

ROLLING THUNDER

IN A GENTLE LAND



THE VIETNAM WAR REVISITED

Editor Andrew Wiest

CONTENTS

Contributors	8	Chapter 9	The Conduct of the War	174
Chronology	12		Strategy, Doctrine, Tactics, and Policy	
			<i>Lewis Sorley</i>	
Chapter 1	16	Chapter 10	On the Ground	192
			The US Experience	
			<i>Bernard Edelman</i>	
Chapter 2	34	Chapter 11	“Swatting Flies with a Sledgehammer”	212
			The Air War	
			<i>Professor Ronald B. Frankum, Jr.</i>	
Chapter 3	52	Chapter 12	Battle for the Mekong	234
			The River War in Vietnam	
			<i>Professor R. Blake Dunnavent</i>	
Chapter 4	74	Chapter 13	Tactics in a Different War	256
			Adapting US Doctrine	
			<i>Gordon L. Rottman</i>	
Chapter 5	96	Chapter 14	The “Living-Room War”	276
			Media and Public Opinion in a Limited War	
			<i>Professor Daniel C. Hallin</i>	
Chapter 6	116	Chapter 15	The Final Act – And After	292
			The Legacy of War	
			<i>Arnold R. Isaacs</i>	
Chapter 7	136			
			Endnotes	311
Chapter 8	156		Bibliography	320
			Glossary	327
			Index	330

Chapter 14

The “Living-Room War”

Media and Public Opinion in a Limited War

Professor Daniel C. Hallin

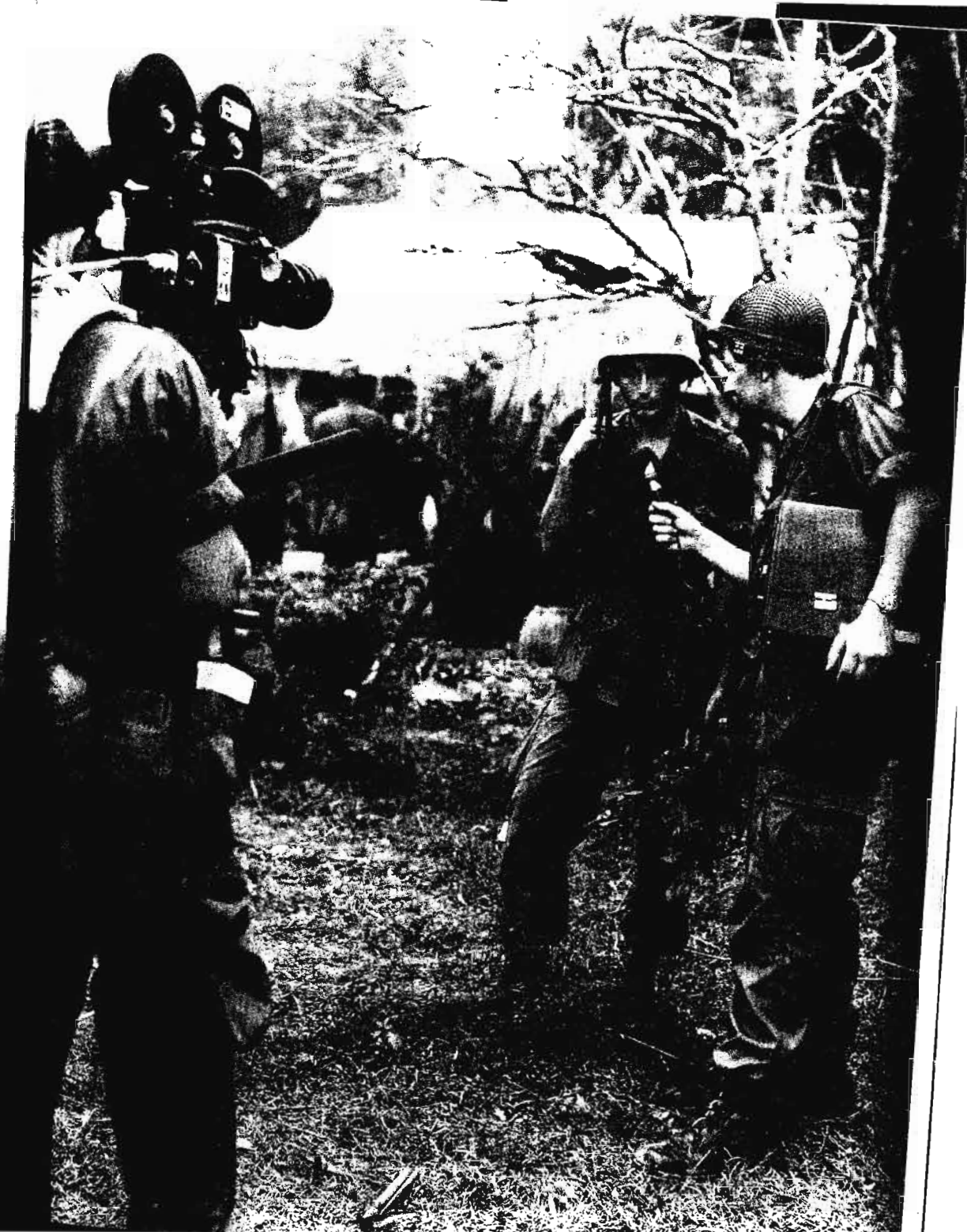
The role of the media has provoked as much contestation as any aspect of the Vietnam War. Richard Nixon, for example, reflecting on the war in his memoirs, placed the blame for the failure of American policy squarely on the media:

The Vietnam war was complicated by factors that had never before occurred in America's conduct of a war... [T]he American news media had come to dominate domestic opinion about its purpose and conduct... In each night's TV news and each morning's paper the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed. Eventually this contributed to the impression that we were fighting in military and moral quicksand, rather than toward an important and worthwhile objective. More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war. Whatever the intention behind such relentlessly literal reporting of the war, the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home.¹

James Reston, columnist, and, during part of the Vietnam War, Washington bureau chief for *The New York Times*, wrote, “Maybe the historians will say that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of the war to the people, before Congress or the courts, and forced withdrawal of American power from Vietnam.”²

Supporters of American intervention in Vietnam portray the media as the villains of the story: they turned the public against the war, and caused the collapse of American will to prevail in a war that could and should have been won. Opponents portray the media as the heroes: they told the public the truth about a failed policy, and forced policymakers to face reality. The

Representatives of American news media interview US soldiers during action in South Vietnam. (TRH Pictures)



view has been widely held within the American military, and the latter among journalists. As sharply as they disagree in political terms, however, the two camps in this debate share many assumptions about the media's role in the war: that media coverage of the war was broadly critical of US policy, and that the media played a decisive role in turning the public and policymakers against it. They also generally share the assumption that television brought the "true horror of war" into people's living rooms, changing the dynamics of public opinion in wartime forever.

This conventional wisdom about the media and Vietnam is deeply rooted in American collective memory and widely disseminated around the world. Historians, however, have been essentially unanimous in rejecting it. Public support for the war in Vietnam did, of course, decline dramatically over the years, and in a democracy it is inevitable that this will have profound effects on policy. And of course the media play a central role in the dynamics of public opinion. But their role was both more ambiguous and less decisive than the conventional wisdom holds. In the early years of the war, through about 1967, media coverage was for the most part supportive of American policy in Vietnam. The media's role must be considered as part of the process by which policymakers mobilized support for a foreign conflict about which the public was initially very skeptical. Later, coverage shifted to include more political controversy and more "negative" information, and this is certainly part of the story of how the US came to reverse course on the Vietnam War. The historical evidence does not, however, suggest that the media were the central, driving force of this change. The media themselves shifted in response to other powerful forces in American society, and in many ways must be seen as more followers than leaders in the American change of course in Vietnam. This is particularly true of television, which – despite the common view that the camera brought the true horror of war into the American living room – was particularly cautious about reporting that might generate controversy with audiences, advertisers, or government; it presented a mostly sanitized view of the war; and was relatively slow to venture into more critical reporting.

