THE MERCURIAL ROLE OF THE U.S. MEDIA IN WARTIME:
The Vietnam War, 1961-1975

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ABSTRACT

The various roles of the U.S. media comprise one of the most complex elements of U.S. foreign policy especially during wartime because the media has the ability to sway public opinion for or against any foreign policy agenda. The Vietnam War is the greatest example of the media’s mercurial role in U.S. foreign policy. The diverse and uncensored media coverage of the Vietnam War forever changed U.S. foreign policy during wartime. The emergence of television as a viable source of information and the transmission of war images into American living rooms served as vivid reminders of the toll Americans paid for U.S. participation in the war. The daily onslaught of war images forced policymakers and the American public to reevaluate U.S. foreign policy.

The aim of this thesis is to document and analyze the complex multidimensional relationship between the media and the American people throughout the four presidential administrations that became entangled with the Vietnam War. Its scope spans from 1961 to 1975 covering the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford administrations. This thesis is organized into six parts. Chapter I, “Setting the Stage: U.S. Media Involvement in the Vietnam War,” provides a brief historical background of Vietnam, a survey of U.S. Vietnam relations to 1961, and an assessment of U.S. media
To my parents, Cletis and Cassandra Bullard
for allowing me to blaze my own path.
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CHAPTER I

SETTING THE STAGE: U.S. MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN THE VIETNAM WAR

The dynamics of the Vietnam War make it one of the most complex wars ever fought by the United States. Every element of the war was saturated with complexities beyond the previous conceptions of war because of the domestic civil strife in Vietnam. The media coverage of the war became an intricate element in the labyrinth that would become the Vietnam War, because there was an extreme disconnect between reality and rhetoric. This disconnect created a tumultuous relationship between the U.S. government and the media. As the war drudged on, the media emerged as a strange mercurial force, often in opposition to the U.S. military and to the U.S. President. These tenuous relationships were a direct result of the vastly diverse coverage of the war. The daily broadcast of war images by media’s newest electronic invention (television) into the living rooms of Americans forever changed the way Americans perceive war. Television made the pain, suffering, and atrocities of war a part of the day-to-day lives of Americans. This overexposure altered U.S. foreign policy during wartime for every future war involving the United States; “the way the media cover the political process affects domestic as well as foreign policy issues.”¹ In order to gain a better understanding of how the media coverage of Vietnam changed the landscape of modern foreign policy, scholars must look to the past. Therefore, this

chapter will provide the necessary background for the rest of this thesis. It is divided accordingly into three parts: media coverage during previous wars involving the U.S., a brief historical background on Vietnam, and a survey of U.S.-Vietnam relations and the role of the media up to 1961.

**U.S. Media Coverage during Wartime: The Mexican War to the Vietnam War**

In every war involving the United States, the U.S. government has struggled to suppress or delay the release of information to the general public in order to maintain public support. By very nature of their roles, the press and President of the United States have a very complicated relationship. In the first few months of a term, there is often a courting period, but “there are certain elements in the relationships between the presidency and the media which inevitably cause tension and, sooner or later, personal bitterness.” 2 Since almost every U.S. president has tangled with the complexities of the media in his own way, media coverage of every war is slightly different. In the infancy of the media’s relationship with the government during the Mexican War of 1848, the media was considered merely a mild irritant; however, by the time of the Vietnam War, the media was a force to be reckoned with for public support.

The wartime relationship between the government and the media started during the Mexican War of 1848, when five journalists were sent into the field to cover this war. Although their work was very inconsistent, “they managed to get copies of their

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dispatches to Washington well before any official Army reports.” They achieved this by using the telegraph and various sorts of transportation — pony express, railroads, and steamboats. Due to the early arrival of their reports ahead of the official Army reports the U.S. government accused and charged many of the editors with violating postal regulations.4

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the nation and newspapers were divided down partisan lines, which only succeeded in fueling the conflict. During the course of the Civil War, the media often provided bad intelligence and exposed details of future operations on either side of the conflict. For example, newsmen in the North “revealed secrets best left unwritten, and many editors passed along material best left unpublished,”5 such as troop locations and strategies. Journalists courted generals to gain not only vital information, but also supplies, and, in doing so they made friends and enemies. Media coverage of the Civil War accounts for “most of the nation’s knowledge of the war.”6 At the conclusion of the war, the government “developed policies that led to the recognition of an official status for correspondents and to a


6. Ibid., x.
better control of the flow of information.” Few of these policies were enforced in the three-month Spanish-American War of 1898, which became a “journalistic free-for-all” because of the short duration of the war. Additionally, these policies were enforced in future wars — World War I and World War II.

During both world wars, journalists were granted formal accreditation, but were mostly forced to cover the war far away from the front lines. The U.S. government censored their dispatches and the personal letters of troops. In World War II, the Office of War Information (OWI) vehemently censored journalists. It censored both words and images. Accredited photographers, who had pledged to abide by the military’s rules, were the only ones permitted in the field. Thus, “photographers submitted exposed film to field censors, who, after classifying photographs in accordance with policies by the military and civilian leaders, would send them back to the United States for further review and for distribution.” Images that depicted fallen soldiers and soldiers with mangled bodies were confiscated and collected into a file

7. Ibid., 323.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

called “Chamber of Horrors.” In the last few years of World War II, the government released some of these images in order to gain public support for the war. Many news sources resented the censorship. For instance, “the Houston Post complained that censors assumed that the American people lack the intestinal stamina to hear the bad news.”

The public backlash during the Vietnam War would prove that the American people, in fact, would not support a long-term war filled with countless atrocities and a high death toll. Many factors contributed to this backlash. Some view the media as the mastermind behind public dissent, while others merely identify it as a beacon of that dissent already present in America. It is undeniable that the media might have contributed in some way to the deterioration of public morale, but many factors eroded public support of the war. Overall, the media’s overwhelming achievement during the war years was its ability to force policy makers to reassess U.S. foreign policy; policies were no longer crafted and implemented in a vacuum void of public dissent. Media exposure of U.S. foreign policy forced policymakers to weigh their political agendas against public opinion and in doing so the media coverage of the Vietnam War forever changed the decision making process for U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, “the role of

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12. Ibid., 1.
13. Ibid., 16.
the news media remains one of the most controversial aspects of American
involvement in Vietnam.”

A Brief Historical Background on Vietnam

Vietnam’s long history of conflict is a direct result of its diverse population and
its location in Southeast Asia next to China. In 1961, Vietnam’s total population of
over 35 million consisted of a blend of sixty ethnic groups scattered predominantly
in the Red River delta area in the north and the Mekong River delta area in the south.
Vietnam’s close proximity to Laos, Cambodia and China made it attractive to both the
French and the United States. Vietnam is also considered a gateway to China and the
rest of Southeast Asia; even China begrudgingly acknowledged that its shared southern
border with Vietnam was a security threat. This perceived threat would entangle China
and Vietnam in conflict for over 2,000 years. During the course of this long period,
many Vietnamese adopted Chinese culture and customs, but they rebelled against

Perspectives on the Vietnam War (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007),
265.

15. World Bank, Population, Total: 1961, Vietnam,

Press, 1995), 5.

17. Ibid., 1.
Chinese rule. After the Vietnamese evicted the Chinese from Vietnam, they had expanded their border southward by conquering and assimilating parts of Champa and Cambodia. Vietnam’s quick expansion led to several civil wars, making the country extremely vulnerable to French colonization.

When the French invaded the fragmented country of Vietnam in the 19th century, they were met with no real military opposition, bringing Vietnam under French rule despite various local rebellions. By 1885, all of Vietnam had fallen under French rule and the country was divided into three regions: Cochin China (a colony), Annam and Tonkin (protectorates). These three regions of Vietnam “were among the richest and most prestigious of France’s colonial possessions.” In the early years of French rule, there was so much civil unrest that the military was sent in to quell those that rebelled. After 20 years of pacification, the resistance was under control and the French concentrated on turning Vietnam into a profitable colony.

The Vietnamese were forced to work for poor wages and under treacherous working conditions. Meanwhile, French culture permeated day-to-day life in Vietnam; the Vietnamese were forced to learn under a French educational system and to work jobs that benefited France even though many of these jobs paid very little. The


19. Ibid.

Vietnamese wanted independence from France and tried to enlist aid from Great Britain and the United States, but all their attempts fell on deaf ears. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt later “advocated placing Indochina under international trusteeship in preparation for independence,” he withdrew this idea after realizing that Great Britain and France would not support relinquishing their colonies.\(^{21}\)

In 1940, under extreme pressure from Germany, France agreed to sign an armistice with Germany. The armistice put Vietnam in jeopardy of being colonized by Germany’s ally, Japan. Three days after the armistice was signed, Japan demanded access to Vietnam. Japanese forces quickly flowed into Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese were not fond of the Japanese they were inspired by the Japanese invasion of Vietnam because “the ease with which Japan had established its position discredited the French in the eyes of the Vietnamese.”\(^{22}\) The Japanese and the French both milked Vietnam’s natural resources and imposed other hardships that resulted in a devastating famine. Many Vietnamese resistance groups opposed both the French and the Japanese. Ho Chi Minh’s resistance group, the Vietminh, helped the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) with operations against the Japanese and they rescued American pilots who were shot down by the Japanese. The Vietminh also organized


\(^{22}\) Ibid., 6.
the Vietnamese peasants to seize rice stocks during the famine and were prepared to help in any way possible.  

