

Media Coverage of the War

No Censorship

The ability of the news media to be present throughout Vietnam and cover the war without censorship was unique - - such reporting freedom did not exist before that conflict and hasn't since.

The absence of censorship appears to have been a development that was not given a great deal of thought - - somewhat like the war itself. Under the Kennedy Administration, with relatively few boots on the ground and scarcely any US reporters on the scene, press coverage of events in Vietnam was sparse until the Buddhist protests against Diem's policies. And in the Administration belated and bungled reaction to that crisis, press censorship was apparently not considered.

President Johnson's efforts to downplay the seriousness of the conflict and paint a rosy picture of Vietnam was a major factor in his administration's decision not to impose some form of censorship - - since censorship might alert Congress and the public that the US effort was not going as well as the White House said it was. In addition, until 1967 press coverage of America's conduct of the war was generally very positive. Even reporters who were critical of the military's conduct of the war, such as Neil Sheehan or David Halberstam in their accounts of the battle of An Bac in 1963, didn't question the underlying purpose of the war until much later. In *Armies of the Night*, published in early 1968, Norman Mailer portrayed the mainstream press as highly critical of the anti-war movement and almost a cheerleader for the Johnson Administration.

Not only did the military refrain from censoring the press, but they made systematic efforts to accommodate print and TV coverage. Soldiers in the field almost always welcomed reporters, would transport them freely around the country, and respected them for facing hardships and dangers in battle zones. In Vietnam, if a reporter had the courage and the stamina, he (it was almost always a he) could go anywhere in the war zone and generally anybody he approached would talk to him.

The downside was the number of journalists killed on the battlefield and, on a different level, the resentment felt by the military's top brass, who didn't always appreciate what was being written, especially as the war grew bloodier and American casualties mounted.

Government Efforts to Influence Reporting

Although, there was no U.S. censorship of war coverage, the U.S. Mission and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam ("MACV") tried to influence what was reported by creating the post of "U.S. Mission's Minister-Counselor for Public Affairs" (a/k/a the "information czar"). Barry Zorthian, the first "czar" advised the commanding officer General Westmoreland on public affairs and, together with the U.S. Ambassador, took

responsibility for the development of information policy. Zorthian maintained liaison between the embassy, MACV, and the press; publicized information to refute what he considered erroneous and misleading news stories; and sought to assist the Saigon correspondents in focusing on the favorable aspects of US war policies.

Nightly MACV briefings covering the day's events, which became known as the Five O'Clock Follies, were well attended by print and TV correspondents, despite most of the correspondents' believing they were a waste of time. In addition to public briefings, the Saigon bureau chiefs were often invited to closed sessions at which background (off-the-record) presentations would be made by a military briefing officer, the CIA station chief, or an official from the embassy providing information on upcoming military operations or Vietnamese political events.

The content and dramatic structure of the uncensored "living room war" as reported by television correspondents during 1965–1967 remained simple and traditional: the forces of good (anti-communists) were locked in battle with the forces of evil (communists). What began to change in 1967 was the media's conviction that the forces of good would inevitably prevail. During late 1967, MACV began to ignore its 1966 decision at the Honolulu Conference that the military should leave the justification of the war to elected officials in Washington. Instead, at the urging of the Johnson Administration, MACV became increasingly involved in attempts to influence public opinion and domestic politics, to the point that it eventually became just as involved in "selling" the war to the American public as the Johnson Administration. This change, which reached a crescendo with General Westmoreland's detecting "light at the end of the tunnel" shortly before the North Vietnamese 1968 Tet Offensive, resulted in a serious deterioration of relations between the U.S. military and the press.

Reporters: Qualifications and Points of View

From forty reporters in 1964, the press corps in South Vietnam had grown to 282 by January 1966. By August 1966 that number had jumped to 419. Of the 282 at the beginning of the 1966, 110 were Americans. 67 were South Vietnamese, 26 Japanese, 24 British, 13 Korean, 11 French, and 7 German. Correspondents with valid accreditations had to show their credentials in order to receive a card that gave them access to military transportation and facilities. All other correspondents had to present a letter from their editors stating that they represented a bona-fide news-gathering organization which would take responsibility for their conduct. Freelance correspondents were required to produce a letter from one of their clients affirming that agency's willingness to purchase their work.

Like U.S. troops and more than a few foreign affairs officers, American journalists arrived in Vietnam with almost no knowledge of its culture, history, society, or language, and most did not attempt to make up the deficit. The short 6-12 month period most news people spent on rotation in South Vietnam provided little incentive for them to learn the language. And, although the U.S. Department of Defense offered a brief introductory course for journalists on the history and culture of Vietnam, few attended it and none of the networks trained their correspondents to understand military matters. As a result, a great many significant topics never received more than cursory media

attention. For example, the "pacification" of South Vietnam's villages was continuously touted as the supreme goal of both South Vietnam and America, but there was little real media discussion of why it was so difficult to convince the Vietnamese peasantry to voluntarily join the side of the Saigon government.

