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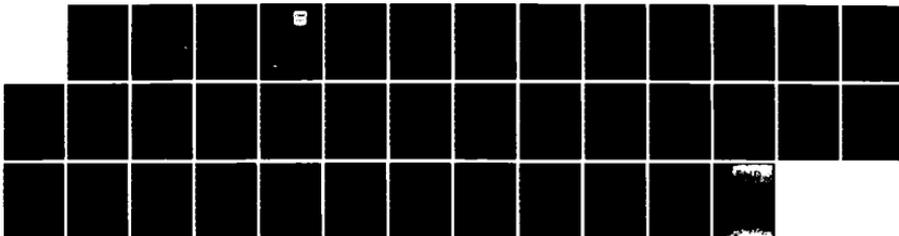
THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABSENCE OF FIELD PRESS
CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM(U) ARMY WAR COLL CARLISLE
BARRACKS PA J LUNDBERG 30 MAY 84

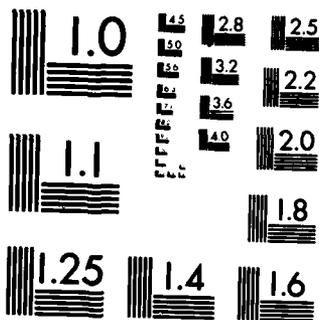
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IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABSENCE OF FIELD PRESS CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN LUNDBERG
AGC

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30 MAY 1984



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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABSENCE OF FIELD PRESS
CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

by

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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ABSTRACT

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The media did not lose the war in Vietnam. A flawed national policy that sent US soldiers into combat without adequate public support did. Nonetheless, the performance of the press--which operated throughout the conflict without field press censorship--left much to be desired. The three questions this ^{student} essay pursues is why wasn't field press censorship imposed in Vietnam, what was the effect of that decision, and where do we go from here? The discussion includes a look at World War II war reporting, how the Battle of Tet was misrepresented in the press, and the role of the press in a free society. The conclusion reached is that censorship was not imposed, initially because it was not considered necessary and then because it was not considered politically feasible. The effect of the decision was that the press misrepresented some aspects of the war, particularly in the later years. If the US government is to fight a successful war in the future, it first needs popular support, then more control of the media than it had in Vietnam. Better accreditation of reporters and some press censorship are the keys to more accurate reporting of future US conflicts.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABSENCE OF FIELD PRESS CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

INTRODUCTION

The US military activity in Vietnam ended a full decade ago but the controversy over how the war was reported in newspapers and on TV continues today. In November 1983 a former Assistant Defense Secretary for Public Affairs, Henry E. Catto, said a feeling remains deep in the psyche of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that the press cost lives, reputations, and indeed victory by its access and reporting.¹ In August 1981 Robert Elegant, for more than 30 years a US foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia for Newsweek magazine and other publications and an Asian specialist fluent in Japanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin, castigated his press colleagues in Vietnam. Elegant stated that in Vietnam for the first time in history the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page and television screen.²

Peter Braestrup, former Saigon bureau chief for the Washington Post and now editor of the Smithsonian Institute's Wilson Quarterly magazine, is also extremely critical of the performance of the press in Vietnam. In a massive, six-year study of the way the Battle of Tet in 1968 was reported, he concludes, "Rarely has contemporary . . . journalism . . . veered so widely from reality."³ Braestrup says analysts have concluded Tet was clearly a severe military and political setback for Hanoi but the press reported it as a US defeat.

William Buckley, conservative magazine editor, doesn't believe the war was lost by the press, attributing that to poor decisions by the US government. But Buckley does strongly criticize the press for being a

major catalyst for political decisions that did lose the war. He believes, for example, the furor over the Cambodian invasion was really a creature of the press.⁴

Not all of the media agree with Elegant, Braestrup, and Buckley. Columnist James Reston defends journalism's performance in Vietnam. "They [the media] brought the issue of the war to the people . . . and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam."⁵ Pulitzer prize winning Peter Arnett takes strong exception to the press allegedly misreporting the Battle of Tet, calling it instead "one of our finest hours."⁶ CBS analyst Morely Safer disagrees with a "not-too-subtle move afoot today to rewrite history and to assign blame [for Vietnam] to the messengers of that war."⁷ Jack Laurence, another CBS reporter who was in Vietnam from 1965 to 1971, said that with few exceptions the American press corps was professional, hard working, and dedicated.⁸

And so the controversy continues 10 years after the last soldier left Saigon. Our purpose here is to explore why field press censorship was not imposed in Vietnam and the effect of that decision? Would it have made a difference in the outcome? In our discussion, we will contrast war reporting in World War II with Vietnam, highlight the Battle of Tet to show the power of the press, look at the role of the press in a free society, and draw some conclusions about the future.

The effect of the media on public opinion is significant, particularly during wartime. This will be especially true in the next war because the mini-camera and communications satellite enable the war correspondent to quickly report information from the battlefield. For these reasons the US military must develop plans now on how the next war will be reported. One of the tools available to control information

from the battlefield is field press censorship. We need to know why this tool was ignored in Vietnam.