When U.S. forces defeated Japan in August of 1945, the Vietminh capitalized on this development and seized Hanoi, where Ho Chi Minh created a new government by mixing members from other nationalist groups. In the South, the Communists murdered leaders of other nationalist groups.  

On September 2, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent he read a Declaration of Independence based on the U.S. model. However, the Potsdam Conference of July 1945 divided Vietnam into two parts for the evacuation of Japanese troops, with the Chinese Kuomintang forces in the North and British troops to the South. Unfortunately, during this process, Great Britain allowed the French to rearm themselves.

As Japanese forces withdrew, a freshly armed French force began to try and regain power. Ho Chi Minh appealed to Truman to support Vietnam’s independence, but the Truman Administration had no desire to support Ho’s Communist regime.

Truman ignored eight letters from Ho. Meanwhile, in order to get rid of the Chinese Kuomintang troops in the north, Ho signed a treaty with France in March 1946. After the withdrawal of Chinese and British troops, the French quickly organized a new French government in the South and negotiations began in France. To avoid war Ho

23. PBS, “Vietnam a Television History: Roots of a War (1945-1953).”

24. Ibid.

then went to France for the Fontainebleau negotiations in July 1946. The Fontainebleau negotiations broke down because the “French delegates took a hard-line position” on complete independence for Vietnam.26 Ho Chi Minh believed this would at least give his forces time to organize a strong opposition. The “Vietminh units gradually withdrew to prepared base areas in the countryside and prepared to resume guerilla war.”27 By the end of 1946 the French and the Vietminh were at war.

The First Indochina War began at the end of 1946 after both sides launched a series of bloody attacks. Months earlier, Emperor Bao Dai had warned the French that “even if you come to reestablish a French administration here, it will no longer be obeyed: each village will be a nest of resistance, each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and colonists will themselves ask to leave this atmosphere which they will be unable to breathe.”28 This warning had fallen on deaf ears and now the French were entangled in a battle that appeared to have no end in sight. For eight years, the French and the Vietminh battled over control of Vietnam. As the French death toll continued to rise year after year, the French remained adamant about maintaining control of Vietnam.


27. Ibid.

As the war continued on, the French made Vietnam an Associated State within the French Union, but they still refused to relinquish any real power to the Vietnamese. By the end of 1949 the Vietminh had aligned themselves with China and by January of 1950 both China and the Soviet Union recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The Vietminh’s decision to seek communist support pitted the DRV against not only France, but also the entire free world, especially the United States. The United States pledged millions of dollars each year to France’s war in Vietnam; the U.S. feared the loss of Vietnam would lead to the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia and that a Communist win in Asia would undermine U.S. efforts to reshape Western Europe. The U.S. promised the French monetary support, but made it very clear they did not want to volunteer manpower.

In the Spring of 1954 Henri Navarre, the French commander, tried to set a trap for the Vietminh forces at Dien Bien Phu, a remote valley near Vietnam’s Laotian border. General Giap of the Vietminh forces strategically created a human chain to transport supplies to tactical outlooks around the valley. The Vietminh quickly took the upper hand and cut French forces off from supplies, making the stranded French forces dependent on airdrops, which were extremely dangerous because of Vietminh artillery. The Vietminh laid siege to Dien Bien Phu for fifty-five days before the French forces finally surrendered. When the dust finally settled on the conflict, both sides had

suffered enormous losses: 1,500 French soldiers were killed, “4,000 wounded, and as
many as 10,000 missing or captured,” while the Vietminh suffered “25,000 wounded
and 10,000 killed.” Dien Bien Phu fell on the eve of the Geneva Conference, which
left the French with little desire for continuing the war and little negotiating room if the
superpowers did not step in and help with the negotiations. At the conclusion of the
conference, the Vietminh were forced to accept the Geneva Accords of 1954, which
temporarily partitioned Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel. The country was to be
reunified by general elections in the summer of 1956. The Vietminh left the Geneva
Conference of 1954 feeling cheated of their rightfully earned victory for control of
Vietnam. The U.S., was also displeased with the partition of Vietnam because it made
South Vietnam even more vulnerable to the Communist threat from the North. In the
South, Ngo Dinh Diem, an avid nationalist, became Premier and then President and
refused to compromise with the Communist forces in the North. His purge of known
Communists in the South and adamant refusal in 1956 to implement the agreed upon
elections triggered widespread resistance. By 1961, Vietnam was a powder keg on the
brink of a full-scale world war between two super powers.

30. Herring, America’s Longest War, 45.
31. Ibid., 49.

For the first half of the twentieth century, Vietnam was of little strategic importance to the United States and, even “after World War II, Vietnam was a very small blip on a very large American radar screen.” The U.S. knew very little about Vietnam outside of its rice production until the French colonized the country. Even after France’s colonization of Vietnam, a great deal of America’s perspective and the media’s perspective of Vietnam was “devoid of expertise and based on racial prejudices and stereotypes that reflected deep-seated convictions about the superiority of Western culture. In U.S. eyes, the Vietnamese were a passive and uninformed people, totally unready for self government.”

A survey of *New York Times* articles published during the First Indochina War revealed that the U.S. media overwhelmingly concentrated on the French perspective of the conflict. Little attention was given to the Vietminh perspective or to the perspective of the French backed government of South Vietnam. This viewpoint continued until 1949 when China’s civil war ended and the Communist took control of China. Shortly after taking control Mao Zedong, the Communist leader acknowledged the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Soviet Union quickly followed suit. After that, the U.S. media placed a greater emphasis on Cold War rhetoric when

32. Ibid., 14.

33. Ibid., 13.
dealing with Vietnam. As noted, the Cold War mindset permeated much of American culture during this time period; “it was an age of ideological consensus, and this was true above all in foreign policy.” Thus, after 1950 the notion of containment and “falling dominoes” saturated U.S. media coverage on Vietnam. At the conclusion of the First Indochina War, the U.S. media primarily addressed Vietnam as a nation that could spread Communism in Southeast Asia.

The New York Times media coverage from 1954 to 1957 looked mainly at the internal affairs of South Vietnam and at Ngo Dinh Diem, and to a smaller degree at the Refugee Crisis after the Geneva Accords. From 1957-1961 the U.S. media focused heavily on Vietnam’s fate in relation to the turmoil in Laos and Cambodia. During this period, the media and U.S. foreign policy concentrated on the Soviet threat and this perception dominated both the media and U.S. foreign policy well into President John F. Kennedy’s Administration, as will be seen in the next chapter.


CHAPTER II

THE AGENDA SETTING MEDIA AND THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION, 1961-1963

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the role of the media in the crucial chain of events that escalated the war and made it a front-page issue during the presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK). The scope is a short three-year period from January 1961, when Kennedy assumed the presidency, to November 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated. This chapter is divided into five sections: a brief introduction of Kennedy’s life before 1961, Kennedy’s early challenges with Communism and the media’s portrayal of the Diem Administration in Vietnam, the media frenzy during the Buddhist Crisis of 1963, the media’s assessment of Diem’s assassination in 1963, and a review of U.S. press coverage from 1961 to 1963.

Introduction: JFK before He Became President of the United States

Kennedy was born into an ambitious and political Irish Catholic family. His father, Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., dreamed of becoming President, but those dreams were cut short after he favored appeasement of Adolf Hitler in World War II. During that war JFK and his brother, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., enlisted, with JFK serving in the Pacific and his brother in Europe. Both sons became war heroes, but in vastly different ways. JFK became a hero for saving a crew member’s life during a patrol boat attack and the injuries he sustained during the attack ended his involvement with the war. After hearing about his brother’s heroic actions, Joseph volunteered to participate in a risky military operation involving a plane filled with explosives and he died during
the mission.¹ After Joseph’s death, JFK was asked by his father to follow the political path his brother would have taken if he had returned from the war. JFK was eager to please his father and agreed to run for Congress in the 1946 election.

Joseph Kennedy orchestrated an elaborate Congressional campaign for JFK. His money helped him saturate the district with “Kennedy billboards, posters, car cards, leaflets, and radio spots.”² JFK also hit the streets and introduced himself to the people. One campaign volunteer stated that voters “saw Kennedy, heard Kennedy, ate Kennedy, drank Kennedy, slept Kennedy, and Kennedy talked and we talked Kennedy all day long.”³ The people loved him; the women adored his good looks and the men idolized him for his war record. JFK’s charming demeanor coupled with his father’s campaigning skills easily clinched him the victory. At the age of 29, JFK became a member of Congress.

Kennedy drifted his way through three terms in Congress. He spent a great deal of his time as Congressman either ill or living life to the fullest. He was diagnosed with Addison’s disease during his first year in Congress. The disease nearly killed him and at


one point he was so close to death that “he was given the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church.” When he returned to Congress he often seemed bored and unserious, but whenever he spoke the media lavished him with attention. Kennedy craved more attention and he turned his sights to winning a position in the Senate in 1952.

