditionally stays close to the mainstream, it also thrives on the sensational, the dramatic, the controversial. The mixed message sent out by the press concerning Vietnam resulted from the interplay of these competing pressures. At different times different traditions dominated. At any given time, conflicts over how to cover the war are evident—between mediums, among reporters, and—because of journalists’, editors’, producers’, and owners’ different perspectives—even within single stories.

The Press and Boundary Maintenance: Defining Consensus, Controversy, and Deviance The pushes and pulls of the press’s competing tendencies are bounded, however. When the topic is consensual, the media serves as advocate or celebrant of that consensus.³ When the topic is one about which legitimate groups or individuals disagree, then the media is obliged to present those opposing views. The key, however, is the term *legitimate*. The media does not advocate or even neutrally present views that fall outside of the dominant culture. While the lines between consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance are not written in stone, they are real, and the rules governing media coverage are different for each.

Consider, for example, national election coverage. The importance of elections in the political process is never debated. Elections as an institution fall clearly within the sphere of consensus. During the election campaign, however, the media are free to present the opposing views of legitimate political candidates—almost always defined as the Democratic

and the Republican nominees. This is the sphere of legitimate controversy. The views of individuals and groups falling beyond its bounds—those of fascists, communists, socialists, etc.—are seldom covered in the mainstream press. When they are, it is usually to expose them as threats to the consensus, not to present their points of view objectively. (FCC guidelines for the Fairness Doctrine state, “It is not the Commission’s intention to make time available to Communists or to the Communist viewpoints.”) Since the press is the dominant source from which people learn about the political world, it is not only part of the spheres of consensus and legitimate controversy, but also “plays the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable political conflict.”⁴

Coverage of Vietnam, despite claims to the contrary, seldom left the spheres of consensus and legitimate controversy. When it did, it was to ridicule deviance rather than present it as a legitimate alternative. The media did, of course, criticize the war, and helped shape the debate over the war’s direction. And Vietnam was covered differently than other wars. But the mainstream press never stood outside the dominant culture to criticize it. Instead, it reflected societal shifts in the boundaries between consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance. Ultimately it continued to serve as a boundary-maintaining mechanism, preserving the status quo from serious challenges.

The Press, War, and Censorship War both intensifies and changes the norms of press-government relations. Prior to World War I, reporters either found their own way into a war zone, or, at the discretion of the commander, attached themselves to a military unit. If found in a war zone without permission, they were often arrested. The unprecedented scale of World War I, the press’s increased ability to gather and transmit information, and the growing unhappiness of everyone with the resulting chaos in press coverage led to a more formal system in which the press was granted routine access to the front in exchange for formal accreditation and censorship by the military. The threat of losing accreditation or being jailed, their knowledge that copy and film would be censored anyway, and their underlying patriotism meant that journalists often engaged in self-censorship. As Frederick Palmer of the *New York Herald* wrote, “We rarely had our copy cut. We had learned too well where the line was drawn on military secrecy. The important items were those we left out; and these made us public liars.”⁵

This system of accreditation, access, and censorship, which remained largely in place through the Korean War, was as important politically as it was militarily. The mobilization of public support for a war is as critical

as the mobilization of troops. From the government's perspective, the press needed enough freedom to report back frequently to the public, but enough control to assure that what was reported boosted rather than hurt morale. Often more than military secrets were the subject of censorship. During the Korean conflict, for example, the press was forbidden to make any derogatory comments about United Nations troops.

While the accrediting of journalists continued in Vietnam, formal censorship did not. The military believed it gained more by limiting the access of journalists than by giving them complete access in exchange for censorship. In addition, since the United States' involvement in Vietnam fell short of declared war, full censorship and its enforcement were politically and legally difficult. Finally, it was assumed that the combination of the threat of loss of accreditation, journalistic patriotism, the tradition of "neutrality and objectivity," and the dependence of the press on official sources of information would make voluntary guidelines workable in place of prior censorship. This assumption proved correct for most of this very long war. Eventually, however, uncensored coverage, the limited nature of the war, and a growing, vocal, legitimate opposition in the States, combined to shift the boundaries of legitimate controversy, and ultimately, of the consensus itself.

Covering the War in Vietnam

No News Is Good News: Coverage of Vietnam Prior to 1964 Prior to 1964 the only extensive coverage of Vietnam came during the 1963 Buddhist crises.⁶ Networks did not assign full-time film crews and reporters until the middle of 1963, and only the *New York Times* had a full-time correspondent in Saigon during the Kennedy administration. It was in this period, however, that the context for future coverage of the war was set.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, debating the wisdom of the Cold War was taboo. For most people this acquiescence was less because they feared retaliation than because, immersed in this ideological consensus, they never thought to question it. In addition, during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, a bipartisan consensus on national security removed most foreign policy decision making from the public agenda. Thus, neither the fact nor the method of American involvement in Vietnam was deemed newsworthy.

When, beginning in 1961, Vietnam occasionally made the news, the cold war consensus and the media's dependence on government sources combined to assure coverage supportive of U.S. policy. Consider the following quotes from the *New York Times*: "General Taylor heads a twelve-man group . . . assessing how Washington can best stop the Red advance" (1961); and, "Communist guerillas trying to subvert this country admit to having underestimated the depth of the United States inten-

tions" (1963). Such ideological content, typical of reporting prior to 1964, was not viewed as violating the norm of objective reporting precisely because it fell within the cold war consensus. According to one NBC correspondent, "To the degree that we in the media paid any attention at all to that small, dirty war in those years, we almost wholly reported the position of the government."⁷

A typical case of government news management occurred in late 1961. General Taylor, the president's military advisor, had concluded that South Vietnam could not survive the Vietcong and North Vietnamese "insurgency" without the help of more than the 685 American advisors permitted by the 1954 Geneva agreement. While Kennedy reluctantly accepted Taylor's recommendation (by the time of his death nearly 17,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam), he did not want public attention drawn to the escalation. The White House leaked misleading information suggesting that both Taylor and Kennedy opposed sending troops to Vietnam. This was the story reported in the press. The *New York Times*, for example, printed that "officials said it was correct to infer from this that General Taylor did not look favorably on the sending of United States combat troops at this time" and "the president and General Taylor agreed, according to reliable information available here, that the South Vietnamese government is capable of turning back the Communist threat." The story spent one day on the front page.

So the door was opened to U.S. troops fighting and dying in Vietnam while the press reported that it was still closed and locked. In December 1961, when the first U.S. troops authorized to provide "direct military support" to the South Vietnamese sailed up the Saigon River, the *New York Times* carried the story on the twenty first page. And at a televised press conference in January 1962, in answer to the direct question, "Mr. President, are American troops now in combat in Vietnam?" Kennedy simply said no and went on to the next question. He was not challenged—although the first U.S. combat death in Vietnam had occurred three weeks earlier.

Despite the predominantly cold war coverage between 1961 and 1964, some reporters did raise questions about America's Vietnam policy. As the number of combat deaths increased (from 1 in 1961 to 787 in 1963), the press found it difficult to ignore the conflict. And as the disparity between officially reported and real U.S. policy widened (for example, in December of 1961, with at least 2000 Americans in combat zones authorized to carry and fire weapons, the official count was still 685 advisors), the number of sources who questioned the honesty of government statements also increased.

While this did not mean that press coverage was consistently negative, it did result in "mixed signals." For example, in late 1961 a *New York*

Times editorial stated, "Fresh details are slowly emerging from reticent Administration sources about the expanded program of American participation in South Vietnam's anti-communist struggle." This sentence captures the complex relationship of the press to government, and the ambivalence of the press about that relationship. Its acceptance of the basic correctness of U.S. goals is evidenced in the phrase "American participation in South Vietnam's anti-communist struggle." But journalists' suspicion that there was more to U.S. involvement than met the eye, and their annoyance at government unwillingness to provide more information about that involvement shows, too, in the phrases "slowly emerging," and "reticent Administration sources."