THE DEBATE BEGINS

The Vietnam War first entered the American public sphere in a significant way in 1963. By modern standards, the US presence there was already quite large, growing to 17,000 advisors by October 1963. In the context of the Cold War, however, a deployment of this magnitude did not generate much public debate, and Vietnam was very much a backwater in media terms, with only a handful of reporters present in Saigon representing the wire services, news magazines, and a very few newspapers. A major media controversy did not arise during this period, one which would establish the lines of debate about the war and media and Vietnam that would prevail down to the present. The controversy was touched off by the battle of Ap Bac in January 1963. US advisors expressed their frustration to reporters that South Vietnamese troops had performed poorly, and critical reports appeared in much of the US press. Later

The "Living-Room War"



The Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolates himself on a Saigon street corner in 1963 in protest at the attempted suppression of the rights of Buddhists in South Vietnam. (TRH Pictures)

attention shifted to the political conflict between President Ngo Dinh Diem and opponents of his regime. This conflict produced the first iconic media image of the war – the photo of a Buddhist monk immolating himself in protest of the Diem regime – amid a good deal of critical reporting about the Diem government and the progress of US policy. Officials in the Kennedy administration accused the journalists of undermining US policy with this reporting, and launched a public-relations offensive which involved encouraging established journalists to go to Vietnam to counter the coverage of the young reporters stationed there. This led to some internal tension within the press, most notably at *Time* magazine, whose correspondents resigned after the magazine, owned by Henry Luce (who had strong opinions on US policy in Asia), criticized the Saigon press corps.

The events of 1963 are legendary in both versions – heroic and anti-heroic – of the conventional narrative of the media and Vietnam. The reality is a little less dramatic, however. First, media coverage in this period essentially reflected the views of US officers and officials, who became increasingly divided, both in Vietnam and in Washington, about whether the war was indeed going well, and whether to continue supporting the Diem government. It illustrates a general pattern media scholars would later confirm as a kind of law of foreign policy reporting: that significant critical reporting generally appears in the US media if and only if political leaders are divided over policy.³ Second, even the younger reporters responsible for the critical reporting questioned the tactics, but not the basic premise, of US policy in Vietnam. David Halberstam of *The New York Times*, for example – who was the subject of personal lobbying by President Kennedy, urging his removal by the president – wrote in his 1965 book, *The Making of a Quagmire*:

I believe that Vietnam is a legitimate part of that global commitment. A strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to US interests.⁴

SELLING THE AMERICAN COMMITMENT

Vietnam largely faded from the news columns following the ouster of Diem. It reentered in August 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and within a year would come to dominate the news in the new era of a media-saturated society. By mid-1964, it was clear to US policymakers that the war was indeed not being won in South Vietnam, and that a much more extensive and direct American role in the war would be necessary. This was politically delicate, however. President Johnson had been assuring the public that he would avoid sending troops to Vietnam, and opinion polls showed considerable uneasiness about the prospect of major war there. The administration downplayed the beginning steps of the “escalation” of American involvement, presenting them as retaliatory strikes (for instance following the Gulf of Tonkin attack) or as continuations of existing policy which did not require political discussion. This went on until July 1965, when Johnson finally called on the public to rally behind a major American commitment.