As for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and National Liberation Front (Viet Cong / VC), American readers were rarely presented with the possibility that the communists were waging a war of national reunification and not solely a campaign to further the interests of a global communist conspiracy masterminded by China and the Soviet Union. (In fact, the war they were waging sought to achieve both goals.) Like the American government, the media didn't question the domino theory, which predicted regional domination by China unless America intervened in Vietnam, and failed to take into account the centuries of hostility between the Vietnamese and the Chinese. As in other wars, the enemy were consistently portrayed as "brutal, cruel, fanatic, sinister, untrustworthy, and warlike" and negative racial stereotypes were frequently invoked, including the shopworn charge that Asians didn't place as high a value on human life as Westerners did. Even our allies, the South Vietnamese, were often depicted by the media with the condescension, contempt, and disdain.

The vast majority of reporters in Vietnam never left Saigon, so with the exception of the work of the relatively few correspondents and TV crews who did consistently venture into the countryside, most print and video stories about rural areas originated with MACV. As a result, there was little balanced reporting of actual developments outside the cities. As in other contexts, media coverage, especially TV, was biased towards dramatic action, which in a war means combat. So extended fighting would draw reporters out of Saigon to the scene of the fighting, resulting in the inaccurate picture of a South Vietnam where war was constant and ubiquitous. Reports concerning those areas of the country that were quiet most of the time or analyses of programs that didn't involve combat had little appeal for news editors or the public back in the United States and, having almost no chance of being published or aired, few such pieces were created.

Tet

In January 1968, Vietcong and NVA troops launched the massive surprise attacks throughout South Vietnam that became known as the Tet Offensive. Saigon, which had seen relatively little of the war up to that point, was one of the focal points of the offensive, with the U.S. Embassy a particular target. Although U.S. and South Vietnamese troops were able to fend off the enemy troops and eventually inflict a crushing military defeat on them, the attack marked a turning point in the reporting of the war and the American public's trust in the government's portrayal of the war. The fighting that raged through Saigon affected a great many reporters who had previously never witnessed combat. Many were jolted, even traumatized, by their immersion in the battle and the resulting coverage, replete with pictures and TV video of dead and dying US troops, the enemy on the grounds of the US Embassy, and a South Vietnamese officer blowing out the brains of a captive Viet Cong, was shocking. Most Americans had no idea that the communists were capable of mounting such a vast offensive,

especially in light of the Johnson Administration's recent "light-at-the-end-of-the tunnel" public relations campaign. It brought into American living rooms, as never before, the bloody brutality of war, a war it now appeared we were not winning.

Starting with the great increase in the number of American KIA's and WIA's in 1967 and accelerating with the shock of the Tet Offensive, the American public began to place its trust in media reports about the war and not in the announcements of the administration and the military. The relation between the media and the government during the Vietnam War changed from one of cooperation in the early years to one of conflict, especially after Tet, with the media increasingly contradicting the more positive view the government was projecting.

1969–1973: Withdrawal and Reduced Information

Once Americans saw on television and read in the newspaper a less optimistic picture of the war than the one the Administration had painted, many felt betrayed by the withholding and deliberate manipulation of information about the war's direction. The resulting public pressure to withdraw American fighting men from Vietnam mounted steadily and disenchantment with the war led to Richard Nixon election in the November 1968 presidential election. Reacting to the change in public opinion, his administration began to withdraw U.S. troops in July 1969. This process, dubbed Vietnamization (a term chosen instead of "de-Americanization") eventually culminated in the last American troops being withdrawn in 1973.

With Vietnamization, Nixon permanently altered the nature of the debate about the war. No longer was the question *whether* the United States was going to get out, but rather *how* and *how fast*. Nixon's policy toward the media was to reduce as far as possible the American public's interest in and knowledge of the war. He began, not by imposing censorship, but instead by sharply limiting the availability of information concerning Vietnam. Emblematic of this shutting down of information were the peace negotiations in Paris, where the public talks attracted heavy media attention, but amounted to no more than a meaningless public relations show, while the substantive peace discussions between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were conducted secretly, at a location that was hidden from the media's scrutiny.

The Paris peace talks, the viability of South Vietnamese military and government, the effect of American disengagement, became the prime stories for the news media during in the early 1970's. The intense, on-location, close-up reporting of the Tet Offensive and the battle of Khe Sanh was not repeated and with reporters settling back into their pre-Tet routines, press coverage again became Saigon-centered. News stories focused on the withdrawal of the Americans, the advances of the communist forces, the South Vietnamese military being put on the defensive, and the increasing isolation of South Vietnam's leadership. Nixon's goal was for the press to have as little as possible to report.