This example also reveals the press's almost total dependence on the government for information; frustrated or not, the media can only report as much as those "reticent administration officials" will say. As U.S. involvement in Vietnam increased so, too, did the potential for official and credible sources who would provide alternative information or interpretations. Prior to 1964, however, such voices were rare and usually easily silenced. In February 1961, for example, the Republican National Committee asked the president to make "a full report to the American people" concerning U.S. involvement in Vietnam. While affirming their commitment to "any policy which will block the Communist conquest of Southeast Asia," the Republicans raised concerns that the U.S. was "moving toward another Korea which might embroil the entire Far East." This was one of the earliest attempts to redefine the boundary between consensus and legitimate controversy. Stopping the communist threat in Southeast Asia is reasserted as a consensus issue, but the Kennedy administration's strategy for doing so is gently pushed toward the sphere of legitimate controversy. The challenge was not made by the press, but by players who are considered legitimate actors within the hegemonic culture. In fact, while reporting the Republican challenge, the *New York Times* supported Kennedy in an editorial, arguing in true boundary-maintaining fashion, that "undue publicity . . . could compromise Washington's effort." Even this minor challenge quickly faded, as the Republicans conceded to Kennedy's call for a continuation of the "very strong bipartisan consensus" in foreign policy. A Democratic challenge in 1963 followed a similar pattern. A true shifting of boundaries would not occur until the Tet offensive.

Challenges most often finding their way into the press during this period originated with U.S. troops and middle-level officers. In managing the news, the government relied on its ability to control information, on the press's commitment to "objective" reporting, and on its loyalty to the U.S. cause rather than on censorship. As a result, the opinions of soldiers and officers in the field could be and were communicated directly to the

public. In a traditional, declared war this would not be a problem. Vietnam, however, was a "limited" war; Americans, though shooting and being shot at, though killing and being killed, were not soldiers, but "advisors." Victory in battle and in the "pacification program" depended not only on how U.S. soldiers performed, but on how South Vietnamese soldiers and, ultimately, the South Vietnamese government performed. Moreover, just who the enemy was was unclear—was it North Vietnam? The Vietcong? The Soviet Union? Communism? The resulting frustrations and uncertainties were managed within the administration, and even, with a few exceptions, within the U.S. government and military more generally. But in the field this was more difficult. Again, most coverage was neither negative nor pessimistic. Even David Halberstam, the *New York Times*' columnist whom Kennedy wanted removed from Saigon because of his negative coverage of the war, supported the war effort, often writing in the loyal tradition of World War II correspondents:

Here a handful of tough United States Special Forces men day after day live a precarious existence training several hundred Montagnards, or mountain tribesmen . . . The Americans . . . seem completely indifferent to danger . . . "We've got a job to do and we do it." According to Lieut. Pete Skamser of Covina, CA., . . . every man on the team is willing to die for Dak Pek. (1962)

Mixed in with upbeat reports, however, were signs of doubt and of what Hallin calls "cautious pessimism." These were not the inventions of unpatriotic journalists; they reflected the frustrations of advisors who were committed to the objectives of the war but disillusioned by the tactics. The press gave voice to frustration over the limited nature of the war, its civil/guerrilla war character, the incompetence of the South Vietnamese army, and the corruptness of the Diem regime. The result was reporting like the following *New York Times* excerpts:

United States Army helicopters carried a Vietnamese battalion in a successful raid today . . . But as usual the main enemy force got away . . . The Government troops failed to exploit the Viet Cong state of shock. They bunched up . . . under the shade of coconut trees until an American advisor cried out in exasperation, "Let's move the thing forward." (March 9, 1962)

The Battle of Ap Bac, in which attacking South Vietnamese troops were badly beaten by Communist guerillas, has bewildered high United States officials in Saigon. United States advisors in the field, however, have long felt that conditions here made a defeat like this virtually inevitable . . . American officers . . . feel that what happened at Ap Bac goes deeper than one battle and is directly tied to the question—whether the Vietnamese are really interested in having American advisors and listening to them. (January 7, 1963)

In reporting the soldier's perspective of the war, the media never questioned our right or our motives for being in Vietnam. Nor did they question the motives or bravery of U.S. soldiers. To the contrary, the press

often championed their cause, as when in 1962 the *New York Times* criticized the government for not awarding the Purple Heart to soldiers wounded in Vietnam. Like the soldiers it reported on, the press believed in the cause; when critical, it reflected concern that bad policies put that cause at risk.

Entering the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy: The Buddhist Crisis of 1963 and the Fall of Diem The most intensive coverage of Vietnam prior to 1964 was during the Buddhist crisis. Diem garnered much of his support from Vietnam's Catholic population. On May 8, 1963, Buddhists in Hue were prohibited from flying religious flags during the celebration of Buddha's birthday. Protests began immediately, leading to six months of dramatic, violent confrontations between Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government. Negative press coverage during this period is often used as evidence of media policymaking power, since prior to the crisis the administration supported Diem, and by its end actively supported a coup against him. More pointedly, the press is accused of undermining the U.S. war effort that depended so heavily on a stable South Vietnamese government. These accusations do not stand up under examination.

While it is true that the press criticized Diem during this period, so, too, did many American diplomatic and military officials in Saigon and Washington. Indeed, prior to May 1963 the press consistently reported the official U.S. line that, while Diem was not perfect, he held the key to success. As the *New York Times* put it in 1962:

Official Americans here, though often impatient with some of Ngo's repressive policies and his apparent reluctance to effect reforms, appear to have concluded that his leadership . . . is an irreplaceable asset. Some Westerners who have made a specialty of studying the Vietnamese mind have suggested that a mandarin is really what most of the people want.

The administration felt Diem could be "educated" about democratic reforms and government efficiency. Most press coverage of Diem prior to May 1963, a combination of support spiked with critical nudges towards reform, reflected this view. Some members of the administration and many military personnel in Vietnam felt winning with Diem in charge was unlikely. But as long as this view remained deviant, it rarely surfaced in the media. In some cases reporters censored such criticism, seeing it as harmful to U.S. efforts (and their own careers). And when they focused on deep-seated problems in the South Vietnamese government and military, as Charles Mohr did in 1962 and early 1963 for *Time*, stories were edited back home to fall into line with government policy.

Negative press coverage increased during the Buddhist crisis, but it did so because of a growing debate over the direction of U.S. policy and not because journalists launched an anti-Diem campaign of their own. The

crisis, coupled with Diem's continued unwillingness to take U.S. advice slowly turned the tables within the administration. At first this meant that the usefulness of Diem as the means to achieve victory over the communists was open to legitimate debate. By Diem's ouster in November, opposition to Diem had become the new consensus.

The media were important arenas in which the debate played itself out. Journalists who had already concluded that the Diem regime was unsalvageable were the first to give voice to the now legitimated criticism, but the words were those of military advisors and administration officials. Here the media did play an important role in the shift in U.S. policy, but not as the leader. (Indeed, when the first Buddhist monk burned himself to death in protest, the story did not make the front page of the *New York Times*, and Malcolm Browne's now famous picture of the self-immolation was not run.) Journalists did what they always do, they reported what "officials here believe." But now what officials believed was in conflict, and the press was an important weapon in the battle for a new consensus. It was, however, a weapon as likely to be used by the pro-Diem forces as the anti-Diem ones. In the midst of the crises, for example, *Time*, owned by the virulently anticommunist Henry Luce, published an editorial blasting the Saigon press corps for its anti-Diem reporting. And even as the administration position shifted away from Diem, *Time's* editorial staff insisted on so sanitizing Vietnam coverage that Charles Mohr and Mert Perry, the magazine's Saigon correspondents, resigned in September 1963.