Media coverage generally accepted administration statements at face value during this period. Much of what was reported on the basis of official sources – like the occurrence of the second Gulf of Tonkin attack, to which the US ostensibly retaliated – turned out to be false or misleading, and this is a period in which the media clearly did not live up to the widely accepted ideal of a



The Associated Press photographer Huynh Thanh My covers a Vietnamese battalion pinned down in a Mekong Delta rice paddy about a month before he was killed in combat on October 10, 1965. (Empics/AP Photo)

“watchdog” press. This was true for two major reasons. First, the Cold War conceptual framework which guided administration policy in Vietnam was almost entirely taken for granted in American politics in this period, and this was true just as much among journalists as among other prominent political actors. Early in 1962, for example, *The New York Times* printed a big map across the Week in Review section with the heading “Communist Expansion in Asia Since the End of World War II – and the Military Situation in Vietnam.” Nixon’s comment about the media presenting the war with “little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting” may have been true in 1971. For many years before, however, one of the media’s principal functions was to explain the war to their readers within a narrative of US resistance to global Communist expansionism. Within this framework, alternatives to a policy of intervention were not really thinkable.

In the early 1960s, moreover, the professional routines of journalism centered around a particular understanding of “objective reporting” which assigned the journalists a relatively passive role. In practice, “objective” reporting meant reporting what was said by government officials without comment by the reporter. If officials were engaged in a policy debate, this would produce “balance.” If not – and at this time the Johnson administration was united, and the Republicans not inclined to challenge the President on the war – it meant that the media were more or less transmission belts for official statements. The crucial decision to commit the US to a major war in Vietnam was thus made with relatively little public debate, and the Johnson administration was able to “manage” news coverage relatively effectively to ensure that this would be the case.

CHANGE TO A “LIVING-ROOM WAR”

Vietnam became a “living-room war”⁵ from the middle of 1965, as American troops entered combat in large numbers. The press corps correspondingly surged from about 40 accredited correspondents in 1964 to about 400 by mid-1965. In 1964, in an effort to reduce tensions that had developed with the press corps, the US military had adopted a policy called Operation *Maximum Candor*. This initiative involved a greater effort to accommodate the media, through access to American forces and facilities, expanded briefings and other efforts to provide information. Reporters generally enjoyed considerable freedom of movement and access to US forces, though there were controversies over restrictions on access to air bases, and, increasingly, over the quality of information given in official briefings – over the policy, for example, of characterizing casualties in particular battles only as “light,” “moderate,” or “heavy.” The imposition of censorship of the sort applied in World War II and part of the Korean War was discussed – many journalists themselves favored it – but rejected for a variety of practical and political reasons. It was replaced by a set of guidelines journalists were required to accept as a condition of accreditation, which restricted reporting of information that could affect operational security. Violations of these guidelines or controversies over their application were quite uncommon.⁶

Morley Safer reports on the burning of a Vietnamese village in 1965. (Photo by CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images)



From the beginning, some critical and controversial reporting appeared in the press and television. Two occasions generated the greatest controversy. The first was Morley Safer's August 1965 report on the burning of the village of Cam Ne, which showed US Marines setting fire to the village with Zippo lighters, and included Safer's concluding comment: "Today's operation shows the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American firepower can win military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side." The second was a series of reports by *New York Times* correspondent Harrison Salisbury, reporting on the effects of US bombing of North Vietnam, which questioned US claims that civilian casualties were minimal. These were relatively isolated reports however; Salisbury was attacked by many of his colleagues in the press, and nothing like Safer's report would appear in television over the next year or two.

For the most part, media coverage of the Vietnam War from 1965 through 1967 followed conventions of reporting established in World War II, and was neither critical in tone nor graphic in its depiction of combat. World

reporting was based on two sets of reporting conventions. The first emphasized the "big picture," understood in terms of military strategy. The second emphasized the individual American soldier, and had a human interest rather than an analytic perspective. The same conventions dominated Vietnam reporting. The lead story in a newspaper on most days, as well as the television anchor's introduction to network reports on Vietnam, would feature a battlefield roundup based on the daily press briefing in Saigon. These were generally upbeat in tone: as Morley Safer's Cam Ne story indicates, reporters almost universally assumed that American firepower would eventually produce victory in Vietnam. Of battles reported on television in which a judgment was reported on success or failure, 62 percent were described as "victories" for the US.⁷ Reporting on US troops emphasized their professionalism and high morale. The image of the enemy was also very traditional, heavily focused on atrocity stories and peppered with terms like "savage," "brutal," and "murderous."