The gradual disintegration of American support for the war was apparent in changes in the source of news stories. As the Nixon administration reduced the flow of information, the traditional sources - - press conferences, official news releases, and reports of

official proceedings received less attention. To compensate, some reporters began doing more research, conducting more interviews, and publishing more analytical pieces.

On the other hand, the increased number of American homes that owned a television set had led to an increase in the number of people who gained their knowledge of the war from television rather than from newspapers. A study authorized by the Trilateral Commission in 1975 to examine the "governability" of American democracy found that "the most notable new source of national power in 1970, as compared to 1950, was the national media," and pointed to "considerable evidence to suggest that the development of television journalism contributed to the undermining of governmental authority." Although this report was published shortly after the war ended, the conclusion that the development of new journalistic media, especially television, eroded the government's ability to maintain the support of the American public during the Vietnam War has since become widely accepted.

The waning of the American commitment saw an increased media emphasis on Vietnamization, the character of the South Vietnamese government, and casualties - - both American and Vietnamese. Stories concerning interracial tensions, drug abuse, disciplinary problems, and the general collapse of morale among American troops grew dramatically in number. This disillusioning coverage was increasing at the same time more and more U.S. soldiers had begun to worry that they might become "the last KIA" in a meaningless, lame-duck war. The American military resented the negative emphasis and, at first, refused to acknowledge that the problems were as bad as correspondents portrayed them. Adding to the tensions created by their conflicting points of view, the manpower reduction in MACV's Public Affairs Office after 1969, exacerbated relations between the military and the press.

As the war continued and the withdrawals went on, the military leadership and the press became more and more antagonistic toward each other, battling constantly over subjects like GIs' refusing to obey orders and the troops' increasing drug and morale problems. Over time, however, the media were able to show that their close contact with the GIs in the field gave its reporters an understanding of the war's unmanageable human element that had not filtered up to headquarters, and, slowly, reluctantly, the military acknowledged the grim reality.

The Last Act

The Easter Offensive of 1972, a conventional North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam, was generally depicted by MACV and Washington as a "true test" of the policy of Vietnamization. After a great deal of bloodshed, the invasion was repulsed, but it had become apparent to the media that without massive American airpower, the South Vietnamese would not have been able to stop the enemy. Accordingly, the conclusion was unavoidable that Vietnamization was failing. The press reported heavily on the deficiencies in South Vietnam's military capabilities and emphasized the importance of the U.S. role in holding the line, particularly Operation Linebacker, the intensive bombing campaign in the south to stem communist advances and in North Vietnam to

punish Hanoi for launching the offensive. Despite the overwhelmingly negative tone, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird declined to criticize the reportage, instead describing it as "generally balanced."

By the end of 1971 the number of accredited American correspondents in South Vietnam had declined to fewer than 200. By September 1973 that number had dwindled to 59. As the war became more and more a South Vietnamese affair, the Saigon government tried to silence unofficial news sources, tightening its information guidelines and stringently punishing anyone who violated them. Even as the Easter Offensive waned, President Thieu passed a martial law decree that made circulating news or images "detrimental to the national security" a criminal offense.

With the breakdown of the Paris peace negotiations between the US and North Vietnam, President Nixon launched Operation Linebacker II, an extensive aerial bombardment by B-52's and tactical aircraft against North Vietnam that began on December 16, 1972. Nixon, in an effort to conceal the fact that the talks had broken down, ordered that the public explanation for the bombing be linked to "a possible enemy offensive in the South." With no information flowing from the White House, the Pentagon, or MACV, the reporters had nothing to rely on but North Vietnam's propaganda, which was extensively reported by the media. Despite the fact that most of the war news was now originating in North Vietnam, the American people remained unconvinced that the bombing was wrong. According to a Harris poll, fewer than 50 percent agreed that it was "inhuman and immoral for the U.S. to have bombed Hanoi's civilian center" and 71 percent believed "what we did in bombing Hanoi was no worse than what the communists have done in the Vietnam War."

The bombing campaign induced Hanoi to return to the negotiating table and an agreement was finalized by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. As a result of intense American arm-twisting, the Saigon government bowed to the inevitable and accepted an agreement that had been negotiated without their participation. The Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973. For both the U.S. military and the U.S. communications media, although not for the people of North and South Vietnam, the Vietnam War was effectively over.

Sources: The Associated Press; <Wikipedia.com>; *Bright Shining Lie*, Neil Sheehan; *The Big Story*, Peter Braestrup.