In the race for Senate in 1952 Kennedy squared off against Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., a fellow Massachusetts Brahmin. They were well-matched opponents. Lodge and Kennedy had both served in the military, attended Harvard and pursued journalism before entering politics. Kennedy knew if he wanted to beat Lodge he had to run a phenomenal campaign. So Kennedy hired his brother, Robert Kennedy, as his campaign manager and his campaign became “the most methodical, the most scientific, the most thoroughly detailed, the most intricate, the most disciplined and smoothly working state-wide campaign in Massachusetts history.” Kennedy also worked hard to master television interviews during the course of his 1952 campaign. In early interviews and debates Kennedy came off as relaxed and direct, but by the end of his campaign


7. Ibid., 240.

8. Ibid.
Kennedy was physically and emotionally exhausted. Just days before election day Kennedy was scheduled to appear in a fifteen minute live television broadcast, but everyone agreed it would be a horrible idea for him to appear “drained and exhausted on live television.” The live television coverage of JFK was replaced with a compilation of film clips spliced together of him earlier in the campaign. The switch worked and Kennedy was elected to the Senate by a narrow margin.

Over the next few years, JFK enjoyed Senate life and he wrote a book titled Profiles of Courage, which garnered him a Pulitzer Prize. By 1956 he had established a name for himself in the Democratic Party. At the 1956 Democratic Convention, JFK introduced the Democratic presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson, and eagerly threw his name in for the vice presidential nomination. He was narrowly defeated, but the incident gained him national recognition. In 1958 when Kennedy ran for Senate again, he captured the win by a record margin. After his win he turned his attention to the presidency.

In the 1960 Presidential race, JFK an Irish Catholic, was the clear Democratic favorite, with the overwhelming support of his party. His opponent was Vice President Richard Nixon, a Quaker and the Republican heir apparent. Throughout the campaign, the race was extremely close. The two opponents squared off in live televised debates.

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9. Ibid., 256-258.

10. Ibid., 259.

On-air during the first debate, Kennedy appeared cool and collected, whereas Nixon seemed frustrated and tense. Kennedy’s charming demeanor on television solidified a narrow win. Neither Nixon nor Kennedy would ever forget how television coverage determined the presidential election of 1960; their future decisions reflected an acute awareness of the media’s pull on public opinion.

**Kennedy’s Presidency and the Media’s Portrayal of the Diem Administration**

In January 1961, an ambitious and charismatic JFK took office, determined to stop the spread of Communism and to end the Cold War. During the first few months of his presidency he was confronted by multiple Communist challenges. For example, in April he launched an invasion at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, but failed and Fidel Castro’s forces captured Kennedy’s entire brigade comprised of Cuban exiles. It was a devastating defeat that was documented in the headlines and Kennedy accepted full responsibility.\(^\text{12}\) Next, in June, Kennedy was faced with a difficult situation in Berlin, where the Soviets had constructed a wall to block East Germans from entering West Berlin. Kennedy decided that the destruction of the wall would not be something he could achieve in the immediate future without escalating the U.S. conflict with the Soviet Union and he wanted to avoid that at all costs.\(^\text{13}\) At the same time, the Soviets were supporting wars of national liberation in Third World nations like Vietnam. While

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13. Ibid., 556-557.

President Diem was a devout nationalist who the U.S. heralded as a champion of “true independence” after he refused to align with the Communists and the French.\textsuperscript{14} *Time* magazine dubbed him “the Beleaguered Man,” with many faults, but overall America’s and Vietnam’s best chance to establishing a functional government in the South.\textsuperscript{15} Over the next ten years, Diem purged French sympathizers within the government and appointed members of his family to key government positions; this left vast holes in the infrastructure of the South Vietnamese government. The Communists also eliminated political opponents in the South; the Vietcong strategically bumped “off refractory schoolteachers who didn’t peddle their line”\textsuperscript{16} and by 1961 there were few viable leaders left in South Vietnam besides Diem. During these early years the U.S. press corps was complacent as shown below:

… both the United States government and the American press had been satisfied to maintain the status quo in South Vietnam. Because it assessed the situation in South Vietnam in only a surface way, the United States government never successfully addressed the fundamental problems of the country. And because the press paid only the most cursory attention to the Vietnam story, it was controlled by a variety of forces, not least of which


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., \url{http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,866120-8,00.html} (accessed January 19, 2010).

was an American government that sought to conduct foreign and military policy in the shadows.\textsuperscript{17}

It was only after the situation in South Vietnam began to deteriorate did the American media and the U.S. government truly analyze the Diem regime.

The Diem Administration became rampant with faulty policies, which only alienated large portions of the Vietnamese population. For example, his ambitious land reform programs that relocated villagers to strategic hamlets only gained the Communists more supporters while his brother’s secret police fueled the flames of discontent. The problems in Vietnam in “the twenty months or so between April 1961 and December 1962 were perhaps the most crucial time in the long story of the American press and the Vietnam War. This period raised almost all the important questions concerning the press’s relationship to the Vietnam story for the rest of the war.”\textsuperscript{18}

Questions ranging from the role of the press in U.S. foreign policy to government transparency dominated U.S. press coverage by the end of 1962. For all the correspondents who rushed to Vietnam in the early 60s, it became obvious that the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating. Each year the U.S. was providing more monetary and logistical support in order to keep the Communists at bay and maintain the status quo. Even though the U.S. had already invested numerous “experts, and some


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 79.
$400 million a year of its money in South Viet Nam”19 the Communists continued to gain ground there. Meanwhile, Diem and the U.S. downplayed U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but “the number of American advisers jumped from 3,205 in December 1961 to more than 9,000 by the end of 1962.”20 Also, during 1962 Kennedy tried to freeze out the media by issuing Cable 1006, a joint State-Defense-United States Information Agency (USIA) message. The cable urged officials in Vietnam to withhold any information regarding U.S. involvement in Vietnam and civilian casualties, in addition to stressing the importance of maintaining a firmer grasp on the media.21 The secrecy practiced by the Diem Administration and the U.S. government forced reporters to find other sources and the information that the Diem Administration did release to the press left many of them skeptical of its credibility.22 According to Clarence Wyatt, a historian, their secrecy led to conflicting accounts of the war, as described below:

Soon two different pictures of the war began to appear in the American news media, one increasingly critical of the way the war was being conducted and pessimistic about its prospects the other supportive of those who led the effort and optimistic about its future course.23


22. Ibid., 82.

23. Ibid., 83.
This division resulted from a multitude of reasons it can be concluded from the available sources that the four main ones were Diem’s disdain for the foreign press corps, the U.S. Saigon press corps’ lack of knowledge of Vietnam, Diem’s nepotism, and U.S. military dissent.

Diem’s disapproval of the foreign press corps stemmed from the fact that he did not trust any of them to depict him in a positive light. Therefore, he interfered with their reporting of the news. The Diem Administration “followed reporters, ransacked their rooms, and tapped their phones. It monitored dispatches and messages out of and into country over the PTT (Post, Telephone, and Telegraph) cable system, and delayed or destroyed those found offensive.”24 Reporters who did not comply with the Diem Administration’s policies were often ordered out of the country and newly appointed staff members from these organizations who offended or criticized the government were expelled from Vietnam shortly after their arrival.25 Diem did not tolerate criticism and his removal of government opponents left many U.S. reporters criticizing America’s ally in Vietnam.

Diem was a far from perfect ally, but many felt the criticisms were not warranted. Shortly after U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Frederick Nolting, arrived he stated, “I myself have not found any substantial evidence for the extreme allegations

24. Ibid., 96.

25. Ibid.
frequently made concerning this regime.”

Diem himself felt that reporters were stirring up trouble in Saigon. He believed “his difficulties at home…arise in part from the bad press which he gets abroad.”

In some ways the U.S. Saigon press corps was ill equipped to cover the complicated nuances of Vietnam’s domestic affairs. Few of them understood Vietnam’s complex political history and even fewer of them could speak Vietnamese. Even after they arrived in Vietnam, few of them socialized with members of the Vietnamese population and, when they did, they used French in order to communicate.

Vietnamese citizens and the American press often avoided socializing in public because the Diem Administration frowned on fraternization between the two groups.

Diem’s suspicious nature and his nepotism isolated him further and further away from the Vietnamese people and the American vision for Vietnam. On one hand, Diem’s family were the only people he could trust with his vision for Vietnam. On the other hand, however, they were also dead weight dragging him further away from seeing the true political climate of Vietnam. Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, the Minister of the Interior, made Diem an even bigger target of the disapproving media with his public crackdowns on non-Catholics, which fueled larger schisms within Vietnam. Nhu’s wife Trần Lê Xuân, or Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu (Madame Nhu), was

26. Ibid., 74.

27. Ibid.

also a controversial member of the regime. To some, she was an Asian Joan of Arc; to others, an Oriental Lucrezia Borgia.\(^2^9\) She lashed out against non-Catholics through many government policies and her efforts to oppress non-Catholics were often referred to as a “morality crusade.”\(^3^0\) She swayed Diem to impose strict penalties for adultery and called for the abolishment of divorce, dancing, polygamy, and concubinage.\(^3^1\) Her hatred for non-Catholics and Communists permeated her rhetoric, which earned Diem no fans. Nhu and his wife had a great deal of influence within Diem’s Administration. Many U.S. correspondents showed “unanimous bitterness toward, and contempt for, the Diem government.”\(^3^2\) Their reports insinuated that the entire Diem regime needed to be replaced.