During World War II, the press served to mobilize public opinion in support of the war effort both by making the war seem understandable, within a perspective of military strategy, and by cementing the bonds of sentiment between the public

Ten year old Phan Thim Kim Phuc runs in terror from a napalm attack on her village, 1972. (TRH Pictures)



at home and the soldiers in the field. Vietnam coverage did essentially the same thing in the early years of the war. One element that did not fit the story line carried down from World War II was the story of political conflict in Saigon. The South Vietnamese government continued to be shaky, and in 1966 what was essentially a civil war within a civil war took place there. This did get substantial coverage, and may have been a factor in the gradual erosion of public support for the war.

Vietnam was the first war extensively covered by television. There was some television coverage of Korea, but the technology of the fifties made it difficult to shoot sound film under combat conditions, and television news was in any case not the institution it would be after 1963, when CBS and NBC introduced half-hour nightly news broadcasts.

How did television change the public's relation to war? It made it more immediate, not in a temporal sense (television reports were mostly five days old when they aired in this period) but in the sense that television makes people feel "close" to events. It also may have shifted the balance somewhat from strategic and political reporting to an intensified emphasis on the individual soldier, since television is particularly dependent on an "up close and personal" style of reporting. But the impact of television should not be exaggerated. Television was less likely than the print media to depart from conventional understandings of war, and was

Walter Cronkite interviews the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, during the battle for Hue City in 1968, while his CBS camera crew use a jeep for a dolly. (NARA)



The "Living-Room War"



South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon. (TRH Pictures)

slower to shift toward more skeptical reporting of Vietnam. The television camera, moreover, was very far from showing the "true horror of war night after night" in people's living rooms. The typical television report would show only fleeting images of combat or casualties, usually not more than outgoing fire or air strikes seen from a distance. In part, this was due to the nature of the war itself, to the fact that so many operations turned out to be nothing more than what the troops called a "long hot walk in the sun." In part it resulted from strong concern on the part of the networks that graphic coverage would offend audiences and advertisers.

THE FRAME SHIFTS

By 1967, some evidence of change in media frames was beginning to appear. In political coverage, especially, there was increasing emphasis on debate about how long the war would last, and whether the Johnson administration was dealing with the public about its progress. The term "credibility gap" dates to this period. The administration responded with a high-profile public-relations effort late in 1967, intended to convince the public - as a presidential election year approached - that the end of the war was indeed within sight. This initiative was upended by the Tet Offensive, launched by the Vietnamese communists in January 1968.

Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land

The Tet Offensive was a dramatic, heavily covered media event, and clearly departed from the earlier pattern of Vietnam coverage in important ways. Journalists generally accepted the official interpretation that the offensive represented a military defeat for the Communists. Tet did not *look* like a US victory in the news, however. It was during the Tet Offensive that the "living-room war" did really turn violent, if only for a few weeks. As the fighting entered the cities where it was concentrated, readily accessible to journalists, and probably more meaningful to an urban audience, the volume of images of combat and casualties rose dramatically. These included another of the iconic images of the Vietnam War: that of South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon.

There were two periods when graphic images of the violence of war did appear with some frequency in the Vietnam coverage, Tet and the North Vietnamese "Easter Offensive" of 1972. In 1968, the images of intensified conflict seemed to belie the Johnson administration's claim that the end of the fighting was in sight. Journalists often interpreted Tet as a "pyrrhic" victory for the US, either because of the destruction it caused – something not normally emphasized in earlier reporting – or because of the political consequences for the Johnson administration. One particularly important element of Tet as a media event was the decision of Walter Cronkite – a veteran of World War II coverage and, according to some polls, the "most trusted man" in America – to cover the fighting first hand, at a time when anchors did not normally leave the anchor desk, and to close a special broadcast with a commentary calling for a change of policy on the war.