The Kennedy administration sought to win the hearts and minds of the press corps and so the American public. Kennedy wanted minimal but positive coverage of Vietnam and the public airing of internal disputes and a stagnating war effort posed a problem. In October of 1963 Kennedy appealed to Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, to recall David Halberstam from Saigon. Sulzberger refused. But administration attempts to keep the press in line did not stop here. The White House and the Pentagon encouraged Washington-based reporters to take brief trips to Saigon, since in a short stay they could not make unofficial or dissident contacts and so would be dependent on the official government line. Reporters were also subtly pressured by the White House staff, who sought to discredit the Saigon press corp by impugning their knowledge and analysis of the war. The pressure from the Pentagon was less subtle, challenging "not just the reporters' accuracy, but their manhood and their patriotism."⁸

The tactics worked. U.S. based journalists, fresh from guided tours of Saigon and primed by White House and Pentagon propaganda attacked the Saigon press corps. Joseph Alsop called their reporting a "reportorial crusade against government," while Marguerite Higgins asserted that "reporters here would like to see us lose the war to prove they're right."⁹

Despite such claims, actual press reporting from Saigon was anything but unpatriotic. To the contrary, it helped to clearly demarcate the boundaries of consensus, debate, and deviance in a way that never challenged the status quo. At issue, for the press as for the administration, was how best to stop the communists; no journalist ever questioned that they had to be stopped. At the height of the crisis Halberstam wrote in the *New York Times*:

The conflict between the South Vietnamese Government and Buddhist priests is sorely troubling American officials here. It has brought to the surface American frustrations of the apparently limited influence of the United States here despite its heavy investment in troops, economic aid and prestige to help South Vietnam block Communism.

The theme of television network news coverage also was that Diem was hurting the war effort. In August 1963, Chet Huntley, quoting official sources, told the ABC audience that "Diem washed eighteen months of effort down the drain." In October he reported that "we journalists have found the Diem regime guilty of serving Communism." And when Diem was assassinated Huntley spoke for all the network anchors when he said, "we can now get on with the war."

Uneasy Consensus: Covering Vietnam between 1964 and 1968 Despite a few tense periods, Kennedy and his advisors were successful in guiding coverage of the war. Conditions were optimal for this kind of news management. The cold war had been kept on ice by the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The images of Khrushchev banging his shoe at the U.N. and threatening to "bury" the U.S. built a wall around the sphere of consensus as impenetrable as that separating East and West Berlin. In addition, although the U.S. was more involved in the war than the Kennedy administration ever admitted, the American presence was still limited.

President Johnson also wanted Vietnam downplayed; the only war he wanted to be remembered for was the one against poverty. However, the political turmoil following Diem's assassination (a constant fact of life from that point on), coupled with the inability of the South Vietnamese army to conduct the war as envisioned by the U.S., led to an escalation of U.S. involvement. Between the end of 1963 and July of 1964, the number of advisors was increased from 17,000 to 75,000, and Americans began bombing North Vietnam, first as "retaliation for North Vietnamese aggression," and ultimately, in February of 1965, as a sustained activity. Finally, in July of 1965, at the insistence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Johnson dispatched 100,000 combat troops to South Vietnam. Vietnam was now an American war.

Increased U.S. involvement altered the relationship between the presi-

dent and the press, as well as the environment in which that relationship played itself out. On the one hand, greater U.S. commitment meant that Johnson had to insure public and congressional support for the war. On the other, he did not want the war to dominate the public agenda. This was still a limited war and one that, like Korea, would not hold the public's loyalty if closely and constantly scrutinized. Besides, center stage belonged to the Great Society; Vietnam was an unwanted sideshow. Like JFK, LBJ walked a tightrope strung between keeping the war off the public agenda and managing media coverage so that public opinion would be supportive of the increasing U.S. involvement. As the scope of that involvement increased, however, LBJ had to build public support, and this required greater media coverage. It was a high wire act Johnson was unable to complete.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was President Johnson's key to unlocking public and congressional support for greater U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the key to the resolution was LBJ's brilliant manipulation of the press. It is, perhaps, the best example of how presidential news management can shape public policy. In early August 1964, North Vietnamese PT boats and a U.S. destroyer did battle in the Gulf of Tonkin. In response, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving the president the power to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." This vague mandate, passed unanimously in the House and with only two dissents in the Senate, gave Presidents Johnson and Nixon the power to wage an undeclared war in Vietnam, although as recently as June 1964, deliberations on a similar resolution had been deferred in Congress because of a lack of agreement on how to exert increasing pressure on North Vietnam. Why the turnaround?

Clearly the "rallying around the flag" induced by the Gulf of Tonkin incident was critical—and depended on the press. The rules of "objective journalism" allowed the president to manage the media presentation as effectively as if he had written the copy himself. The media's exclusive use of official U.S. sources, their focus on the president, the absence of interpretation, and the concentration on immediate events at the expense of historical context guaranteed that their portrayal of the incident was consistent with the administration's evolving policy of escalation in the guise of business as usual. Thus the *Washington Post* reported:

The United States turned loose its military might on North Vietnam last night to prevent the Communist leaders in Hanoi and Peking from making the mistaken decision that they could attack American ships with impunity. But the initial United States decision was for limited action, a sort of tit-for-tat retaliation, and not a decision to escalate the war in Southeast Asia . . . The great mystery here was whether the attacks by North Vietnamese PT boats on the

American vessels were part of some larger scheme on the Communist side to escalate the war.

The network anchors, in tone and word, also supported Johnson's actions. We were committed, according to Cronkite, "to stop Communist aggression wherever it raises its head."

What is remarkable about coverage of the Tonkin incidents is that virtually every report was misleading or even false. For example, contrary to the *New York Times* report that the U.S. destroyer "was on a routine patrol when an unprovoked attack took place" and that "there was no ready explanation why the PT boats would in effect attack the powerful Seventh Fleet," the destroyer Maddox was on an intelligence gathering operation near an area where the U.S. had twice attacked North Vietnam the day before. In fact, evidence suggests that the second attack by North Vietnamese PT boats never happened. Real or not, when heavily reported in the media, it became the public rationale for retaliation and increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam—a policy change decided upon before the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Increased U.S. military presence in Vietnam led to parallel increases in television's coverage of the war. Daniel Hallin notes five "unspoken propositions" underlying television reporting in this period. First, television in general and anchors in particular, referred to Vietnam as our war, portraying it as a national endeavor. Second, coverage often placed the Vietnam conflict in an American war tradition, in the context of World War II, and even of the U.S. frontier. For example, one 1966 NBC report closed by signing off from "the First Infantry Division, the Big Red 1 of North Africa, Omaha Beach, Normandy, Germany, and now the Cambodia border." Reporters also used the soldier's phrase "Indian country" to describe Vietcong-controlled territory. Subtly the historical context of Vietnam changes from its own history of occupation and religious and civil strife to America's "wild west" and the tradition of "great wars."

A third theme noted by Hallin is that Vietnam was a testing ground for manhood, as defined by John Wayne and Audie Murphy. Vietnam was about heroes, toughness, and professionalism:

They are the greatest soldiers in the world. In fact, they are the greatest men in the world. (NBC, February 1966)

They are Marines. They are good and they know it. But every battle, every landing, is a new test of what a man and a unit can do. (NBC, Sept 1965)

But they were bloody, and that's what they wanted. (NBC, July 1966)

Fourth, television coverage reduced the war to a game, to winning and losing. It was the language of sports and technology that, as Hallin says, purged the war of moral and political implications, as with "American

and Australian forces had somewhat better hunting today," or "American soldiers captured the biggest prize so far." The enemy is reduced to dehumanized targets, to body counts, or to what Chet Huntley called "the total score."