Correspondents in Vietnam also encountered serious dissent amongst U.S. military ranks. It did not sit well with many U.S. soldiers that their government did not acknowledge that U.S. military advisors had participated in South Vietnamese military missions and that Diem not only forbade the deployment of more U.S. troops to help fight the Vietcong, but also would not make the necessary reforms required to win the


\(^3^1\) Ibid.

war against the Vietcong. Neither government wanted to take steps that would escalate the conflict; each side only appeared halfway committed to conceding to each other’s demands in order to make the situation work. It was obvious to those on the ground that Diem and Kennedy’s approaches were not working despite the positive spins each government was giving to the media. For example, David Halberstam of the *New York Times* revealed that “there is considerably less optimism out in the field than in Washington or in Saigon and that the closer one gets to the actual contact level of this war, the farther one gets from the official optimism.”

The U.S. government was knee deep in a war in Vietnam whether it wanted to admit it or not. As Halberstam noted, “Americans and Vietnamese live together, march together, fight together and die together, and it is hard to get much more involved than that.” However, the U.S. would get a lot more involved in Vietnam after the events of 1963.

**The Media Frenzy during the Buddhist Crisis of 1963**

In the summer of 1963, Diem’s crusade against non-Catholics reached a boiling point. Diem “had favored Catholics with choice government and military appointments and special property rights; he had also kept on the books a French statue relegating Buddhism to a private status, while the Catholic church was considered a public

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34. Ibid., 95.
In Hue on May 8, 1963, Buddhists gathered to celebrate the Buddha’s 2527th birthday, but they were prevented from flying their flags in celebration. A week earlier, however, Catholics had been permitted to fly papal banners to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the appointment of Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc’ as the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Hue. The Buddhists complied, but continued with the rest of their celebration plans. They formed a large crowd at the city’s radio station in order to listen to a broadcast by Tri Quang, a Buddhist leader. When the military arrived, it asked the crowd to disperse and then fired into the crowd. Pandemonium broke out and when the dust settled a woman and eight children were dead. Over the course of the next few weeks, Buddhist protests multiplied and South Vietnam’s troops brutally handled the protestors. A large-scale Buddhist movement was quickly organized in order to protest the mistreatment of Buddhists and to demand that the perpetrators of these crimes be brought to justice. But Diem ignored their pleas for justice and equal treatment. The Buddhists also refused to be silenced and they reached out to the international community to voice their complaints.

The mistreatment of the Buddhists stirred the American media into a frenzy — they “seized on the Buddhist crisis” and held it “up as proof that the regime was as

37. Ibid.
bankrupt politically as it was militarily.”

Diem’s strongest American press opponents believed that “none of them could afford to abandon the Buddhist story. It was cresting. It could bring down Diem, and they would help it bring down Diem. They did not delude themselves about their goals. The Buddhist Crisis had become the second half of their personal offensive.” The Buddhists also used the media’s immense interest to further their own agenda by inviting the media to their protest, providing them with a front row seat to the event that would bring down the Diem government.

Oddly enough, Madame Nhu provided the most fodder for the flames of American discontent. While Diem downplayed the May 8th events and attributed them to the Vietcong, Madame Nhu blamed the Americans for manipulating and rallying the Buddhists against Diem. Her words angered the American press and the American government. The U.S. urged Diem to make reforms and William Trueheart, acting U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, “warned Diem that the regime might lose U.S. support if the repression of the Buddhists continued.” Diem begrudgingly agreed to investigate the matter, but then did nothing to really improve the situation. On June 11, the issue burst into flames and Diem was left to deal with a public relations catastrophe.

This catastrophe involved Quang Duc, a sixty-six year old Buddhist monk, who allowed himself to be set on fire to protest the mistreatment of Buddhists. Spectators

38. Prochnau, Once Upon a Distant War, 346.

39. Ibid., 354.

and reporters were handed fliers with Quang Duc’s biography and his pleas to the Diem Administration for equal treatment for the Buddhists. Madame Nhu called his sacrifice and the immolation of other monks a “barbeque”\(^{41}\) and stated, “let them burn, and we shall clap our hands.”\(^{42}\) She even “offered to furnish the gasoline and matches for more.”\(^{43}\) Meanwhile, the Buddhist protestors “tipped reporters in advance of several of the suicides by fire that dramatized their movement around the world. They carried signs in English for American television.”\(^{44}\) The friendly nature of the Buddhist protestors stood in stark contrast with the Diem regime’s hostility towards the press. Diem continued to shun the press and he imposed martial law to try and regain order within Vietnam. On August 21, Nhu’s “Combat Police and Special Forces units launched a series of nationwide attacks against Buddhist pagodas… they arrested more than 1,400 Buddhist monks and nuns, stripping the movement of most of the leadership.”\(^{45}\) The U.S. was stunned by Diem’s reaction and the press eagerly covered it all; “the pagoda raids also marked a final break between Diem and the American

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 281.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 115.

\(^{44}\) Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, 44.

leadership.” The Buddhist Crisis was the final nail in the coffin of Diem’s Administration.

The Media’s Depiction of the End of Diem’s Administration

Diem’s policies were a nightmare for the U.S. because his utter disdain for non-Catholics was apparent to the entire world, including the average Vietnamese citizen. In the early years, the U.S. had been placated by the fact that Diem was committed to fighting Communism, but the events of 1963 made Diem an impractical candidate by Western standards and the U.S. media capitalized on the chance to shine a bright spotlight on Diem’s and Nhu’s follies. Diem was left on very shaky ground with the U.S. and Nhu’s decision to negotiate a possible reconciliation with the Communists made the situation even more precarious. Nhu’s new deal would have been between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, but would have excluded the United States. When the news broke, the U.S. government was furious. The U.S. daily tabloids called for removal of Diem and his family. One reporter for Time magazine stated, “to Saigon’s Western press corps, President Ngo Dinh Diem is stubborn and stupid, dominated by his brother and sister-in-law. As a result, the correspondents have taken sides against all three.”


The correspondents of the *New York Times* Homer Bigart, David Halberstam, and Neil Sheehan and Francois Sully of *Newsweek* were the most vocal about their disdain for the Diem Administration and in doing so they shed light on the innate problems with backing Diem. They saw the South Vietnamese military as cowards and Diem as “an aloof and diffident man unable to deal with the problems facing him.”

Magarette Higgins of *Newsday* and Joe Alsop of *The Washington Post* saw the situation differently; they both felt that Diem was doing a decent job and that a great deal of Diem’s problems spawned out of the Saigon press corps coverage of the war. They saw the South Vietnamese military as eager heroes and Diem as a “courageous” and “viable national leader.” At *Time* magazine, the situation in Vietnam divided the reporters in the field from the editors in America, for example Otto Fuerbringer, Managing Editor for *Time*, clashed with Charles Mohr, a Far East correspondent, and Merton Perry, a Vietnam stringer, over their dismal assessment of the situation in Vietnam. Fuerbringer watered down every report Mohr and Perry submitted in order to paint the situation in Vietnam in a more positive light. In September of 1963, when he received from Mohr and Perry a twenty-five paged copy of how the war in Vietnam was lost he published a story attacking Saigon’s press corps and stating that the newsmen had “become a part of South Vietnam’s confusion” by covering “a complex situation from only one angle, as if their own conclusions offered all the necessary


49. Ibid., 119-121.
illumination.”

Richard Clurman, Chief of Correspondents at *Time*, defended his colleagues by contacting Henry Luce, Editor in Chief of *Time* magazine. However, Luce backed Fuerbringer and Mohr and Perry resigned. Clarence Wyatt, a historian, attributes the schisms between the different correspondents in the field and correspondents and their publishers back in America to geography; “top press brass and Washington based pundits tended to go along with authoritative top level sources, whereas reporters in the field respected their sources.”

Many of the reporters in the field gave the men on the ground a way to voice complaints against Diem’s and Kennedy’s mismanagement of the situation in Vietnam.

The reporters were not the only ones taking sides; “a group of South Vietnamese Army generals opened secret contacts with the United States.” The generals had “evidence that [Nhu] was not only planning their execution but also discussing with Hanoi a deal that would sell out the independence of South Vietnam.” The generals also asked the United States how it might respond if Diem was ousted from office. The Kennedy Administration mulled the idea over, but still preferred to back Diem if he removed his brother from office. It proposed the removal of Nhu to Diem and told the


53. Ibid.
generals that if Diem refused to dismiss his brother it would not continue to support Diem. But Diem refused and by “August 26 the United States had concluded that a change in government was needed.”\(^{54}\) Later that month, the plans for the coup fell apart and the Kennedy Administration was left pondering if Diem was truly their only viable leader in Vietnam.\(^{55}\)

Over the next few weeks, Kennedy received very mixed signals from his advisors; some felt he should stay the course with Diem while others felt he should cut ties. It was painfully obvious to JFK that his dream for Vietnam was dependent on Diem reforming his government and dismissing his brother. In a CBS Evening News interview on September 2, 1963 with Walter Cronkite, JFK said “I don’t think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there” and that “the government [in Vietnam] has lost touch with the people.” He added: “perhaps with changes in policies and personnel I think [Vietnam] can be successful.”\(^{56}\) During the interview Kennedy was very adamant that Diem had to make changes or he would lose the fight in Vietnam. These statements did not fall on deaf ears.