After Tet, coverage returned more or less to normal for the balance of 1968. But the shift in tone resumed in 1969, particularly after the middle of the year, when President Nixon began the withdrawal of American troops, and political divisions began to grow. The change should not be exaggerated. Many elements of the reporting remained similar. American troops were still presented very sympathetically most of the time; the enemy remained mainly faceless and sinister. American motivations for fighting in Vietnam were still interpreted as noble. The tone did shift significantly, however. The upbeat rhetoric of the early years gave way to more matter-of-fact descriptions of the action; 24 percent of battles were described as inconclusive in their results after Tet, as opposed to two percent before,⁸ and journalists sometimes commented ironically on the eternal recurrence of the war. "It illustrates the frustrations of fighting here," reported one correspondent (June 18, 1969), describing a search-and-destroy operation years before would surely have been described as a "big victory." "The troops held so many assaults here they've long ago lost count of the number... We fight the enemy or find they've just left, we leave, and the Communists..." There was greater emphasis on the human costs of the war, as illustrated by an issue of *Life* magazine which featured photos of all the Americans killed in combat. There was increased emphasis on the political debate at home, and there were a number of major stories that played key roles in the growing opposition over the war. These included the story of the My Lai massacre and

reporting on atrocities by US troops, beginning in 1969, as well as the publishing of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. The Pentagon Papers, printed in the face of threats of legal action by the Nixon administration, revealed the extent to which officials had misled the press and the public through much of the Vietnam War. They contributed to a significant shift in American journalism away from the more deferential reporting styles that had prevailed at the war's beginning.

MEDIA, POLICY, AND OPINION

On the surface, the significant shift in media framing of the war between 1967 and 1969 would seem consistent with the conventional wisdom about the media and Vietnam: the idea that the media were the decisive actor, that changes in media coverage produced the shift in opinion and policy. A closer analysis does not support that conclusion, however. The media, certainly, were part of the process by which opinion and policy on Vietnam changed, and journalists themselves were significant actors. Certainly one important factor in the shift in public discussion of the war was the fact that journalists who covered it over a period of years became increasingly skeptical that American policy could

An injured journalist is helped to safety in October 1966. Over 60 journalists were killed during 20 years of conflict in Vietnam. (Topfoto)



succeed. But it is also clear that the media were, to a large extent, responding to other actors, not driving the process of change by themselves.

Three forces had particular influence on the media. The first, referred to earlier in this article, was the balance of elite opinion. Journalists covering the war from Washington, especially, did so on the basis of sources, almost all of them US government officials located in the standard "beats" for gathering political news – the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, and Capitol Hill. In 1964–65, these sources rarely expressed doubt or dissent on the war. This would gradually change. Early in 1966, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under Chairman J. William Fulbright, held hearings which represented the first significant domestic debate on the war. By 1967, considerable debate was taking place within the Johnson administration. In the Defense Department, for example, Secretary Robert McNamara's "systems analysts," responsible for "crunching the numbers" on the progress of the war, were increasingly leaning to the view that US policy in Vietnam could not succeed at a level of commitment that seemed sustainable. McNamara clashed with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Lieutenant General Westmoreland, and left the administration. His successor, Clark Clifford, however, came to similar conclusions. In 1968, the issue of the war became an important factor in electoral politics. And after 1969, deep divisions existed at all levels of American politics, including sharp conflicts in the Nixon administration, where the secretaries of Defense and State came into conflict with the White House and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.

The role of the press in the formulation of policy tends to expand when channels of communication break down within an administration. This had occurred in 1963, when US advisors dissatisfied with policy found their views cut out of the US mission's reporting to Washington. It occurred again in the Nixon era, starting in mid-1969. It was, in part, the effort of the White House to plug "leaks" to the press connected with these divisions that led to the Watergate scandal.