Finally, television gave the war an appearance of order and progress where often there was none. The anchors played an important role in this structuring process, mainly through the "battlefield roundups" that introduced the film footage each night. For example, CBS viewers might see Walter Cronkite, often posed in front of a map of Southeast Asia with the words *RED CHINA* arching over the top, declare:

Today, after meeting three days of desperate, almost suicidal resistance by the Vietcong, our troops find the enemy gone into sullen hiding, our firepower too powerful to face. For in the three weeks of . . . operation ATTLEBORO, the infantry has killed more than four hundred, captured scores, overrun strong point after strong point. As the fighting rages once again to preserve democracy, the GIs themselves have an eye on the elections back home. (November 1966)

This image of progress, of an enemy on the run, was based on daily press briefings by the military in Saigon. Film footage was also government influenced, as TV crews "were shunted by helicopter from one operation to another by military press officers who wanted to show off American initiative."¹⁰ Coupled with reports from Washington and the media's inclination to close ranks around the administration in a time of war, coverage produced an image of military success. As Hallin notes, "It must have been very hard . . . for the average television viewer to imagine the possibility that American arms might not ultimately be successful in Vietnam."¹¹

Television's emphasis on combat was ironic, since it is less mobile than the print media and so more dependent on news from Saigon and Washington. At times action footage was staged, since the enemy often proved too elusive. "The strangest thing about the war was we never saw the enemy, the Vietcong . . . they vanished whenever we arrived."¹² Once U.S. combat troops were committed in large numbers, the story quickly became "American boys in action," and this required having cameras in the field (nine network employees were killed in Indochina and many more were wounded). But being in the field did not mean being in battle—only 22 percent of the pre-Tet film reports from Southeast Asia showed combat, and most of these were limited to "a few incoming mortar rounds or a crackle of sniper fire."¹³ When battle scenes were available, they were edited according to explicit guidelines barring the use of graphic film of wounded American soldiers or suffering civilians. According to

former CBS News president Fred W. Friendly, these network policies “helped shield the audience from the true horror of the war.”¹⁴

But while the public received positive reports about the war, a conflict brewed within the press corps. To a small but growing number of journalists, government and media accounts did not jibe with their own experiences in Vietnam. This view cut against the grain of the still-prevailing cold war consensus, however, and so was met by subtle and not so subtle censorship by editors and producers. In part, this internal censorship resulted from editors’ suspicions of young reporters who were too committed to a cause to be objective. More disturbingly, it also reflected direct political intervention. For example, President Johnson intervened to stop a 1965 *Time* article by Frank McCulloch revealing that U.S. troops were preparing to assume an active combat role. Such presidential involvement in press censorship was not unusual, especially at *Time*, where “any time McCulloch had a particularly big story that went against the official line, somehow the Administration shot it down through the Washington bureau.”¹⁵

Despite the stifling of occasional voices of dissent, a subtle change in coverage occurred in this period. In the print media, doubts were raised in the editorial page or buried deep in the inverted pyramid of a news story. The *New York Times*, for example, ran editorials urging stronger efforts at diplomacy, or, towards the end of news articles, referred to unnamed sources who questioned the stability of the South Vietnamese government or the competency of their military. Occasionally a soldier’s quote would reveal a growing sense of confusion and frustration. But the administration was never criticized directly, and the format of newspaper reporting assured that readers could distinguish “fact” from opinion and the “important facts” from less important ones.

In television, less information is conveyed, and the distinction between fact and interpretation is blurred. Television thus limited itself to simpler and fewer themes, presenting issues in black-and-white terms. Most often this meant our good guys heroically but inexorably succeeding against the bad guys. But sometimes the norms of reporting forced the networks to make choices and present information they would just as soon not. The most dramatic example of this prior to Tet was in August 1965, when Morley Safer’s crew filmed U.S. marines destroying the village of Cam Ne. Safer’s report threw CBS into turmoil. While no one wanted to air footage of American boys indiscriminantly burning down houses, they had the film and the norms of journalism clearly said show it. The night it aired, CBS was swamped by phone calls from viewers who were outraged that CBS would “do something like this, portraying our boys as killers, American boys didn’t do things like that. Many of the

calls were obscene.”¹⁶ The next day, CBS executive Frank Stanton was awakened by yet another phone call:

“Frank,” said the early-morning wake-up call, “Are you trying to fuck me?” “Who is this?” said the still sleepy Stanton. “Frank, this is your President, and yesterday your boys shat on the American flag.”¹⁷

The administration’s reaction did not end here. Johnson, convinced Safer was a communist, did a thorough search of his past. (Upon finding that Safer was clean, but Canadian, Johnson replied, “Well I knew he wasn’t an American.”)¹⁸ Johnson also ran a check on the marine officer who took Safer to Cam Ne, and a Pentagon official tried to get the Vietnamese cameraman for CBS fired, “complaining that one of the keys to this evil story was that CBS had used a South Vietnamese cameraman, a sure sign of alien influence.”¹⁹

The norms of newsworthiness were instrumental in a second challenge to the administration’s policy in Vietnam during this period—the Fulbright hearings. William Fulbright was the senator who had, based on Johnson’s promise that no U.S. ground troops would be committed to Vietnam, shepherded the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress. By early 1966 he felt betrayed and helpless, as the administration’s line on Vietnam received exclusive media coverage. Thus, in late January 1966 Fulbright used committee hearings on a supplemental foreign aid bill as a platform to lambast the administration. When representatives of the administration appeared before the committee, he made Vietnam the issue. The confrontations were highly newsworthy, given the legitimate nature of the opposition (a respected senator), the stature of the forum (the Capitol building), and the confrontational nature of the issue (Congress vs. the president; a heated challenge to the president’s Vietnam policy by a member of his own party and a former supporter). In fact, NBC and CBS covered much of the hearings live, despite the high cost in lost revenues. (Fred Friendly, eventually prevented from continuing coverage due to the cost, resigned as president of CBS news.) The Fulbright hearings, however, and the Cam Ne incident are most notable as exceptions during this period. Shifting the norm required changing the definitions of consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance. This shift occurred in dramatic fashion in January of 1968.

Expanding the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy: The Tet Offensive Coverage of the Tet offensive is among the most controversial aspects of the war. While military historians agree the offensive failed, it launched large-scale opposition to the war at home. The tenor of press coverage did change during the offensive. Prior to Tet journalists editorialized in about 6 percent of the television stories on Vietnam. During the two

months of the offensive, this percentage jumped to 20 percent, subsequently dropping to about 10 percent.²⁰ Newspapers also editorialized more during Tet, often on the front page.

The administration's view of the offensive was *not* ignored—papers and networks dutifully reported the official line, often as the lead of the story. On February 2, for example, the *Washington Post's* headline read: "LBJ CALLS UPRISING FAILURE—VIETCONG HOLDING ON IN HUE; THIEU ASKS MORE BOMBING—PRESIDENT SEES REPULSE OF NEW DRIVE." Now, however, "upbeat" messages were presented in ways that led one to doubt their accuracy. For example, the *New York Times* reported on February 2 that the "latest propaganda line [is] that we are now seeing the enemy's 'last gasp'." Government optimism was being reported in a way that turned it on its head. The press remained dependent on government sources, but no longer fully believed them. The result was a style of reporting that presents "facts" in a way that says these are not facts.