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54. Ibid., 118.

55. Ibid., 119.

In Saigon it became obvious to key players there that the U.S. was wavering in its support of the Diem Administration. Kennedy’s advisors convinced him to apply “selective pressure, including cuts in foreign aid” in order to get Diem to implement reforms. The generals took these sanctions as a sign of U.S. support for removing Diem and they moved up their plans for another coup. During the second coup attempt, the Kennedy Administration neither openly supported a coup nor discouraged a coup; it simply sat back and waited for the events to play out. On November 1, the generals staged their coup and by November 2, Diem and Nhu lay dead in the back of an armored personnel carrier. In the wake of the coup, Madame Nhu accused the U.S. of orchestrating their murders. The U.S. vehemently denied this despite the fact that a CIA agent named Lucien Conein maintained contact with the generals during the planning stages of the coup. After the coup, it appeared that for the most part few people cared if the U.S. had a hand in Diem’s assassination. U.S. press coverage of the assassination treated the coup as a “positive development … accompanied neither by

58. Ibid., 125-126.
60. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 126.
publicity about American involvement nor by calls for a reexamination of the American role in Vietnam.”

Many members of the Saigon press corps felt this was a new beginning for South Vietnam; Diem’s removal placated the most outspoken correspondents there. Back in Washington, some members of Kennedy’s staff were hopeful that Diem’s assassination would open the doors for U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam. The President, on the other hand, “had come to doubt Vietnam’s manageability. He had learned painfully from Diem’s assassination that the U.S. could influence events there, but not necessarily control them.” Diem and Nhu’s assassination left Kennedy shaken in regards to Vietnam’s future, as he had truly believed Diem would not be harmed. On November 20, Kennedy confided to one of his advisors that he was extremely concerned with the fate of Vietnam now that Diem was dead. Unfortunately, on November 22, 1963, before he could address these concerns Kennedy was assassinated. His assassination left his successor Lyndon B. Johnson to pick up the pieces in Vietnam.

61. Hallin, The Uncensored War, 48.


63. Ibid.

In the early 1960s the reporting reflected early hints of the “domestic polarization” that would eventually consume the war. During those years the American journalists reporting on Vietnam were often divided by Diem’s policies regarding non-Catholics. His policies coupled with Kennedy’s regarding the media “sowed the seeds of the credibility gap that would later emerge.” Their restrictions on the media forced reporters to find unofficial sources that frequently painted a vastly different picture of the situation in Vietnam leading many to believe that both governments were hiding something. Neither government wanted to bring the press up to speed for fear of turning the American and Vietnamese people against the war. The lasting “legacy left by Vietnam reporting of the Kennedy years was an image of Vietnam as a vital though shaky outpost of the Free World, one that could not be abandoned without the gravest consequences.” This perspective reflected an extreme disconnect from the reality of Vietnam’s murky political situation because as time will tell the collapse of Vietnam would be of little consequence for the rest of the Free World. In addition to that, the boisterous Saigon press corps added to the confusion in Vietnam and in the U.S., for the better and for the worst. For example, they provided

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64. Hallin, The Uncensored War, 48-49.

65. Ibid., 49.

66. Ibid.
necessary information and critiques on Diem’s policies in South Vietnam, but in doing so they also influenced Kennedy’s decision to shift his support away from Diem.

Kennedy’s policies in Vietnam were extremely flawed because he was trying to participate in Vietnam’s internal war without ever declaring war. Daniel Hallin, a media scholar, believes this is a direct result of what he calls Kennedy’s limited war policy in Vietnam. Although, he never declared war he was in fact fighting a limited war and in order to fight a limited war, Kennedy had to send conflicting signals. He had to convince the North Vietnamese that the American commitment to the war was unlimited and the American public that the war was very limited, so limited that it would not escalate into a full-scale war.67 He tried to achieve this by blocking the media from receiving details on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but that only made the media speculate more about the intentions of Diem and the United States. Diem’s and Kennedy’s obsession with the public image of the war allowed the media to dictate the agenda for the war during this time period. However, as the next chapter will discuss, his successor Lyndon B. Johnson would develop a more multi-faceted relationship with the media and he would officially declare America’s intentions to participate in the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER III


In November of 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson inherited a very shaky situation in Vietnam. The purpose of this chapter is to address the role of the media in the events that trapped the Johnson Administration in the Vietnam quagmire. The scope is the duration of Johnson’s term as president from November 1963 to January 1969. This chapter is divided into six sections covering the following: a brief historical background of Johnson, Johnson’s first year in office, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the Administration’s escalation of the war between 1965-1967, the Tet Offensive, and an analysis of LBJ’s handling of the Vietnam War and the media’s role.

Introduction: Background Information on Lyndon B. Johnson

Johnson, a Texas wheeler-dealer who idealized Franklin D. Roosevelt, was an “extraordinarily complex individual.”¹ To Dean Acheson, one of his advisors, Johnson “had as many sides to him as a kaleidoscope.”² On the one hand, he was a shrewd ambitious southern politician, “a remarkably adroit politician, brilliant legislator, and highly successful Senate majority leader,”³ with a Texas size ego; on the other hand, he

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³ Ibid., 137.
was self-conscious “single-minded, manipulative, [and] overbearing.”

He was a force to reckoned with even as a young politician in Texas.

At the age of 28, Johnson quickly rose to stardom when he was elected to Congress. In Washington and Texas he gained a name for himself, so much so that when he ran for Governor in 1941 he was declared the winner on Election Day. But by the next day ballot boxes stuffed with extra votes for his opponents robbed Johnson of the victory. Johnson’s team never forgot how they were robbed of the win, so when he ran for the Senate in 1948 many members of his team vowed to secure the win for him no matter what the actual vote count totaled. In the end, the election “hinged on the “Duke of Duval County,” George Parr, the man who controlled the votes in South Texas.” The election had come down to one man’s support since “George Parr controlled that county and those people voted the way he wanted them to vote.” When Precinct Box 13 was turned in, the votes in the box looked “like there had been a change in ink and it looked like 200 or 202 or 203 names had been added to the poll list in a different ink by a different hand.” Johnson was handed the win, but the scandal

4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Quote by John Connally, LBJ Campaign Aide, in Ibid.

8. Homer Dean, LBJ Campaign Supporter, in Ibid.
surrounding that election followed him for the duration of his career. Johnson made the best of the situation and assumed his spot in the Senate, with a new nickname “Landslide Lyndon.”

Once in the Senate, Johnson worked hard to learn the ropes, quickly making friends and surrounding himself with influential people. Johnson’s hard work did not go unnoticed; he was given the position of Party Whip and two years later he was elected Democratic Leader. Then, in 1954, he became Senate Majority Leader. In this position, Johnson truly became a wheeler-dealer. Robert Dallek, an LBJ biographer, stated, “there was no more powerful Majority Leader in American history. He understood the way the Senate worked. He understood what senators needed and what they wanted. He had biographies on each of them, so that he knew what their tastes and intentions and aims and desires and wishes and hopes were.”

Johnson’s co-conspirators in the Senate bartered votes with skill and efficiency for years. However, the pace Johnson was setting in the Senate was taking a toll on his health; the only time he slowed down was when he suffered a heart attack, which put him out of commission for a while. By the time he returned to the Senate, many members of his party questioned his loyalty to the Democratic Party.

For years Johnson had courted members from across the party line, like President Dwight Eisenhower, and many Liberal Democrats were fed up with his lack

9. Ibid.

10. Robert Dallek, LBJ Biographer, in Ibid.
of loyalty to several key democratic issues (civil rights, housing, and jobs). When the Civil Rights Act of 1957 came to the Senate, Johnson saw it as an opportunity to show his dedication to the Democratic Party. He played each side against the other to push them to negotiate and pass the Act. Johnson made many concessions during the negotiation process and by the time the bill was approved it was extremely watered down. Once implemented the bill achieved very little; regardless of this Johnson saw it as a victory. Most Democrats saw it as proof that Johnson was still finessing his way down party lines, in order to please Southern Conservatives.

By 1960 Johnson began making his desire to become President known around Washington, but the Democratic Party favored a young Senator named John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy won the nomination, he asked Johnson to be his running mate. This angered conservatives and liberals. From a Conservative perspective, Johnson’s presence on a ticket would surely win Kennedy key votes in Southern states; from a liberal perspective, Johnson was far from liberal. Kennedy knew Johnson was a controversial choice; his brother Bobby Kennedy despised Johnson. Kennedy knew it was a gamble, but he needed those Southern votes, because no Catholic had ever been elected President. In the end, Kennedy was right; he edged out Nixon in key states.