A second important influence on the changing frame of war reporting was public opinion itself. Opinion polls have almost invariably shown initial public reluctance about a decision to go to war, followed by a strong "rally round the flag" effect, in which opinion shifts to support for war. This occurred in late 1964 when public support for the Vietnam War peaked at about 70 percent support for the war and 25 percent opposed. Support then dropped early in 1966 – about the time the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held hearings – rebounded a bit in the year, and then began a steady decline that lasted through the end of the war. By early 1967, a plurality disapproved of Lyndon Johnson's handling of the war, and by October 1967, a plurality told pollsters that they thought the US had made a "mistake" getting into Vietnam. Public opinion had thus already shifted substantially against the war *before* the most significant changes in news coverage began. This clearly undercuts the conventional wisdom that the coverage drove public opinion on the war. The evidence from opinion polls also undercuts the common notion that the Tet Offensive was the "turning point" of the war, or that Cronkite's special broadcast had a decisive influence on

important in many ways, as a catalyst for public discussion of Vietnam policy. Opinion polls show some change in people's assessments of how well the war was going, and in the balance between those calling themselves "doves" and "hawks" early in 1968. But overall the evidence does not suggest that Tet changed the general trend toward declining support which was already underway.⁹

If media coverage did not drive public opinion, what did produce the decline in support for the war? Various hypotheses have been put forward, including the arguments that the level of support for the war was driven by the cumulative casualty toll,¹⁰ or by cues from political elites,¹¹ who as we have seen were increasingly divided. To a significant extent it may simply have been a matter of time, a reaction to the fact that the war continued for years, with no clear end in sight.

What of the role of the anti-war movement? Significant anti-war demonstrations and "teach-ins" began early in 1965, while public debate in "mainstream" institutions was still very limited. Martin Luther King, Jr. announced his opposition to the war in April 1967. In the pre-1968 period, however, media coverage of the anti-war movement was limited in volume and generally hostile, often emphasizing an "aid and comfort to the enemy" frame.¹² After the success of Senator Eugene McCarthy (and, eventually, other anti-war candidates) in the 1968 elections, and as participation in anti-war activities expanded, news coverage became more extensive and less hostile, though protests were still typically reported more as disruptions of social order than as political statements. A typical news story on a war protest would focus on the presence or absence of violence; only 16 percent of television reports on anti-war rallies had soundbites from the speeches.¹³

The impact of the anti-war movement on policy and opinion is hard to judge. Though participation in the anti-war movement widened in the later period, the movement always remained unpopular with most of the mass public. It has been argued that the rise of protest and the growth of anti-war sentiment in the mass public have to be understood as parallel but separate developments, driven by different motivations.¹⁴ Much of the anti-war movement saw American intervention as unjustified from the beginning; little of this point of view made it into news coverage. Mass public opposition was focused on the success of US policy, rather than its motivations or premises. It does seem likely, however, that the anti-war movement contributed to the shift in news frames by dramatizing to analysts that the war was indeed a political issue, and could not be treated (as earlier reporting) as a matter of consensus.

A third important factor affecting news coverage was the decline of morale among American troops in Vietnam. American soldiers, as we have seen, were the characters of the "living-room war." Their words and images dominated the news coverage, especially on television. During the 1991 Gulf War, a common theme in the discussion was the idea that the nation had to atone for its failure to support the troops a generation earlier in Vietnam. In fact, American political culture has long treated the individual soldier as an icon of patriotism and a central part of the "common man," around whom American national identity is built. This is as no less true of Vietnam than of other wars, and a strong identification

in news reporting with the ordinary soldier continued from the beginning of the war to the end. The image of the soldier was tarnished to some extent by reporting on atrocities, though the extent of this coverage should not be exaggerated; it is no accident that the My Lai story was broken by a small alternative news service, and not a mainstream news organization.¹⁵ It is true, however, that the media's strong focus on the individual soldier began to cut both ways politically in the later part of the war, particularly after troop withdrawals began and it became clear that main objective of US policy in Vietnam was to find a way out. From the middle of 1969, news reports from the field in Vietnam, once dominated by expressions of enthusiasm from the troops, included an increasing volume of comments from soldiers that reflected either a desire simply to go home or, especially later in the war, criticism of the war itself as "senseless."