Television, with its tendency to blur fact and opinion, portrayed Tet even more bleakly. Again, reporters did not suggest Tet was a military defeat. Cronkite's statement of February 14, 1968—"First and simplest, the Vietcong suffered a military defeat"—was typical. Instead, the message was that such victories did not add up to winning the war. For example, CBS offered this description of prisoners captured by the U.S.:

These pathetic-looking people may be Buddhists rather than Vietcong, and there's little record of the Buddhist's and the Vietcong working very closely together. About the only thing certain is the government hasn't won any friends here today. If the purpose of this war is to win the hearts and minds of the people, the capture of An Quang pagoda can be considered a defeat. (February 2, 1968)

An NBC report on February 20 paints a similar picture of futility:

American Marines are so bogged down in Hue that nobody will even predict when the battle will end . . . More than 500 Marines have been wounded and 100 killed since the fighting in Hue began . . . The price has been high and it's gained the marines about 50 yards a day or less in a heavily populated part of the citadel. Still, nothing is really secure . . . Most of the city is now in rubble . . . and many Vietnamese say the fight isn't really worth it now that their city is dead.

And from the siege of Khe Sanh CBS reported:

So there is no end in sight. The North Vietnamese out there beyond the fog show no inclination to pull back or attack. U.S. commanders show no inclination just yet to drive them back. So for the Marines and the Seabees and the rest here, there is nothing to do but sit and take it, just to wait, and hope they'll rotate out, leave before they join the roster of the wounded and dead here.

As a picture of military reality such reports may have been too pessimistic. By this time, however, reporting of individual events had become a metaphor for the war as a whole. An AP wire quoting a U.S. major in Ben Tre perhaps best captures the theme of the war coverage during this period: "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." This theme was reinforced by the frequency of vivid scenes of casualties and urban destruction. Such scenes were four times more frequent during the Tet period than during the rest of the war, and scenes of military casualties were almost three times more common.²¹

Three events are particularly emblematic of the Tet coverage. The first, from early in the offensive, was the photo and film footage of Colonel Loan blowing the brains out of a captured Vietcong on a Saigon street. Putting aside the debate over whether the act was justifiable, the impact of this film on the estimated twenty million Americans who saw it was devastating. Nothing had prepared them for such a horrible, naked image of the war, and especially not for such an image of "our side's" behavior.

The second media event was Walter Cronkite's hour-long special on the Tet offensive, broadcast on February 27. Cronkite, a supporter of the war prior to Tet and perhaps the most trusted man in America presented a shocking picture of the immediate situation and of the overall war effort. He concluded:

It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer's almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us . . . And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.

These sentiments were echoed by other journalists and anchors, but as Johnson himself was purported to say, "Cronkite was it."²²

Finally, on March 31, one day before American troops broke the siege of Khe Sanh and effectively ended this two-month offensive, LBJ told the American public on national television that

With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I

shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.

This speech marked more than the end of the Johnson presidency; it marked the beginning of the end of the war. When LBJ changed the opening of his address from "I want to talk to you about the war in Vietnam," to "I want to talk to you about peace in Vietnam,"²³ the idea of a military victory was gone forever. And the media, true to its tendencies, took the president's lead. As ABC telexed its Saigon personnel: "We are on our way out of Vietnam."

Never was the phrase "to win the battle but lose the war" more appropriate than with Tet. Johnson later reflected that "while the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese may have failed militarily with Tet, they did achieve the psychological victory they sought."²⁴ During this two-month "defeat" for the North, public opinion in the U.S. shifted dramatically. Between November 1967 and February 1968 those believing the U.S. was making progress in the war dropped from 51 percent to 32 percent. By late March LBJ's approval rating was 26 percent, a 13-point drop since November.²⁵ And, as the siege of Khe Sanh ended on April 1, for the first time a majority of Americans opposed the war.²⁶ Policy followed opinion as plans for an increase in U.S. force levels were put indefinitely on the back burner. Administration talk shifted from "the war effort" to "the peace effort." Johnson ordered another halt to the bombing of North Vietnam.

In explaining this turnaround in public opinion and public policy, many point an accusing finger at the press. Former reporters like Peter Braestrup contend that "the collective emanations of the major media [produced] a kind of continuous black fog of their own, a vague conventional 'disaster' image."²⁷ ABC anchor Howard K. Smith charged that the networks "just showed pictures day after day of Americans getting the hell kicked out of them. That was enough to break America apart."²⁸ President Johnson, in a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters on April 1, 1968, even suggested that the presence of television *might* have altered the outcome of World War II or Korea.²⁹ Why did coverage change during this period? Was the media responsible for the shift in opinion and policy, and for our eventual withdrawal from the war?

Answers to these questions are more complex than many critics pretend. This shift in media coverage did not occur out of the blue. Recall that since the early sixties a minority of Saigon correspondents, government officials, military personnel, and citizen dissidents had questioned the strategy and/or legitimacy of the war. When Tet shook the establishment perspective on the war, causing a momentary void, these critics stepped in to fill it. For example, during the Tet offensive Neil Sheehan

published a story (cowritten by Hedrick Smith) revealing General Westmoreland's request for more troops and the "stirring debate" it caused in the administration. The story would not have been in the works had Sheehan not been haunted by the war since 1962; but without Tet it would never have been published in a form capable of, according to Walt Rostow, "churn[ing] up the whole eastern establishment."³⁰ Tet, in short, gave those who had long questioned the war access to the agenda and control of the peg on which news is hung. Had there not been such people waiting in the wings, the Tet offensive might have produced much less journalistic chaos and might have been more easily pigeonholed as a military victory story.

Much of the pressure for expanding the sphere of legitimate debate came from within the administration, where civilian advisors challenged the military's optimistic assessments and requests for more troops. In Congress, too, concerns were building. And the media voices that both reflected and fueled this growing debate were not deviants; they were well-known supporters of the war, like Cronkite, Reynolds, and even Howard K. Smith.

Signs of this growing debate existed prior to Tet. Beginning in the spring of 1967 with the battle for Hills 861 and 881, and continuing into the fall with the battles of Con Thien and Dak To, the North's tactics shifted to more concentrated battles, raising the level of concern within the U.S. media, public, and government. Media reports, while still overwhelmingly supportive, began to show the doubts that would dominate the Tet period:

One high-ranking official . . . said he thought the enemy was willing to take a million casualties, which at the current ratio would mean 200,000 U.S. casualties, with at least 25,000 killed, and that figure may be conservative. "Will the American people accept those losses?" I wondered. "Do they have any choice?" was his rejoinder. "Then the real war out here is just beginning?" I asked. The official nodded his head in assent. (CBS, April 12, 1967)

The battle for Dak To has now become the bloodiest of the war for American and North Vietnamese troops . . . The question every GI asks and cannot answer is, "Was it all worth it?" No one really knows. (CBS, November 22, 1967)

McNamara's resignation soon after a public clash with the Joint Chiefs of Staff added fuel to this smoldering fire.

This increasingly public display of doubt affected public opinion. While most indicators of support for the war remained strong, the percentage of Americans who felt getting involved in Vietnam had been a mistake and who disapproved of Johnson's handling of the war began to grow in 1966.³¹ In short, the erosion of support for the war was accelerated, but not created, by Tet.

Ironically, much of the negative coverage during Tet can be laid at the feet of the Johnson administration itself. In part it was the inescapable price of previous media management. The success of efforts to make the war appear both minor and successful now came back to haunt the Pentagon and the White House with a vengeance. Film footage and stories during Tet were dramatic in their own right. Counterposed to years of exaggerated claims of U.S. and South Vietnamese control and deflated estimates of North Vietnamese and Vietcong strength, they were devastating. The American public and media were caught unaware. The Johnson administration failed to deal forcefully and directly with this dismay. Had Johnson taken control of the agenda during Tet, the void that was filled by critical, pessimistic reports might never have been opened.³² Indeed, support for LBJ and the war increased at the beginning of the Tet offensive, providing the platform upon which he could have reestablished his leadership. Instead he retreated into brooding silence while his support plummeted, to rise again only when he announced his withdrawal from politics.