Kennedy assumed office in January 1961 with Johnson at his side. Then he was sent on a fact-finding mission to Saigon to discuss possible troop deployments. During his trip he did not secure Ngo Dinh Diem’s support for U.S. troop deployment. When he

11. Ibid.
returned to Washington he recommended to Kennedy that the U.S. should develop a clear cut plan for Southeast Asia and be aware that a commitment to Southeast Asia might mean a major commitment of U.S. forces. Johnson’s assessment would prove true by mid-1962, as Kennedy increased the number of military advisers in Vietnam from 700 to 12,000.

Then in 1963, when the Kennedy Administration began coordinating coup plans against Diem, Johnson opposed the idea even though he conceded that it was extremely hard to work with Diem. Regardless of his apprehension, the plan went ahead in early November and during the course of the coup Diem was assassinated. Both Kennedy and Johnson were troubled by Diem’s assassination. Kennedy had only wanted him removed from office and Johnson had opposed the coup from the start because removing an ally from power seemed irrational. Now the situation in South Vietnam seemed even more precarious. Unfortunately, before Kennedy could clear up the situation in South Vietnam he was assassinated during a late November trip to Dallas.

President Johnson’s Handling of the Growing Conflict in Vietnam from November 1963 to August 1964

When Johnson assumed the presidency, he was faced with the daunting decision of whether to continue Kennedy’s policies in Vietnam or to establish his own. Johnson


decided to continue Kennedy’s policies in Vietnam. Since Kennedy was a popular president, and his sudden death only made him more popular in the eyes of Americans, the last thing Johnson wanted to do after Kennedy’s death was to appear inconsiderate of his predecessor’s policies. Therefore, Johnson “pledged to honor his martyred predecessor’s commitment to an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam.”

He hoped to achieve this by retaining key Kennedy advisers and by constructing a more rigorous U.S. military presence in South Vietnam. Once the military was in place, Johnson’s strategy was “to do enough but not too much in South Vietnam, navigating the treacherous waters between letting the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies win, and increasing American involvement to the point where it threatened his Great Society programs.” Johnson’s Great Society program was “the most ambitious legislative program of domestic reforms since Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.”

Johnson had no real desire to fully commit more U.S. troops to Vietnam, because he preferred to concentrate on domestic issues. But Diem’s assassination “opened the Pandora’s box of conflicts latent in South Vietnamese society.” For instance, the power vacuum left by Diem was filled by General Duong Van Minh, “who

16. Ibid.
17. Herring, America’s Longest War, 136.
formed a military revolutionary council, composed of twelve members who bickered endlessly” on all South Vietnam matters.\textsuperscript{19} The fractured assembly of generals achieved very little, so a new commitment of more troops became the only way that Johnson felt he could keep the government in South Vietnam afloat. The U.S. press corps remained almost unanimously critical of helping Saigon’s struggling government.\textsuperscript{20} At the end of 1963, their cynicism towards the government in South Vietnam, coupled with the assassination of Diem, made public opinion sway away from escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Additionally, the assassination of Kennedy left the nation uninterested in Vietnam affairs.

Public opinion in “1964 was apathetic and permissive” regarding Vietnam.\textsuperscript{21} For example, a “growing [number] of Americans opposed a major war, and while there was also opposition to withdrawal, the public would likely have gone along with a skillfully executed disengagement.”\textsuperscript{22} Even the majority of the press favored “deescalation and a negotiated settlement.”\textsuperscript{23} The LBJ Administration “was well aware

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20. Winters, Year of the Hare, 176. See also a report from the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs (Manning) to the President, Washington, undated, in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961-1963 3:5, 31-43. \\
21. Herring, America’s Longest War, 148. \\
22. Ibid. \\
23. Ibid.
\end{flushright}
of the American public’s ambivalence.”

Johnson welcomed their disinterest over their contempt over his war effort in Vietnam, as for him “the basic purpose of public and press relations policy on Vietnam was to keep the war off the political agenda.”

He needed Vietnam to fade to the back of the American conscience. His greatest fear was that walking away from the conflict in Vietnam would blemish all he hoped to achieve during his presidency. By March 1964, the Johnson Administration was knee deep in the planning process to escalate U.S. involvement. Its first strategy was to intensify military pressure on the North while its second strategy was to increase U.S. troop commitments in Vietnam. The Administration just needed a viable excuse for escalating the war into North Vietnam and it received this in August 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.

The Eye of the Storm: The U.S. Media Coverage of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

On August 1, 1964 the South Vietnamese government attacked an island in North Vietnamese waters; the U.S. destroyer USS Maddox had been supporting these attacks. Then on August 2 the USS Maddox encountered North Vietnamese torpedo boats and subsequently the Maddox and the torpedo boats exchanged fire. At the end of the exchange “the torpedo boats were driven away; one was badly damaged” and the


26. Herring, America’s Longest War, 142.
USS Maddox had only been struck by “one North Vietnamese bullet.” Two days later the Maddox was joined by the U.S. destroyer C. Turner Joy and they reported an attack in turbulent seas just sixty miles off North Vietnam’s coastline. The initial reports ended up being inaccurate because in the pitch darkness of the night they encountered adverse weather conditions and their sonar and radar equipment malfunctioned. But, the damage had already been done; Johnson eager to seek Congressional approval to escalate the war had already informed them of the attack and made a television announcement. Immediately after the alleged attacks Johnson authorized retaliatory attacks against the North Vietnamese. The military launched air strikes on the North’s “torpedo boat bases and nearby oil storage dumps.” Then on August 7, Johnson “seized a golden opportunity to secure passage of a congressional resolution authorizing him to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed almost unanimously with only two dissenters. The Gulf of Tonkin Incident provided the Johnson Administration room to escalate the war in Vietnam and to guide the media back into the direction of the Cold War framework.

28. Herring, America’s Longest War, 142.
29. Ibid., 144.
The media and the public eagerly accepted the Johnson Administration’s interpretation of events in Vietnam. The general public and the press “almost uniformly praised” Johnson for his “speed wisdom and restraint” regarding the incident.\(^{31}\) The \textit{New York Times} complimented the President for showing “restraint as well as firmness” to pursuing peace in Vietnam.\(^{32}\) \textit{Time} magazine declared that the “U.S. was united behind the President.”\(^{33}\) Both \textit{The New York Times} and \textit{Time} magazine failed to question the authenticity of the news they were receiving. They never questioned why the North Vietnamese attacked the \textit{USS Maddox} and they never questioned the motives of the Johnson Administration. Instead, they chose to concentrate their efforts on the political crisis in Saigon because “the American press in 1964, much like the Johnson Administration, was trying to feel its way through post-Diem South Vietnam.”\(^{34}\) For months, the President and the press corps focused on the unstable political climate in the South. The situation in South Vietnam troubled Johnson; he became extremely worried about the fate of Vietnam. As a result, a new press policy was formulated.

Whereas prior to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident the U.S. government had tried to maintain control of the media by blocking their access to official information, after the


\(^{34}\) Wyatt, \textit{Paper Soldiers}, 132.
incident the Johnson Administration began to see the benefits of providing the press with selective information. Barry Zorthian became the head of a newly formed agency, titled the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), which was designed “to take charge of both relations with the news media and propaganda operations against the enemy.” Once in charge, he coordinated interviews between correspondents and military officials. He believed that due to wide-scale confusion in the media the government was losing support for the war and that “newsmen had to explain the war properly to the world.” These interviews in 1964 were an attempt to balance the war coverage coming out of Saigon. In the interviews, Zorthian’s officials provided correspondents with information that they hoped would reduce the general confusion regarding Vietnam. The confusion was in large part due to the constantly changing leadership in Vietnam. Since Diem’s death there had been multiple coups and a series of successors such as: General Duong Van Minh, General Nguyen Kahn, then General Duong Van Minh again, then General Nguyen Kahn again, a Provisional Leadership Committee, then General Duong Van Minh again, and finally Phan Khac Suu.

36. Ibid., 109.
37. Ibid., 78-82.
Another perceived problem from Zorthian’s perspective was that often “reporters attempted to judge events in South Vietnam by the standards of the past: daily victories and defeats, ground won and lost, and statistical measures of progress. Those indicators might be valid in a conventional war, but they failed to give more than a partial picture of what was happening in South Vietnam.” 39  Zorthian and Johnson knew the South Vietnamese government needed more U.S. support in order to stabilize its crumbling system and the media had to be brought on board with that idea. In the weeks that followed, the media and the public seemed a great deal more receptive of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Bolstered by the support of the media and the American public, Johnson bought the feuding South Vietnamese government more time through covert attacks on the North. These strategic moves after the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis further entangled America into the Vietnam conflict, to an extent that “scholars now agree that late 1964, early 1965 was the pivotal period in [Johnson’s] escalation of the Vietnam War.” 40


By 1965, Vietnam War was a powder keg issue and Johnson was sitting on top of it; he knew from the start that he would take the brunt of the backlash if the situation in Vietnam deteriorated. Johnson hoped that day would never come. The situation in


40. Herring, America’s Longest War, 147.
Vietnam was “the biggest damned mess [Johnson] ever saw.”\textsuperscript{41} However, in March Johnson increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam in order to keep the North Vietnamese Communist at bay. He launched a “sustained bombing program against the North,” that was orchestrated “to relieve the pressure on the increasingly unstable South Vietnamese government.”\textsuperscript{42} This bombing campaign became known as Operation Rolling Thunder. Then in anticipation of North Vietnamese retaliation for the operation he sent two battalions of Marines to Vietnam in March 1965 to defend an airbase in Da Nang.\textsuperscript{43} Meanwhile, General Nguyen Van Thieu assumed power in South Vietnam and the Johnson Administration viewed him as a “capable military leader.”\textsuperscript{44} They began coordinating efforts to deploy more American troops in July. Therefore, on July 28 Johnson held a press conference to deliver the information to the press in order to place a positive spin on the information before it was leaked to the press. At the press conference, Johnson “announced only a modest deployment of 50,000 — half of the increase he had decided upon”\textsuperscript{45} and stated that this new commitment “does not imply


\textsuperscript{42} Wyatt, \textit{Paper Soldiers}, 131.