CONCLUSION

The dominant framework for understanding war in American culture is derived from World War II. An important element of that framework is the idea that war stands above politics, occupying a "sacred" space of the "civil religion" of patriotism. Americans remember World War II as the "good war" in part because the nation was unified. The value system of journalism, by contrast, centers around notions of balance and objectivity, and the notion of the press as an independent "Fourth Estate"¹⁶ and "watchdog" of state power. In the case of World War II, journalists set aside normal reporting conventions to merge themselves in the war effort. World War II, of course was a "total war": the survival of the nation was clearly at stake, war was formally declared, and the entire society was mobilized around the war effort. When Johnson announced that the nation was going to war in Vietnam, he referred to "lessons of history," and strove to invoke the World War II understanding of war as a sacred national cause, just as President Bush would do a generation later in announcing war against the "Axis of Evil." Like Bush, Johnson was largely successful; political leaders of both parties, the mass public and the media for the most part rallied around the cause, none of them quite completely – opposition to the war in the polls was never lower than 25 percent, for instance – but enough to provide solid political backing for the war.

Vietnam, however, like all the wars the US has fought following World War II, was a limited war, not a total war. It was one policy political leaders of balance against other priorities; as it continued and costs mounted, cohesion broke down. That process was extremely painful. For soldiers and their families it is difficult to accept the notion of a limited war – difficult to accept that you are risking your life for a cause to which the nation is not fully committed. This is in part what accounted for the decline of morale later in the war. For the American public at large, too, the contradiction between the cultural ideal of what war should be and the reality of Vietnam was disillusioning. The contradiction between the rhetoric of total war used to mobilize public opinion and the reality of limited war is important to understanding the receding

The "Living-Room War"

of public opinion in post-World War II conflicts. It helps to explain the shift from strong support and a significant closing-down of political discussion at the beginning of a war, to disillusionment once a conflict becomes protracted.

For journalists, limited war creates ambiguity about what model of their role is appropriate. Over the course of the Vietnam War, they gradually shifted from what can be called the "sphere of consensus" to the "sphere of legitimate controversy."¹⁷ This happened, to a large extent, in response to the forces outlined above: the growth of debate among political elites, the erosion of public support, and the disillusionment of American soldiers increasingly worried about being the "last casualty" in a fading war. Journalists shifted from deferential and celebratory reporting to the roles of neutral observer and watchdog which prevail in normal political reporting. With this shift, of course, the media contributed to the interlinked processes by which opinion and policy on Vietnam changed. The controversy over the media's role is intimately related to this shift, as the proper role of the media in covering the war became as controversial as the war itself.

The conventional wisdom that the media were decisive to the outcome of the Vietnam War has prevailed in part because it is a convenient way to remember Vietnam. Policymakers like Richard Nixon or for military commanders, it is easier to blame the media than to face up to their own failings. For journalists, similarly, it is easier to remember their role as a heroic confirmation of the ideal of the press as the Fourth Estate, rather than to face up to their own implication in the tragedy of Vietnam. And for the public, too, it is probably easier to tell the story of Vietnam as a story of betrayal by particular actors like the media and the anti-war movement, or as a story about how the democratic process worked in the end, than to remember it as a serious error of collective judgment. The collective memory of the Vietnam War seems to focus more on the later than the earlier part of the war – as painful as the divisions of that period were, it seems easier for people to remember than an early era when the majority of the country seemed to go to war without serious question and debate. That is, however, a critical part of the story of the Vietnam War.



Participation in the anti-war movement widened in the later years of the war, but the movement remained unpopular with most of the public. Some Vietnam veterans demonstrating against the continuation of the war publicly threw away their medals, as at this demonstration near the Capitol, on April 23, 1971. (Empics/AP Photo/John Duricka)