Finally, the nature of the Tet offensive and of the routines of news gathering added to the dramatic nature of the coverage. Prior to Tet most combat occurred outside the cities and therefore away from where most journalists and camera crews were stationed. Where before they depended on the military for access, during Tet "merely by stepping outside their hotels, correspondents found themselves willy-nilly in the midst of bloody fighting. There was no way that the attacks in broad daylight on such landmarks as the presidential palace could be concealed from television cameras."³³ Moreover, the frantic pace of events during Tet sped up the normal routines of filming, transporting, editing, and broadcasting. Unedited films were flown immediately to Tokyo, broadcast via satellite to New York (a rare and expensive procedure), and put straight on the air. The result was not the orderly, bloodless images to which audiences were accustomed, but raw visions of chaos, destruction, and Americans on the defensive.

It is the airing of these films that best reflects the complex interaction of journalistic norms as to what is newsworthy, the chaos of Tet, the media's distrust of the administration in this period, and the void left by the administration's failure to reestablish its authority. The war had come to the journalists, and in ways that did not fit the well established mold. Government reports were assumed to be false and were automatically questioned. As if to make up for their sins of omission and naivete, journalists gave the horror of the war free reign. Had the offensive not provided so many visually arresting images it might not have had the same effect. Had the military not so exaggerated American superiority and Vietcong inferiority, or had the press not accepted its claims so fully, the

effects of the Tet offensive might have been different. But in combination, these factors loosened the grip of editors, producers, generals, and the administration on the media and offered critics of the war an opening. Even the North Vietnamese were able to occasionally get their perspective onto American front pages and into the evening news.

In the end, however, the media never questioned American motives or the policymaking system itself. They merely questioned the soundness of the tactics and whether the benefits of this protracted, bloody war outweighed the rising costs. These were precisely the questions being raised by congresspersons, senators, administration officials, and soldiers in the field. The media were no more responsible for the shift in public opinion and policy against the war effort during the two months of Tet than they were for maintaining that support and policy during the prior seven years—and no less responsible either.

A New Consensus? Media Coverage after Tet After Tet, coverage of the war settled into a new normalcy. The networks returned to the standard operating procedure of shipping film by air freight. This delay—film would arrive in New York as much as five days after the shots had been taken—meant a return to timeless pieces designed to be non-specific. NBC, for example, ordered correspondents to “be careful about filming events that might date themselves.”³⁴ The end of a crisis atmosphere also meant a return to sanitized images, and “the military scene was depicted as a series of orderly American actions against an unseen foe.”³⁵

This new consensus differed from the one preceding Tet, however. The media now portrayed the war as a stalemate. In late 1968, for example, NBC rejected producing a series showing that Tet had been a military victory because, in the words of an NBC executive, Tet was “established in the public’s mind as a defeat, and therefore it was an American defeat.”³⁶ This new view of the war is dramatically reflected in statistics on the media’s description of battles as victories or defeats. Prior to Tet, of those battles journalists characterized, 62 percent were described as U.S. victories, while only 28 percent were described as defeats and 2 percent as stalemates. After Tet, the number of victories reported fell to 44 percent, the number of defeats rose slightly to 32 percent, and the number of stalemates jumped to 24 percent.³⁷

Even during this last phase of the war, the media was still loyal, but Tet had changed the tenor of the coverage. Anchors and correspondents no longer portrayed the war as a national endeavor and seldom referred to “our war.” They no longer invoked the memory of World War II, in effect disconnecting Vietnam from American tradition. Gone too was the macho sports image of the pre-Tet stories. “Today in Saigon,” reported NBC in June 1969,

they announced the casualty figures for the week, and though they came out in the form of numbers, each one of them was a man, most of them quite young, each with hopes he will never realize, each with family and friends who will never see him again. Anyway here are the numbers.

The most dramatic example of this shift to the personalization of the deaths of U.S. teenagers was the June 27, 1969 edition of *LIFE*. It simply presented the faces and names of the 242 U.S. soldiers killed during a "typical" week in Vietnam. The effect was devastating:

The story was so plainly done, there was the air of a high-school yearbook to it; one did not know these kids, but one did—they were kids who went to high school and who, upon graduation, went to work rather than college. Nor were these photos by Karsh of Ottawa. Their very cheapness and primitive quality added to the effect, the pride and fear and innocence in the faces, many of them being photographed in uniform, half scared and half full of bravado. It was almost unbearable. It was an issue to make men and women cry.³⁸

Gone was the sense of purpose, of order. Consider the following:

The Special Forces and the enemy fought this battle to a standstill. And there was nothing left but to tend the wounded, and fight again another day. (CBS, Oct 1, 1968)

Finally, the themes of military victory, of "halting communist aggression" and "preserving democracy" simply disappeared. Instead, the policy statements read in the papers and heard on TV (made mostly by administration and congressional spokespersons) focused on how to end the war, on its costs to the U.S., and on how to protect U.S. troops and bring home prisoners of war.

The Nixon administration introduced a dual strategy of "Vietnamization," or returning the war to the South Vietnamese, and "peace with honor," or negotiating an American withdrawal without losing face. This strategy had contradictory elements, however. Vietnamization meant the removal of U.S. combat troops, but getting the North Vietnamese to negotiate required added military pressure; this, in turn, posed serious media and public relations problems.

The result was a schizophrenic relationship between the media and the Nixon administration. On issues where there was mainstream consensus—that we should withdraw, that we must negotiate for peace rather than win it militarily, that the South Vietnamese should fight their own war, that the North Vietnamese were still the enemy—the administration could count on the press's support. The media focused on relatively positive portrayals of the South Vietnamese army, and on the Paris peace talks. By 1970, consistent with U.S. policy, the main story on all three

networks had become the withdrawal of American troops. When negotiations failed to produce results, the media blamed the North Vietnamese:

President Nixon's new peace plan for Vietnam was formally offered at the Paris peace talks today, and the Communists reacted with sneers, wisecracks, and sarcasm. But actually that's about what was expected of them . . . In this country the president's plan has won wide support and approval in both parties (NBC, October 8, 1970)

Conversely, the president and the press collided when his policies most openly contradicted the mainstream consensus, and especially when they led to the war's expansion. When—as at Hamburger Hill in May 1969, the invasion of Cambodia in April 1970, and the invasion of Laos in February 1971—the war seemed to be escalating and U.S. casualties rose, the media, opposition leaders, and even the troops themselves, turned against the administration:

The elite Special Forces have fought well and bravely as usual but for a military objective of doubtful value . . . After you've been here a while and seen all the casualties . . . you come away with the distinct impression that the principle reason these Special Forces have been ordered to take Million Dollar Mountain is simply because its there. (CBS, March 21, 1969)

U.S. casualties could no longer be portrayed in a positive, meaningful light. This shift away from military objectives made combat especially tough on the soldiers, whose morale dropped precipitously. This was not missed by the press, which reported on poor morale with increasing frequency. In one ABC report in April 1972, for example, footage of “an officer persuading reluctant troops to go out on a mission by assuring them it was not an offensive operation” concluded with the report saying “one thing does seem for sure: the average American soldier no longer wants any part of this war—even in a defensive posture.”³⁹

The Nixon administration also suffered in the press when its policies appeared inconsistent or deceptive. In September 1970, when the administration halted and then resumed bombing the North, the networks (echoing sentiment in parts of the government and the public) suggested that it was internally torn and lacked a clear policy. Revelations of the secret bombing of Cambodia in May 1969 further heightened tensions between the press, the administration, and the loyal opposition, as did the controversy over the printing of the Pentagon Papers in 1971.