\textsuperscript{43} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 155-156.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{45} Hallin, \textit{The Uncensored War}, 60.
any change of policy...[and] it does not imply any change of objective." He made these statements all the while knowing that the policy had changed with the commitment of more U.S. troops and increased military pressure on the North.

By August 1965 Johnson could already hear the early murmurings of discontent within the American public since 39 percent of Americans polled were against the war. Regardless of this, Johnson pushed ahead with his plans for Vietnam; he tightened his hold on the media in Vietnam through misinformation and restrictions, in order to circumvent a media backlash. When “the 1965 buildup began, the American command tightened restriction on the media, particularly on access to American air bases.” He hoped that this would prevent details from being leaked to the press about covert operations. But, as the American military forces began to swell in South Vietnam, so did the American press corps and it became harder to control the information the press had access to once they entered the country.

The American press corps flocked to Vietnam eager to increase their coverage of the escalating situation in South Vietnam: thirteen staff members were added to the staff of the AP and UPI; Newsweek sent two additional reporters; Time and U.S. News set up bureaus in Vietnam, and each television network gained more than twenty staff

46. Ibid., 61.


48. Hallin, The Uncensored War, 127.
members, in addition to establishing offices in Saigon. Wide-scale censorship of the media in Saigon was not an option because any “effective censorship would have required U.S. court-martial jurisdiction to be extended not only to American civilians in South Vietnam, but also to third-country nationals — reporters from Asia and Western Europe.” The U.S. government required that correspondents become accredited, as noted below:

…correspondents accredited to U.S. forces agreed to a set of rules outlining fifteen categories of information, which they were not allowed to report without authorization. They were forbidden, for example, to report troop movements or casualty figures until these were officially announced to Saigon. Violation of these rules could result in revocation or suspension of a reporter’s accreditation.

Even with these restrictions “for the most part journalists in Vietnam were free to go where they pleased and report what they wished.” Television and new crews traveled with American soldiers into the field where they could obtain personal accounts and footage depicting “American boys in action.”

49. Ibid., 133. This source is originally located in “Correspondents In-Country,” Robert Shaplen Papers, December 24, 1965, box 9. Mass Communications History Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

50. Hallin, The Uncensored War, 127-128.

51. Ibid., 128.

52. Ibid., 129.

53. Ibid., 134.
Television coverage that came out of Vietnam during this time period was for the most part American centric. This viewpoint permeated U.S. television coverage because “television’s most important sources in 1965-67 were American soldiers in the field; television reported the war from their point of view, and as long as they remained supportive of it, there would be strong tendency for television to be so as well.”

Footage from 1965 was weaved together to create personal stories about American soldiers, “the Good Guys,” fighting against the Communists, or “Reds.” Daily television reports usually provided a brief battlefield roundup and “a glimpse of one very small part of the war, saying little explicitly about its wider significance. The big picture was filled in primarily by the anchor.”

During this time frame the networks were very cautious of how they depicted soldiers in the field. CBS issued the following directive:

Producers and editors must exercise great caution before permitting pictures of casualties to be shown. This also applies to pictures of soldiers in a state of shock. Obviously, good taste and consideration for families of deceased, wounded or shocked takes precedence. Shots can be selected that are not grisly, the purpose being not to avoid showing the ugly side of war, but rather to avoid offending families of war victims.

54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 141.
57. Ibid., 140.
Television coverage of the war portrayed the war from a humanistic angle. The war was approached “from inside American foreign policy, from the point of view of those carrying it out, with very little critical distance.” During 1965, newspaper and magazine coverage also tried to present this perspective of the war, as “editors at *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* were keenly aware that they had to compete with television, to offer more than the images of war that flickered on television screens in living rooms across America.” Both television reporters and newspaper correspondents sought out American soldiers, in order to develop stories that “presented American combatants as noble warriors.” News coverage of the war remained fairly positive and had less and less to do with the Cold War ideology and the “global stakes in Vietnam.” Instead, television proposed that “war is a national endeavor… war is an American tradition… war is manly… winning is what counts… and war is rational.” Dissenting ideas were rarely portrayed. As a result, few media sources in 1965 covered the growing anti-war movement.

Since early 1965, there had been a growing anti-war movement in America. The movement gained momentum through demonstrations and teach-ins on college campuses.

59. Ibid., 135.


61. Ibid., 77.

campuses across the United States. Many members of the media delivered news of these protest movements without really examining their implications on foreign policy. The few that did cover them had trouble understanding the distinct shift in liberal and conservative support for the President, though, one reporter of The New York Times summed it up best when he identified the movement as the “Liberal-Conservative Paradox.”63 The author went on to state that there appeared to be a correlation between Johnson’s escalation of the war and public support: the more Johnson escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam the less liberals supported the President and the more the conservatives supported him.64 This correlation was an indicator of problems with Johnson’s policies in Vietnam, but few members of the media addressed those shortcomings.

By mid-1965 both television and print media coverage began to occasionally cover stories that shed a negative light on U.S. involvement in Vietnam. For example, on August 5, a television broadcast of the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite aired a controversial television report by Morley Safer, which discussed American soldiers burning down the homes of Vietnamese civilians.65 After the episode aired, the CBS president received an angry phone call from Johnson and the network was


64. Ibid.

“flooded with calls and letters” from viewers that were “critical of Safer’s report and the negative light it cast upon American servicemen.” Newspaper coverage of a similar incident emphasized the futility of the situation in Vietnam. In this case, Charles Mohr, a reporter for the New York Times wrote an article that addressed village attacks from the perspectives of a South Vietnamese citizen and an American soldier. The South Vietnamese citizen told Mohr “the 10-year old children who witnessed their village being burned are the ones who at 15 will take up rifles for the Vietcong and fight to the death.” The American soldier condemned the village burning but added “it’s sometimes hard for a marine under fire to be a diplomat.” It was the first article that discussed the war from a South Vietnamese viewpoint and from a U.S. soldier’s perspective. In the article, both of them described the attacks on villages as wrong and as part of a much larger problem with America’s approach to fighting the war in Vietnam. The article also chastised the Johnson Administration’s attempts to “deemphasize the importance of civilian deaths and the burning of village huts at the hands of United States Marines.” The article stated that these types of incidents made many people question the legitimacy of America’s war effort in Vietnam.


68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.
Not surprisingly, by late 1965, large-scale protests against the Vietnam War were well underway in major cities all over the world. In the U.S. that November, Norman Morrison, an anti-war advocate and pacifist, set himself on fire outside the third floor window of Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense. Although McNamara did not witness the self-immolation, Morrison’s death bothered him. Years later, in his book titled *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, McNamara disclosed “Morrison’s death was a tragedy not only for his family but also for me and the country. It was an outcry against the killing that was destroying the lives of so many Vietnamese and American youth.” Morrison’s self-immolation also bothered other Americans because it had an eerie resemblance to the immolations by Buddhist monks in Vietnam during the 1963 Buddhist Crisis. Others were outraged at Morrison’s actions, especially since he had brought his youngest daughter with him that day. However, media coverage of the incident appeared fairly detached. But many members of the media had strong opinions regarding the November 27, 1965 march on the White House and the Washington Monument, which included an estimated 15,000 to 50,000 adults. The anti-war march shocked and baffled many onlookers because the crowd


for the most part consisted of typical middle-class adults.\(^{73}\) Their peaceful anti-war demonstration showed the media and many Americans that the anti-war movement was not just for students and hippies. The media quickly accepted public dissent as part of Vietnam’s expanding story. By 1966, television news networks made public dissent a regular part of television news coverage by incorporating footage of the anti-war movement into daily coverage of the war.\(^{74}\) International print media sources also started including coverage of the war from the North Vietnamese perspective, but the American media did not.