WORLD WAR II REPORTING

Understanding World War II reporting gives us something against which we can compare the performance of the press in Vietnam. In initially reviewing World War II war coverage one is struck by how much better relations between the military and the media were in World War II than in Vietnam. With few exceptions war correspondents in World War II accepted censorship as being in the national interest. One can argue they really had no choice--that without agreeing in writing in advance to submit all copy to military censors before dispatch, reporters were not accredited and without accreditation a correspondent could not see the war. But the fact remains World War II was a popular crusade with the American people and the vast majority of the US war correspondents.

Also, considerable trust developed between senior commanders and members of the media during World War II as a result of censorship. Drew Middleton, senior military analyst for the New York Times, believes censorship in World War II allowed reporters to be much better informed about the war than their counterparts were about the Vietnam conflict.⁹ Middleton recalls being one of about 30 correspondents briefed by General Eisenhower a full ten days before the Allied invasion of Sicily. Ike outlined in detail which divisions would land where so the press could follow the campaign intelligently. Because of censorship, correspondents could not even hint of the invasion, but nobody expected them to: trust was mutual.

Rationale for censorship in World War II was basic: the outcome of the war was a matter of vital concern to Americans and security of the armed forces would be weakened by the disclosure of information of assistance to the enemy. Byron Price, director of the US Office of Censorship during the war, said censorship was an instrument of war, that its only function was to contribute to success on the battlefield by denying [to the enemy] military secrets and other information that would provide aid and comfort.¹⁰ The only question asked by a censor reviewing copy from a civilian reporter was: If I were the enemy, would I want this information?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in announcing press censorship in December 1941, said:

All Americans abhor censorship, just as they abhor war. But the experience of this and of all other nations has demonstrated that some degree of censorship is essential in wartime, and we are at war.

It is necessary to the national security that military information which might be of aid to the enemy be scrupulously withheld at the source.

It is necessary that a watch be set upon our borders, so that no such information may reach the enemy, inadvertently or otherwise, through the medium of the mails, radio or cable transmission, or by other means.

It is necessary that prohibitions against the domestic publication of some types of information, contained in long existing statutes, be rigidly enforced.

Finally the government has called upon a patriotic press and radio to abstain voluntarily from the dissemination or detailed information of certain kinds, such as the reports of the movement of vessels and troops. The response has indicated a universal desire to cooperate.¹¹

Two kinds of censorship programs existed during the war: a voluntary program observed by the media in the US and a field press censorship in the overseas theaters. Editors and news directors in the US

received written guidance on what could be said about troop movements, ships, planes, fortifications, productions, production figures, weather, photographs and maps, and casualty figure, but they did not have to have materiel reviewed before publication or dissemination. In the overseas theaters, however, all copy had to be reviewed by military censors before it was dispatched. Some information could only be approved at a certain level. For example, the capture of towns, initiation of new attacks, effect of enemy actions, enemy atrocities, escapee of US or enemy POWs, changes of command, and stories involving gas and chemical warfare could only be approved at army, army group, or theater level.

Surprisingly good rapport existed between most journalists and censors during the war. The two groups talked frequently because no amount of written guidance could cover all situations. If a reporter could show that information was generally known, it was frequently approved for release. The official history of field press censorship in World War II said pressure by the press helped keep the focus of censors on security.¹²

There were some complaints about how the program was administered. The most common ones were favoritism shown some reporters, inconsistency, and unqualified censors. Correspondents also took exception when censors deleted such materiel as the "horrific" aspects of fighting, critical comments on weapons and equipment, and critical comments on US defeats which were usually minimized. Also, when allied forces began their push into France and Germany, censors found it hard to approve all information the same way at the same time. The reason was units were spread out and communications were difficult. Reporters also found

fault when censors created misleading impressions of the front or withheld casualty figures so the enemy couldn't profit by the information before it was released in Washington, DC.¹³

Could the war have been reported better? Phillip Knightley thinks so. He said reporters who were bothered most by what they could not say because of censorship wrote not about the mainstream of the action but "atmospheric" or "reflective" articles.¹⁴ Ernie Pyle concentrated on human interest stories about soldiers for this reason according to Knightley. Byron Price, however, disagrees with those who criticized World War II censorship. Price said censorship achievements were immeasurable because "there is no set value on helping preserve American lives and individual liberties . . . imperiled by powerful totalitarian enemies."¹⁵

Censorship was an overall success during the war. Soldiers and journalists certainly agreed far more during World War II than they did in Vietnam on objectives and ways to reach them. The distrust that characterized military-media relations during Vietnam simply did not exist in the Second World War.

VIETNAM WAR REPORTING

The many reporters who came to Vietnam were a mixed bag or journalists. They included speciality writers from trade journals, trainee reporters from college newspapers, insurgency experts from military publications, religious correspondents, famous authors, small town editors, old hands from the Korean War, still older hands from World War II, and some who had not written anything professionally until they got to Vietnam. There was no better place for a young reporter to put a gloss on a new career or for an old reporter to revitalize a fading one.