The most important story of the post-Tet period, however, was the My Lai massacre of as many as 500 civilians. Coverage of this incident is revealing for a number of reasons. First, the failure of the press to report the massacre for an entire year after the event reflects the dependence of the media on military reports. On the day of the massacre (March 17,

1968) AP, UPI, and the *New York Times* ran stories presenting the action at My Lai as a normal-search-and-destroy action. MACV reports, which made no mention of civilian deaths, were used almost verbatim, spiced up by details that gave a more personal (though fictional) touch.⁴⁰ Second, that the press did eventually report the massacre shows how the war had shifted from a consensus to a legitimately controversial issue. In the past similar atrocities were usually ignored, and made it to the mainstream media only in unusual circumstances such as the Safer film from Cam Ne.

Third, despite the unprecedented coverage My Lai received, the media never challenged the morality of the war effort more generally. In addition, the media's focus on the trial of Lieutenant Calley, rather than on the massacre itself, pegged it as a story of individual misdeed, declining morale, and American justice rather than military atrocity.⁴¹

The anchors also separated My Lai from any systematic pattern or policy: "My Lai was for Americans an exceptional horror. My Lais for the other side are a daily way of life." (Howard K. Smith, ABC, May 28, 1970) Such commentary was typical of coverage throughout the war: U.S. atrocities were aberrations, the acts of individuals momentarily out of control; North Vietnamese and Vietcong atrocities were commonplace, the willful acts of irrational murderers or the application of a systematic policy of terror.

The War at Home: Maintaining the Boundary Between Debate and Deviance Common wisdom suggests that the national media gave the antiwar movement unfettered access to the public, thus helping to turn public opinion and policy against the war and, ultimately, to bring down the Johnson and Nixon presidencies. A closer examination suggests that, while the media did cover the movement and domestic opposition to the war was influential, the media was as responsible for maintaining support for the war as for its deterioration. Moreover, during the period of declining support for the war, the media was critical in keeping antiwar, and later anti-Nixon, protest from becoming the basis for a more systematic critique of the political, social, and economic system.⁴²

Like the war itself, the antiwar movement went through several phases of coverage. From 1960 to 1964, when groups like the SDS began organizing on college campuses, the mainstream media largely ignored the movement. By the end of 1965, however, SDS had grown to 124 chapters and 4,300 members. That year, with the spontaneous eruption of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley and the March 17 march on Washington, organized by the SDS to protest growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the student movement became newsworthy. Reporters sought out protests and articles appeared that spring in many national magazines (for

example, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News*, *Saturday Evening Post*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Nation*, and the *New Republic*).

But greater attention from the mainstream press meant attention from inside the cold war consensus looking out. The movement was often trivialized (making light of student members' clothes, language, goals), marginalized (made to appear deviant, unrepresentative), and presented as deeply divided internally. In addition, stories almost always counterposed the movement with ultraright groups, as if to say that extremism is extremism. At the same time, the movement was presented as ineffective and so not a worthwhile political alternative.

With the Fulbright hearings in early 1966, domestic unrest became a standard news peg upon which to hang a story. From this point on, almost one in five broadcasts about Vietnam dealt with this issue. But except for infrequent criticism from "responsible" representatives such as senators and congresspersons, coverage remained largely negative. And as the number and size of protests grew (ironically, partly in response to the media's coverage of earlier protests) television began to paint the protestors with more sinister strokes:

While Americans fight and die in Vietnam, there are those in this country who sympathize with the Vietcong. (ABC, October, 1965)

Meanwhile, Hanoi was having paroxysms of joy over the demonstrations in this country. (NBC, October, 1965)

In a 1965 CBS broadcast on the day before nationwide demonstrations, Morley Safer showed a group of GIs in Vietnam a film of an antiwar draft-resistance lecture. He then asked one of the soldiers, "You're getting shot at. Five of your buddies were killed down the road the other day. How did you feel watching the film?" One soldier, filled with emotion, responded he wished it had been the people in the film, and not his buddies, who had been killed. The media also regularly portrayed the antiwar movement as violent. While stories occasionally addressed police brutality and overreaction, more often the theme was antiwar provocation: "The sight of the [NLF] flag was too much for some of the onlookers . . . the angry crowd along the roadway jumped in to do away with the Vietcong symbol" (CBS, 1967). The antiwar movement both attracted and repelled the media. Protests and demonstrations, especially when visually dramatic or confrontational, were perfect for television news. In addition, some of what the protestors said hit a responsive chord with some reporters. But the protests clearly fell outside the sphere of legitimate controversy, and so were presented in an almost exclusively negative light.

With Tet and LBJ's decision to not run for reelection, coverage of the antiwar movement changed. In part there was a shift in the boundary de-

termining what was acceptable—a widening of the political arena. In part, however, this shift also marked the appearance a modified version of the antiwar movement—a mainstream, middle-class version. Senators, congresspersons, and much of Middle America said enough is enough, and the media repeated their statements. The electoral process, perhaps the best barometer of what is and is not acceptable, raised the issue of the war. When Eugene McCarthy nearly beat Ed Muskie in the 1968 New Hampshire primary, the antiwar movement had crossed into the realm of legitimate controversy.

Throughout this period the media played a key role in defining the new boundaries and identifying who was to be allowed in and who remained outcast. As *Time* editorialized in 1968,

in an era when many young Americans are turning away from involvement in the democratic process by dropping out either to psychedelia or to the nihilism of the New Left, the cool, crisply-executed crusade of Eugene McCarthy's 'ballot children' provides heartening evidence that the generation gap is bridgeable—politically at least.

This role of border guard was most evident in the coverage of the Moratorium demonstrations of October 1969. That a mass demonstration could be considered legitimate shows how far the boundaries had shifted since Tet. However, for Middle America and its media, there are good and bad demonstrations. With its connections to the political establishment (McCarthy, Kennedy, McGovern) and its middle-class support, the Moratorium was a "good" demonstration and was presented as such. Observed CBS, for example, "Today's protest was different . . . peaceful, within the law, and not confined to a radical minority" (October, 1969). Compare this to CBS's coverage of the more spontaneous, student-led protests that followed the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970: "The Cambodia development set off a new round of antiwar demonstrations on U.S. campuses, and not all of them were peaceful." Again and again the post-Tet theme was the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate protest. Consider this statement, made about a student effort to lobby Congress: "earnest, clean-shaven college students, full of facts, not rhetoric, carrying well-written resolutions and legal briefs in their hands . . . These emissaries are just about as weary of high-flown oratory as their elders" (CBS, May, 1970).

As opposition to the war was first legitimated and then became the consensus, the media had to redefine and guard the nation's boundary on the right as well. The violence of pro-war protesters, hard hats, the police, the National Guard, and even the Nixon administration was increasingly denounced in much the same fashion as the radical Left. Indeed, what is most distinctive of this period is that for perhaps the only time in

our history an administration occasionally found *itself* outside the sphere of legitimate controversy. The result was the ultimate demise of that administration. But here, again, the media was as important in preventing this chaotic situation from evolving into a larger questioning of the system as it was for branding Nixon as a deviant. Ultimately it was not the press that brought Nixon down. Rather it was his inability to distinguish, as the media had, between the loyal opposition and the protesters who had more fundamental grievances but posed a serious threat to the administration only in the minds of Nixon and his cadre of advisors.

The Legacies of Press Coverage of the Vietnam Era

Media coverage of the war in Vietnam has left a number of specific legacies affecting the press, government, grass-roots groups, and the general public. The press, ironically, is the least changed by the events of the 1960s. True, there is now an institutionalized adversarial relationship with the White House that is much more likely to be set in motion than before the Vietnam era. The press has also added a few more specific news pegs to its standard operating procedures. It is impossible to speak about the use of U.S. troops overseas, about protests and demonstrations, about political scandals, and so forth, without referring, explicitly or implicitly, to the Vietnam experience and its immediate aftermath. (Consider, for example, the common use of the phrase "another Vietnam," or the addition of the suffix *-gate*, as in "Koreagate" or "Contra-gate".) The press, in certain circumstances, is also more likely to present official information to the public with a large and cynical grain of salt.