The procedures they found for reporting the war were different than those in Korea and World War II. First, it was much easier to get accredited in Vietnam. All that was required was an entry visa from South Vietnam [which was not difficult to obtain] and a letter from a news organization requesting accreditation. If a person wished to be a free-lance correspondent, the would-be journalist merely had to present two letters from a news organization saying it would buy his or her dispatches. Also, the absence of military censors was a new experience for war correspondents from World War II and Korea. Unlike correspondents in those two conflicts, reporters in Vietnam were free to write what they wished provided they did not divulge classified information.

How were press policies set in Vietnam? The answer is they evolved more than they were set in advance and many policies were not well thought out. William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam from 1964-1968, said in 1976 he seriously considered recommending press censorship to President Johnson when large numbers of US troops began arriving in Vietnam in 1965.¹⁶ But he decided against it. His rationale was there was no way to keep reporters from dispatching stories back to the US from other Southeast Asia countries if military censors denied dispatch from Vietnam. Also, in his words, the "mechanics of censoring TV were forbidding to contemplate."¹⁷

In a visit to the US Army War College in Carlisle, PA, in October 1983, Westmoreland explained that the South Vietnamese would have had to run the censorship program if it had been implemented and they were not well prepared for the task. "They probably could have done it with our help," he said, "but press censorship is a complicated matter and it would have been hard on them."¹⁸

In 1972 shortly before his death, President Johnson told Westmoreland that early in the war he should have imposed press censorship no matter how complex the problem might have been generated.¹⁹ Johnson said in his view the message of America's resolve to see the war through to a satisfactory conclusion never got through to Hanoi. During the conflict itself, however, Johnson did not apparently seriously consider press censorship to any extent. His national security advisor, Walter W. Rostow, said in December 1983, "I don't remember one conversation, one piece of paper, one Presidential or other decision bearing on the subject."²⁰ Barry Zorthian, former director of the Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) in Saigon, says censorship was often discussed in his office but a recommendation to have it imposed was never submitted because of "practical reasons."²¹

A New Jersey attorney and former reserve officer specializing in field press censorship, Jack Gottschalk, states the reasons press censorship were not implemented in Vietnam were political and logistical. "The war was being fought without a clear purpose," he declared. "Censorship would simply have delayed an inevitable reaction."²² Gottschalk pointed out the military did not control the movement of civilians in Vietnam like they did in World War II. Airlines landed and took off daily from Saigon. Anyone could hire a plane to fly throughout the country. Unless all transportation is controlled by the military like it was in World War II, Gottschalk believes civilian reporters are going to be largely on their own in a conflict of this kind.

In evaluating the press performance in Vietnam, it is important to note that the press was not against our intervention in the early 1960s. Only after the battle of Tet in 1968 did reporting become quite negative. Phillip Knightley emphasizes that early critics of the war did

not criticize the intervention of Americans in Vietnam, only the effectiveness of the policy being pursued. He said, "What the correspondents questioned was . . . the tactics used to implement the policy."²³

The US invited editors, reporters, and photographers from US newspapers to Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 to win support for the war. In addition, US Information Service agencies throughout the world encouraged foreign correspondents to come to Vietnam.²⁴ Richard West, a British free-lance journalist, said he was overwhelmed by the assistance he received from US officials when he arrived in Vietnam during this period.²⁵

But the policy to gain understanding and support through the media proved to be self defeating. By making so much of the war so accessible, the US began losing support of correspondents. During 1965 and 1966 the first criticism of US involvement in Vietnam began to appear in the press along with distorted and imbalance reporting.

As the war progressed, US reporting became less objective in the minds of many. Keyes Beech, veteran Chicago Daily News reporter who had spent 33 years in Korea, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, is one of the critics of US reporting in Vietnam. He says the lack of balanced reporting helped lose the war.²⁶ "I knew war was hell long before I got to Saigon," he said. "But for the vast majority of American correspondents, Vietnam was their first war . . . their first experience outside the US."²⁷ Beech suggests correspondents covering the Vietnam war should have been required to serve in at least one Communist country as a precondition for their assignment. "Would their reporting have been different?" he asks. He then answers his question:

I suspect that if forced to choose between a Communist dictatorship and a military dictatorship, they

would have chosen the military dictatorship. At the very least, there would have been a little more balance in their reporting.²⁸

Robert Elegant, another critic of US war reporting, treats US war correspondents even less kindly. He says the war was badly reported, with facts often misstated and emotions deliberately inflamed. In his opinion standards suffered because the majority of reporters wrote not to be objective but to win the acceptance of their superiors and peers. He also felt strongly reporting was detached from political and military realities because most correspondents were isolated by ignorance of language and culture. "Few were given [or took] time to develop the intellectual instincts necessary to report the war in the round," he pointed out.²⁹ Further:

Most correspondents were, in one respect, very much like the ambitious soldiers they derided. A tour in Vietnam was almost essential to promotion for a US regular Army officer. . . . Covering the biggest continuing story in the world was not absolutely essential to a correspondent's rise but it was an invaluable cachet. Quick careers were made by spectacular reporting of the obvious fact that men, women, and children were being killed. Fame or at least notoriety rewarded the correspondent who became part of the action--rather than a mere observer--by influencing events directly.³⁰

Tet: An Example of Bad Reporting

Media coverage of the Battle of Tet is a graphic example of how the press misreported some events in Vietnam. Peter Braestrup studied media coverage of the battle in exhaustive detail. His conclusion was that Tet simply overwhelmed the media, resulting in news reports that were a "wide veer from reality."³¹ How much of a defeat was suffered by the North Vietnamese during Tet? Don Oberdorfer, author of Tet, wrote in the Washington Post in 1971 three years after Tet:

It is clear that the attack forces--particularly the indigenous Vietcong, who did most of the fighting and dying--suffered a grievous military setback. Tens of thousands of the most dedicated and experienced fighters emerged from the jungles and forests of the countryside only to meet a deadly rain of fire and steel within the cities. The Vietcong lost the best of a generation of resistance fighters, and after Tet increasing numbers of North Vietnamese had to be sent south to fill the ranks. The war became increasingly a conventional battle and less an insurgency. Because the people of the cities did not rise up against the foreigners and puppets at Tet--indeed, they gave little support to the attack forces--the communist claim to a moral and political authority in South Vietnam suffered a serious blow.

Under the stress of the Tet offensive, the South Vietnamese government faltered but did not fold, and after the battle it became more of a working institution than it had ever been before. After Tet, the Saigon regime nearly doubled its military strength, from 670,000 men to roughly 1,100,000 men. This process of general mobilization, though supported by massive American economic and military aid, required more political will than the South Vietnamese had ever been able to muster before.³²

Braestrup's study consisted of an analysis of the number of news stories appearing in the US national press, along with where they were displayed and their origin. The national news agencies surveyed were the Associated Press; United Press International; weekday evening news programs of ABC, NBC, and CBS; The New York Times, long the nation's most prestigious newspaper and major influence on other media; Washington Post, which plays a bellwether role in the nation's capital; and Time and Newsweek news magazines.

The questions Braestrup pursued in this study were: What were the ascertainable facts available to the press? How were they reported and processed? How adequate was the media manned, structured, and oriented for surprise, complexity, and undramatic change?

Tet was an ideal media case study to analyze for three reasons: One, the events were limited in time, having a clear beginning and end.

Two, the events occurred in a clearly delimited area and were accessible to reporters. Three, the events were highly significant, coming at a critical stage in the war and involving a US presidential election.³³ Also, the study has a timeliness that extends beyond war because it focuses on the process by which the world is brought home to America.

Listed below is a summary of Braestrup's conclusions of the extent to which the media misreported the Battle of Tet:³⁴

1. Hasty conclusions about the attack on the US embassy in Saigon were initially drawn from incomplete facts. After the facts were known, corrections were slow and incomplete. All 19 Vietcong sappers attacking the embassy were killed or captured. Intrinsically a minor affair, the fight, nonetheless, became headline news.

2. That a "psychological defeat" had been dealt the South Vietnamese was widely reported after Tet began. Not an exact science by those who knew the people and their language, the conclusion by US newsmen whose knowledge of Vietnam was limited was even less credible.

3. After the initial attacks by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, it was soon possible to interview US intelligence specialists and visit US and South Vietnamese units in the field to secure hard facts of enemy tactical performance, but few journalists took advantage of the opportunity.

4. Media coverage suggested all of Saigon and much of South Vietnam was permanently destroyed. In fact, severe destruction was relatively limited.

5. The hardest hit areas of South Vietnam, mostly cities, were described not in context but as a microcosm of the entire country.

6. Newsmen did not visit 90 percent of the country where 85 percent of US combat units fought during Tet and where they suffered 80 percent of their casualties.

7. Until the 77-day siege of the Khe Sanh, a part of the Tet offensive, was lifted, the media continued to suggest imminent disaster—regarding Khe Sanh a possible Dienbienphu that forced France out of Indochina a generation ago. In fact we baited the trap at Khe Sanh and killed many North Vietnam soldiers there. Also, Newsweek magazine ran 29 Khe Sanh pictures, more than one-third of its Tet photos. Thirteen showed US or South Vietnamese troops dead or wounded. None showed US troops firing back.

8. Despite heavy losses and some mediocre generals, South Vietnam troops did not buckle. That was not apparent in the American news media.

9. The description of the effect of Tet on the US pacification program was extremely flawed because of "journalistic laziness." News reports wrote the programs off as a "shambles" with no part of South Vietnam under Saigon's "control." In fact Tet was not a "Red tide" but a series of marches bypassing most villages and district towns.