Yet for all this, the press remains largely dependent on the government for its information about the political world. It remains an institution whose *modus operandi* is reporting what official sources say. And so, it remains the central institution for maintaining the boundaries of consensus, legitimate debate, and deviance. If anything, this role has fallen even more to the press, as other traditional institutions of sociopolitical hegemony have continued to decay and as the media industry has become more centralized, nationalized, and tied economically to the status quo over the past two decades.⁴³

This risk-averse behavior of the press is also the result of the media becoming newsworthy in and of itself. Since the Vietnam era and the speculation that the press was unduly influential in the outcome of the war, social unrest in the United States, and the fall of President Nixon, the role of the media in covering social and political events has become part of the story. This puts the press in an unusual bind. On the one hand, becoming part of the story means challenging the myth of objectivity upon which the press depends for its credibility. On the other hand, the press's dependence on reporting what official sources say means that

if those sources make the media an issue, it becomes an issue. As a result, the media will often back down from an issue rather than run the risk of becoming the story themselves.

The utility of this tendency as a tool in managing the media has not been lost on the government generally, nor on the White House in particular. While they have learned slowly, presidential administrations are now fully cognizant of two critical lessons of the Vietnam era: the press is crucial to the success or failure of an administration; in the relationship between the press and the White House, the latter holds almost all the cards. Presidential administrations now devote huge amounts of time, resources, and personnel to the management of public image. By limiting the amount and kind of information released, by controlling the press's access to people and information in government, by expanding the sphere of consensus and constraining the sphere of legitimate controversy, by exploiting those parts of the press that allow direct access to the public (speeches, photo opportunities, and so forth) and limiting those that allow the press to more freely control the spin of a story, and by intimidating the press through making it part of the story (accusing it of bias or sensationalism, threatening it with costly law suits, and so forth), government has clearly gained the upper hand in limiting negative coverage and increasing advantageous coverage.

Foreign policy is in part shaped by the lessons of Vietnam, though thus far these lessons appear limited to don't take the press along during military interventions (*à la* Grenada); don't use U.S. troops when engaged in limited warfare (*à la* Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan); and, as much as possible, use covert rather than overt operations (*à la* the Iran-Contra affair).

Domestic policy has also been affected by the Vietnam era. The recent dismantling of many of the social welfare and civil rights programs of the 1960s and early 1970s was possible only because of the ability of the Reagan and Bush administrations to paint those programs as failed policies of a misguided liberalism. Such a representation of the Vietnam era is only possible by successfully manipulating the media environment in which our collective memory is preserved. The Reagan and Bush administrations have proven masters of such manipulation, knowing when and how to go public with certain issues (for example, tax reform, the Grenada invasion, the flag-burning controversy) and when to back off and try more covert strategies (for example, the weakening of many environmental and social regulations, the secret war against Nicaragua, arms sales to Iran). Perhaps most impressively, even when certain policies backfired (as with the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Lebanon, the attempt to roll back certain social security benefits, the incredible growth in the budget and trade deficits, and the Iran-Contra affair), the Reagan admin-

istration was able to cut off public scrutiny before much long-term damage to the administration's credibility was done. Compare the way these events played themselves out in the press with similar public issues of the 1960s and early 1970s, and it becomes clear that the lessons of the Vietnam era have thus far worked to the advantage of government.⁴⁴

The organized public on both the left and the right have become more sophisticated in either avoiding the mainstream press through the use of direct-mail and grass-roots organizing, or in presenting themselves in ways designed to capture the attention of media. Like the government, they have learned that they can be active agents in how they are presented in the press. However, they lack the resources of government and most lack the credibility as well, making their task a much more difficult one. And, of course, how and if a group is presented still very much depends on where it is located in the spheres of consensus, debate, and deviance. The more removed from the mainstream a group is, the less likely it is to get its message heard, and the more sensational must be its actions in order to get attention. This in turn increases the likelihood that the group will be presented as illegitimate and that its agenda will be misrepresented or simplified.

And what of the larger public, for whom politics is a less central concern? Coverage of consensus and deviance, because such stories are presented from a point of view (the former is good, the latter bad), remain successful at maintaining the status quo in older generations and reproducing it in younger ones. Coverage of legitimate controversy, however, especially when it deals with problems that are both serious and seemingly intractable, lacks such a context. Presented with either disembodied facts or point-counter-points in which the logic, implications, or veracity of each side is left unexplored and assumed to be equally plausible, citizens are only able to use such information if they have their own well-developed political perspective from which to interpret the news. Such citizens are rare in our society, however, and (ironically) the way in which we expect most citizens to develop such a perspective is by being active consumers of the news.

Viewed in this way, one legacy of the Vietnam era may be an anesthetizing, alienating overload. Almost twenty-five years of uncritical images of business as usual, interspersed with tales of incompetence, corruption, violence, and destruction, have taken their toll. For the current generation of young adults, adolescents, and children such stories are the norm, not the exception. It is not that the stories are false. But presented as they are—as objectified, disembodied facts devoid of context—they can only frustrate.

In the end, however, the real legacy of Vietnam is less what has changed than what has been revealed. The role of the press in the United States is

influenced by two different ethics—the libertarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its emphasis on a free, diverse, adversarial press, and the social responsibility of the twentieth century, with its focus on balance and objectivity. The legacy of press coverage of the war suggests that what passes for objectivity is in fact hegemony. And, despite the cries of bias, what passes for advocacy is little more than a stenographic, relativist presentation of disputes among the powers that be. Ultimately the question raised by press coverage of Vietnam is the impact of this style of informing the public on both the form and the substance of political discourse in the United States.

NOTES

1. In this essay the terms *press* and *news media* will be used interchangeably and refer to both electronic and print media. This essay is limited to a discussion of the mainstream media, and does not explore the very different dynamic that applies to the alternative press.

2. For a detailed discussion of the experience of soldiers in Vietnam, see D. Michael Shafer, "The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy," in this volume.

3. The following discussion draws upon Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 117.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

6. The following section draws upon Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Edward Jay Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction* (New York: Vintage, 1975); David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Dell, 1979); Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, and upon my own examination of news footage and newspaper and magazine accounts. Unless otherwise noted, direct references to particular broadcasts, and newspaper or magazine stories are from these sources.

7. Cited in Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 215.

8. Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, p. 627.

9. Cited in Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 34.

10. NBC correspondent Ron Nesson, as cited in Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 217.

11. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 146.

12. NBC correspondent Lem Tucker, as cited in Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 217.

13. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 129.

14. Cited in Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 217.

15. Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, p. 664.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 683.

17. Ibid., p. 683.
18. Ibid., p. 683.
19. Ibid., p. 681.
20. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 169.
21. Ibid., p. 171.
22. Austin Ranney, *Channels of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 6.
23. Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 273.
24. Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 232.
25. Roper polls reported in Braestrup, *Big Story*, and Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.
26. Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 224.
27. Braestrup, *Big Story*, p. 706.
28. Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 223.
29. Michael Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," *Daedalus* 111 (Fall, 1982), p. 157.
30. Cited in Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 169.
31. John E. Mueller, *Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).
32. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War*.
33. Epstein, *Between Fact and Fiction*, p. 220.
34. Ibid., p. 225.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, pp. 146, 166.
38. Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, pp. 676-77.
39. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 180.
40. Braestrup, *Big Story*, pp. 249-53.
41. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, p. 180.
42. This section draws on Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, and Hallin, *The Uncensored War*. For a further discussion of the war at home, see "Vietnam, Ideology, and Domestic Politics," in this volume.
43. For a discussion of the increasing centralization of the media as an industry in the United States, see Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).
44. For a discussion of the Reagan administration's dominance of the press, see Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).