10. The New York Times exclusive news story of March 12 of General Westmoreland's request for 206,000 more soldiers—which appeared just before the New Hampshire presidential primary and was one of the most memorable stories of the war—was "seriously misleading" and never corrected. The strong implication was Westmoreland was in dire straights militarily when he was not. Also reporters knew but did not report the request had been urged by the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff for manpower needs in Europe and Korea as well as Vietnam and that

the troop request was largely seen as a dead issue by the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and the White House.

Why were Tet press reports so distorted in Braestrup's estimations? He believes it was primarily because senior editors in New York and Washington, DC failed to insist on balanced reporting, professional discipline, imagination, and common sense. Senior editors allowed the lines between news feature stories and editorials to blur in Braestrup's opinion. He also says the difference between the "dramatic" and "significant" should have received more emphasis, editors should have discouraged the instant analysis that occurred, reporters should have questioned participants better than they did, and less use of "themes" and "story lines" to simplify the events of Tet should have been made.³⁵ The latter is a journalism technique used extensively since the early 1960s to make events more intelligible to audiences. Lost in the process, however, are subtleties, inuendos, and events that don't fit the mold. Much of Tet not fitting preconceptions went unreported.³⁶

Braestrup is not optimistic the media will respond to future crises better than they did to Tet. In his opinion the media greets criticism, however mild and constructive, with resentment and disdain. He believes too few editors recognize the limitations of journalism to provide broad knowledge on short notice. He also criticizes US press leadership today, declaring that since James Reston stepped down as the Washington, DC bureau chief of the New York Times, there have been no towering figures for others to emulate nor have any new operational philosophies developed. As a result, he says another unsatisfactory press performance in another crisis appears likely.³⁷

Would Censorship Have Made a Difference in Vietnam?

Earlier we heard a New Jersey attorney specializing in field press censorship say field press censorship would not have changed the results in Vietnam. Many scholars who have studied the Vietnam Conflict agree with that conclusion. Although distorted reporting and North Vietnamese propaganda were factors affecting the war, these scholars say the primary reason US public support waned as the war progressed was due to a lack of a clear cut strategy.

Harry Summers, author of On Strategy: The Vietnam War In Context, says the reason Americans find it hard to understand the defeat in Vietnam is because we have still not yet sorted out what war is all about.³⁸ In his view Americans continue to think of war as something conducted by the military rather than by the entire nation. Quoting Carl von Clausewitz, noted Prussian strategist, Summers states a nation has to involve the people, government, and military in a "trinity" and establish a clear political objective to successfully prosecute a war.³⁹ When the trinity isn't formed and a clear political objective is not set, the strategy for the conflict is fundamentally flawed.

In Vietnam our national survival was obviously not at stake to the extent it was in World War II. Still, Summers argues we could have fought a successful limited war in Vietnam if we had mobilized national will and better defined our political objective (not "nation building" or "pacification" but something like "building a military barrier to North Vietnam expansion").⁴⁰ We did neither. We didn't call up the reserves and Phil G. Goulding, former assistant secretary of defense for public affairs declares efforts to mobilize public opinion to support the war were sadly lacking. Says Goulding:

In my four year tour [July 1965 to January 1969] there was not once a significant organized effort by the executive branch of the federal government to put across its side of a major policy issue or a major controversy to the American people. Not once was there a public affairs program . . . worthy of the name.⁴¹

The conclusion we can draw about the role of the media in Vietnam is that they performed poorly at times but they didn't cause the collapse of public support. The media admittedly plays a key role in generating public opinion but so do other agencies and institutions, not the least of which is the President. When the government makes no real effort to mobilize national will, it is hard to blame the media for "collapsing" it.

This does not mean that censorship could not have been imposed and been very effective in Vietnam under different circumstances. Nor does it mean the press is blameless in how it reported the war to the American people. It does mean, however, that many ambiguities, uncertainties, and confusion existed in Vietnam and poor press reporting was only one of the many factors affecting public opinion at that time. As we develop press policies for future wars, we have to keep this perspective in mind.

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN A FREE SOCIETY

No discussion of US war reporters would be complete without a look at the special role of the media in US society. The writers of the US constitution felt strongly a free press was the best safeguard against political tyranny. They wanted people to have a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events. They wanted a public forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and also a means of projecting opinions and attitudes. They wanted a method for presenting

and clarifying goals and values. Thomas Jefferson said in 1787, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter."⁴²

The US military and many other Americans are unaware of the history of war reporters. William Howard Russell of England is generally regarded as the first, full-time war correspondent. Assigned by the Times of London to cover England's war with Russia in the Crimea in 1854, he was the first civilian reporter to report from the field on an armed conflict. Russell criticized much of England's effort in that war (organization, supplies, etc.), angering the country's military establishment and earning him notoriety he did not enjoy. He called himself a "miserable parent of a luckless tribe."⁴³

Was he right? Are war reporters destined to be criticized for what they write and also for what they don't?

In attempting to answer that question, one must note it isn't easy to report on big organizations. Daniel Cater, author of the Fourth Branch of Government, writes on the difficulties of journalists covering government and big business:

The work habits of journalists are not so fixed as most, less adaptable to the time clock, more susceptible to peak and slack periods. The pay scale starts higher but advances more slowly than in comparable occupations. Those at the top--bureau chiefs, columnists, and certain well-known special correspondents--are paid very well, though not nearly so well as the elite in such roughly comparable activities as advertising and public relations. For the rank and file, the wage scale is by no means a major incentive. The reporter in Washington finds in journalism a career that becomes no less physically demanding and little more remunerative as he reaches middle age.⁴⁴

But Cater also points out reporters have an acute sense of involvement in the churning process that is government:

The reporter is the recorder of government but he is also the participant. He operates in a system in which power is divided. He as much as anyone, and more than a great many, helps to shape the course of government. He is the indispensable broker and middleman among the subgovernments of Washington. He can choose from among the myriad events that seethe beneath the surface of government which to describe and which to ignore. He can illuminate policy and notably assist in giving it sharpness and clarity; just as easily, he can prematurely expose policy and, as with an undeveloped film, cause its destruction. At his worst, operating with arbitrary and faulty standards, he can be an agent of disorder and confusion. At his best, he can exert a creative influence on Washington politics.⁴⁵

In evaluating Russell's "luckless tribe" comment, one must also recall that "truth" used to be perceived as the product not of the people but a few wise men. Today that premise is not accepted in western democracies where "every man" is regarded as a rational being able to discern between truth and falsehood, able to select his version of the truth. Truth is no longer a property of power elites but of all men.

In fulfilling its responsibilities in US society, the press performs six generally acknowledged functions: 1. Serves the political system of providing information, discussion, and debate; 2. Enlightens the public so as to make it capable of self-government; 3. Safeguards the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government; 4. Services the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising; 5. Provides entertainment; and 6. Maintains its own financial self sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.⁴⁶

The media today is pervasive in the lives of Americans. Not only do we receive much of our news from the media but also much of our entertainment. On a typical evening more than 100 million Americans watch TV between 8 and 9 p.m. High School graduates spend more time in front of the TV set than they do in school. The media is the chief source of many of our views of the world and also the fastest. It is not only a watchdog on government and an interpreter of events but also an indirect provider of values.⁴⁷

Of special interest is the intertwining of political candidates and the media in the US. Those who aspire to public office must play the "new politics" which is "media politics." With the advent of television, public opinion polling, and computers, the power and influence of reporters and analysts on elections has increased significantly.

Along with this new power and influence in the twentieth century has come the need for the media to be more responsible. This is an incredibly complex subject beyond the scope of our concern here. But the major criticisms of the press today are:⁴⁸

1. The press has wielded its enormous power for its own ends, propagating its own opinions, especially in matters of politics and economics, at the expense of opposing views.
2. The press has been subservient to big business and at times let advertisers control content and editorial policies.
3. The press has resisted social change.
4. The press has often paid more attention to the superficial and sensational than to the significant, and its entertainment often lacks substance.
5. The press has endangered public morals.

6. The press has invaded the privacy of individuals without just cause.

7. The press is controlled by the "business class," which makes access to the industry difficult for the newcomer and endangers the free and open marketplace of ideas.

A number of solutions have been propagated to make the press more responsible. They include a stronger code of ethics, press councils, newspaper ombudsmen, declaratory judgements for liable, anti-trust legislation, limitations on the number of newspapers and radio/TV stations one individual or corporation can own, prohibition on one individual or corporation owning both radio/TV stations and newspapers, and changing tax laws to provide incentive for estates not to sell to newspaper chains.⁴⁹ Other suggestions include the licensing of journalists, revoking licenses of journalists for unethical conduct, and "right of access" laws.⁵⁰

Despite the clamor for the media to be more balanced and objective, the press remains critical today to the free exchange of ideas envisioned by the founding fathers. Were it not for the free marketplace of ideas, our constitutional form government would not operate.

William Howard Russell was not right when he said the first war correspondent was a "miserable parent of a luckless tribe." The war correspondent may periodically be criticized and controversial. He may be posted a long way from home on occasion (since the war in the Crimean in 1854 US war reporters have covered such conflicts as the US Civil War, France-Prussian War, Turkey's invasion of Bulgaria, Turko-Serbian War, Spanish-American War, Boxer Rebellion, Russo-Japanese War, Boer War, World War I, Russian Revolution, Japan's invasion of China,

Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, Spanish Civil War, World War II, Korea, Algerian War, and Vietnam conflict). But the war correspondent remains essential to checking on government and determining which version of the facts reach the public. We may not always like him but a democracy cannot do without him either.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

What Should Be Reported From The Battlefield?

In looking to the future of US war reporting, the question of what information should be reported from the battlefield remains a difficult one to answer. During the Vietnam War, millions saw the picture of the little Vietnamese girl running down the road seared with napalm. An equally large number saw the photograph of the police chief of Saigon executing a suspected Vietcong terrorist on a street in Saigon with a pistol. Examples like this raise perplexing questions about how much and what kind of stories and pictures should be reported from the front. And as technology produces small handheld TV cameras and communications satellites, finding an answer to the question takes on an added element of urgency.

Ben Wattenburg, syndicated columnist and coeditor of Public Opinion magazine, states democracies will be at a decided disadvantage on battlefields of the future if they allow TV cameras from their free press to film the "blood and guts" of war but the other side doesn't.⁵¹ "You can say this is a wonderful thing [to film death on the battlefield] because it makes war repugnant," he says.⁵² But Wattenburg points out it

only makes war repugnant to viewers in free societies, not those in the Soviet Union, Iraq, or Iran. In his opinion this creates a very dangerous situation. He says it tilts the balance of power toward people who can use force and works against free societies.⁵³

Harry Summers in On Strategy: The Vietnam in Context, asks whether pictures of tens of thousands of little girls incinerated in the fire bomb raids on Dresden and Tokyo should have appeared on American TV along with the little girl running down the street in Vietnam?⁵⁴ The question, in his view, begs an immediate answer but no satisfactory one is forthcoming.

The hunger of TV editors for combat footage in Vietnam was intense and increased as the war progressed. "Before they were satisfied with a corpse," said Richard Lindley, a British television reporter.⁵⁵ "Then they had to have people dying in action." Michael Herr, a US reporter, described a truck carrying a dying South Vietnamese soldier that stopped near a group of correspondents:

The soldier, who was nineteen or twenty, had been shot in the chest. A television cameraman leaned over the Vietnamese and began filming. The other correspondents watched. He opened his eyes briefly a few times and looked back at us. The first time he tried to smile . . . then it left him. I am sure he didn't even see us the last time he looked but we all knew what it was that he had seen just before that--a 16mm converted Auricon sound camera capturing his last moments of life on film.⁵⁶

Forty-eight hours later the scene was probably viewed in American living rooms.

Experts don't know the effect on people at home of seeing battlefield deaths on TV day after day. Tom Wolfe, author of Muave Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine, says, "If the US was seriously trying to win the battle of world opinion . . . (it) . . . had a real bush league

operation. The North Vietnamese were the contested aces."⁵⁷ On the other hand, a Newsweek magazine survey in 1967 suggested TV had encouraged viewers to support the war. And in 1972 a prominent American psychiatrist, Frederic Werthan, suggested Americans were developing a tolerance of horror in TV newscasts. He said, "The only way we can possibly tolerate it is by turning off a part of ourselves instead of the television sets."⁵⁸

It is doubtful that live TV will be found soon on the battlefield. John Martin, ABC news analyst, says few nations would want their people to see directly a battlefield defeat, horrible accident, or atrocity.⁵⁹ But the realities of war, if not live pictures, will be shown in future conflicts as they were shown in Vietnam. This poses a particular problem for free societies. How do you prepare people for the horror of war? Retired US General Fred Weyand, a former Army chief of staff, has one solution. He says military professionals must tell people before the war begins what to expect. He says:

We must counsel our political leaders and alert the American public that there is no such thing as a 'splendid little war.' There is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction. The American way of war is particularly violent, deadly and dreadful. We believe in using 'things'--artillery, bombs, massive firepower--in order to conserve our soldiers' lives. The enemy [in Vietnam], on the other hand, made up for his lack of 'things' by expending men instead of machines, and he suffered enormous casualties. The Army saw this happen in Korea, and we should have made the realities of war obvious to the American people before they witnessed it on their television screens. The Army must make the price of involvement clear before we get involved, so that America can weigh the probable costs of involvement against the dangers of noninvolvement . . . for there are worse things than war.⁶⁰

It is interesting to contemplate the results of past wars if the media had been present on the battlefields. In 1851 English author Sir

Edward S. Creasy published his classic The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World. The criteria he used to select the battle in the book was not the number of combatants nor battle deaths but the outcome of the battle on the kind of world that period of history produced.⁶¹ If live TV and war correspondents had been present during those 15 battles, would the results have been different? The answer is probably yes in some cases. As a result, reporting from a future battlefield could well turn the tide not only of a war but also of history. And western democracies would not necessarily be the winner.

Says Alistair Horne, prominent British author,

I have often reflected that, had there been live TV coverage . . . in World War I, fighting would have been called off sometime before the Battle of the Marne, and we would all now be speaking German.⁶²

And syndicated American columnist George Will states that if TV cameras had been on the battlefields of the US Civil War, the US would be two countries today.⁶³

Panel Discusses Future Press Policies

In February 1984 a government panel met in Washington, DC to draft recommendations for the Secretary of Defense on future press policies during war. The panel was headed by retired Major General Winant Sidle, a former Army chief of information. During the public hearings conducted, the panel solicited the views from the joint chiefs of staff, military services, and 19 news organizations, to include national TV networks, wire services, weekly news magazines, and daily newspapers. The panel's final report will be forwarded through the joint chiefs of staff to the secretary of defense for actions he considers appropriate.

The panel made its intentions very clear at the beginning. In a statement released at the end of the panel's public sessions, it said

The American people must be informed about US military operations and this information can best be provided through both the news media and the government. . . . The US media should cover US military operations to the maximum degree possible consistent with mission security and the safety of US forces.⁶⁴

The questions the panel sought to answer were: What news organizations should have access to the battlefield? How soon after the commencement of operations should the media be allowed to participate? How many reporters should be allowed on the battlefield? How should reporters be supported logistically on the battlefield?

Sitting on the panel were six civilians and six military members. The civilians included a former Pulitzer-winning war correspondent, former national TV news executive, two long-time university journalism professors, and the government's former civilian press officer in Vietnam. The military members included public affairs officers from all the services.

Hopefully, policies that will preclude Vietnam-type problems from occurring in the future will emerge from the Seidle commission report. One of the ideas discussed during the panel's public hearings was the concept of selecting a pool of correspondents from those who wish to go on military operations. The pool members would then be required to share notes, observations, and photographs with those unable to go.

Veteran New York Times military correspondent Richare Halloran [not a Seidle commission panel member] says what is needed for future military operations are agreements beforehand between the department of defense and news organizations.⁶⁵ These agreements would spell out fundamental rules for covering military operations, including those in which

surprise is a factor. Halloran says news organizations would honor those agreements, pointing out they have done so for many years on such subjects as the annual release of federal budgets, speeches, congressional reports, and news briefings.

If such agreements between the military and the media become a reality, one of the big hurdles to restoring trust and confidence between soldiers and journalists would be cleared. It would not be a return to World War II where all copy from the overseas theater was reviewed before dispatch. But it should enable correspondents to show they can be trusted--that not all journalists are driven by the number of newspapers they can sell. Soldiers in turn would be more willing to share insights with reporters about the military. The end result would be a better informed American citizen.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The media did not lose the war in Vietnam. A flawed national strategy that sent American soldiers to war without adequate public support did. Nonetheless, the performance of the press in Vietnam left much to be desired. In planning for media coverage of future wars, the military needs to heed the lessons of Vietnam. Should access to future battlefields be limited? We think so. Should some field press censorship be implemented? We think this should occur also. Hopefully, policies that come out of the Seidle commission report to the secretary of defense will incorporate these ideas.

The US military also needs to continue its efforts to understand and make use of the press in America. Soldiers need to recognize the media is a US institution that is not going to go away. Hopefully, forces at work within the communications industry will make the press

more responsible in the future. The White House reporter for Newsweek magazine, Tom DeFrank, said at the Army War College in May 1984 he felt this would occur in the future.⁶⁶ In the meantime the officer corps must understand the press remains the best way for the US military to tell its story to the American people.

The Vietnam War left many members of the military with a deep resentment of the press. An Army War College instructor said after a three year assignment at the school that he was amazed at the depth of the feeling against the media by student officers. It will take time to heal the wounds. Part of that healing process rests with the media. It must listen to its critics, to include some of its own members. Part of that process also rests with the military. We need to set policies that will preclude press excesses that occurred in Vietnam from occurring on future battlefields. We also need to be willing to respond to legitimate inquiries from the media.

Despite the slow pace at which large institutions change, they do reform themselves. And there is evidence the media is willing to accept the realities of reporting on future battlefields. Said ABC news analyst Ted Koppel in October 1982:

As the King of Siam used to say when confronted by what passes for logic in the West. "It is a puzzlement." And it is likely to remain a puzzlement for as long as we try to reconcile the irreconcilable.

War, after all, represents the breakdown of reasonable and orderly behavior between nations. It constitutes the attempt by one power to impose on another, by force, solutions which were not acceptable within a more civilized framework. It legitimizes massive destruction of property, widespread slaughter and maiming of humanity. To expect, within that context, that nations, even democracies, will long continue to permit the unrestrained practice of journalism is, I would submit, a form of self delusion.

A free press should, indeed must, acquaint the citizens of a democracy with every alternative to war. It must alert them to the prospect of war. It must remind them of the cost of war. But when wars begin, we must expect that all governments will regard the press as one of the weapons in their national arsenal.

What happened in Vietnam, uncensored and unrestrained reporting by the American press, was probably an aberration that will never happen again. That's not a wish, but it is a prediction.

The challenge for the US military is to remain optimistic. World War II is behind us. Vietnam is behind us. Minicameras and communications satellites will be found on the battlefields of the future. We need to go forward, developing press policies in advance that will enable Americans to receive balanced, truthful accounts of how their soldiers are doing in battle. A blue ribbon government panel is attempting to take the first step of that process now. The effort must continue. The task of getting responsible reports from the war zone is not an easy one. But it's not an impossible one either.⁶⁷

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