Meanwhile, in late December 1966, North Vietnam welcomed its first American correspondent, Harrison E. Salisbury of the *New York Times*. Salisbury was the first American correspondent to be granted access to North Vietnam, without being captured. While in North Vietnam, he wrote fourteen articles “based on his own observations and on information furnished to him during tours conducted by North Vietnamese officials in Hanoi and surrounding towns.”\(^{75}\) In his first article, “A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to U.S. Raids,” Salisbury discussed the U.S. bombing campaigns and Vietnamese civilian casualties in North Vietnam.\(^{76}\) In all of his articles,


\(^{74}\) Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, 192.


he focused on the psychological effects of this type of bombing campaign on Vietnamese civilian morale and the damage done to any hopes of America winning the support of North Vietnamese civilians in the fight against Communism. Salisbury’s articles angered military officials, other members of the media, and the American public because they contradicted everything the U.S. government had been vehemently denying for years. For years the Administration had denied hitting civilian targets in North Vietnam. Over the next couple of weeks, many newspapers including *The New York Times*, printed articles that refuted Salisbury’s articles. Regardless of these opposing viewpoints Salisbury’s articles were enlightening because “beginning with Salisbury, the American people could see their enemy not as animals, but as another people trying to make a life for themselves and their children amid hardship and sacrifice.” His articles forced people to question the credibility of the information they were receiving from the U.S. government.

The media coverage of 1967 was a blend of misinformation and doubts. Throughout the course of the year, the Johnson Administration fed journalists information that the U.S. was making “solid progress” and in no way in a “stalemate” situation, but more and more articles were contradicting that viewpoint. Even


79. Ibid., 178.
television coverage ebbed away at American support of the war. David Halberstam summed up television’s effects on public support for the war best when he stated, “the war played in American homes, and it played too long. It made American involvement there seem endless.”80 Daily television coverage “magnified the seemingly interminable nature of the struggle.”81 The lack of progress and overall doubt that permeated American culture paled in comparison to the feelings of utter defeat that swept through the nation after the Tet Offensive of 1968.

**Television Coverage of the Tet Offensive and Destruction of the Heroic American War Image, 1968**

On January 31, 1968 (at the beginning of the Tet New Year holiday), the National Liberation Front (NLF) / Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive, which consisted of a series of strategic attacks throughout South Vietnam. These attacks occurred in “major cities, provincial and district capitals, and rural villages.”82 During the course of the offensive, the Vietcong “struck thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, five of the six major cities, sixty-four district capitals, and fifty hamlets.”83 They laid siege to many of these targets for hours, days, and, in some rare cases, weeks.

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The siege on the grounds of the U.S. embassy lasted for six-and-a-half hours.\textsuperscript{84} The Vietcong controlled the city of Huế for twenty-five days, during which time they murdered anyone suspected of having ties to the South Vietnamese government.\textsuperscript{85} Throughout the course of the Tet Offensive, an estimated 80,000 Vietcong troops participated in the attacks.\textsuperscript{86} The Vietcong were eventually thwarted after suffering heavy casualties throughout South Vietnam. Although the Vietcong lost the Tet Offensive from a tactical standpoint, “they came away with an overwhelming psychological and hence political victory.”\textsuperscript{87}

Media coverage of the Tet Offensive shocked many Americans; by the morning “of February 1, it seemed that the whole country was engulfed in the combat.”\textsuperscript{88} When the initial media coverage arrived back in the U.S., newspaper accounts failed to compete with the vivid and confusing images being broadcast into the living rooms of fifty million Americans.\textsuperscript{89} The situation on the ground throughout South Vietnam

\textsuperscript{84} Karnow, \textit{Vietnam: A History}, 526.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 529-531.

\textsuperscript{86} Duiker, \textit{Vietnam Revolution in Transition}, 80.


\textsuperscript{88} Wyatt, \textit{The Uncensored War}, 181.

\textsuperscript{89} Karnow, \textit{Vietnam: A History}, 526.
looked extremely chaotic: “dead bodies lay amid the rubble and rattle of automatic
gunfire as dazed American soldiers and civilians ran back and forth trying to flush out
assailants.”\textsuperscript{90} Through the chaos and confusion it became easy to see that the Johnson
Administration had lied about the progress being made in South Vietnam. A \textit{New York
Times} editorial stated, “the scope and intensity and the tenacious thrust of the
Communist attacks clearly caught a supposedly alerted allied command badly off
balance.”\textsuperscript{91} The most damning images of them all were the photographs and footage of
Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Chief of the National Police, walking toward a
Vietcong prisoner and shooting him in the head. On February 2, the grisly images of the
execution ran on the cover of multiple newspapers and the television footage of the
incident ran on NBC’s Huntley-Brinkley Report.\textsuperscript{92} ABC also ran footage of the
moments leading up to the execution and the immediate moments following the
execution. Their cameraman missed the actual execution, so they settled for showing
photos in between the two video sequences.\textsuperscript{93} Regardless of the medium it was
delivered on, the images of the prisoner’s execution shocked many Americans. As far as
most Americans were concerned, the Tet Offensive was an embarrassment for South

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{93} Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detief Junker, \textit{1968: The World
Transformed}, Publication of the German Historical Institute (Cambridge: Cambridge
Vietnam and the U.S.; the “televised accounts of the bloody fighting in Saigon and Hue made a mockery of Johnson’s and [General] Westmoreland’s optimistic yearend reports, widening the credibility gap.” Media coverage of the Tet Offensive “had little effect on American public opinion, it served nevertheless to reinforce the doubts that had surfaced within the Johnson Administration during the previous year.”

A dejected Johnson and McNamara knew the Tet Offensive would be the end of their current careers; they both had miscalculated the Vietcong’s fighting capabilities and entrenched the U.S. in a war that seemed endless. It became painfully obvious to both Johnson and McNamara that the only option left was to negotiate with North Vietnam. McNamara, consumed by doubt and guilt, resigned on February 28.

Johnson, convinced he could gain better terms at the negotiating table through “bombing and other forms of warfare,” declared he would not run for reelection on March 31 and that he would not escalate the war any further by sending more U.S. troops to Vietnam. For the rest of his presidency, he continued to use bomb diplomacy to get North Vietnam to the negotiating table. The North Vietnamese stalled

94. Herring, America’s Longest War, 232-233.
97. Ibid.
negotiations throughout the remainder of his presidency. Therefore, LBJ was forced to leave the matter to his successor.

**Conclusion: An Analysis of LBJ’s Handling of the Vietnam War and the Media’s Role**

Johnson knew the stakes in Vietnam from the start; he stated, “it’s damned easy to get in a war but it’s gonna be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in.”

It is unfortunate that, at the time of his statement, Johnson did not fully grasp how much those words would foreshadow the situation in Vietnam throughout the course of his administration. The erroneous nature of his initial policies would trap his presidency in an endless stalemate. Many of Johnson’s policies regarding the war were designed around some form of manipulation of the American people, the media, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese forces. His initial policies and mismanagement of the media stemmed out of his insecurities “especially in the area of foreign policy.” If Johnson had trusted his initial assessment of Vietnam, which was not to involve troops the war would have never escalated out of his control. Every step he made in his first year regarding Vietnam was an attempt to either maintain his predecessor’s policies or to outdo his predecessor. These misguided attempts to follow Kennedy’s wishes and his desire to surround himself with Kennedy’s advisors entangled his Administration even further in the Vietnam War. The more he became a part of Vietnam’s tragic history, the


more he became consumed with ending it on his terms. Johnson refused to be the “architect of surrender.”\textsuperscript{100} After becoming president, Johnson saw “the emerging crisis in Vietnam as a crucial test of strength for his personal prestige, his authority as president of the United States and leader of the Free World, indeed for his manhood.”\textsuperscript{101} He wagered it all on lies and manipulation because U.S. involvement in Vietnam was wrong from the very beginning; “the United States never developed a strategy appropriate for the war it was fighting, in part because it assumed that the mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient. The failure of one level of force led to the next and then the next, until the war attained a degree of destructiveness no one would have thought possible.”\textsuperscript{102}

As far as media coverage of the war is concerned, the media did not lose the war for Johnson; if anything, during the first few years of his presidency media coverage helped promote his policies in Vietnam. The eager press of late 1963 and early 1964 accepted and promoted Johnson’s polices through Cold War rhetoric. Reporters also supported his timely attacks on North Vietnam in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Even as public support began to deteriorate in 1965, media coverage promoted and aggrandized the Administration’s heroic war image. Television coverage of the war

\textsuperscript{100} President Johnson speaking with Senator Eugene McCarthy on February 1, 1966. Located on White House Tapes \url{http://128.143.21.78/clips/1966_0201_mccarthy/} (accessed March 15, 2010).

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 171.
in the late 60’s did from time to time provide evidence of dissenting information, although it also painted a glorified picture of war. In fact, media coverage of the war remained fairly positive until late 1967 when the American public began to lose faith in the war. By the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, American support was already waning. Many critics consider the media’s coverage of the Tet Offensive the prominent reason why Johnson lost the support of the people. Yet, in reality “the Tet Offensive despite its drama and intensity was but one important milestone on the road to that realization.”

In the end, the media coverage during the Johnson Administration was a bellwether of U.S. public opinion. However, as the next chapter will discuss the media would once again redefine its role by emerging as a Fourth Estate during the Nixon Administration.

CHAPTER IV

President Richard M. Nixon acquired a toxic Vietnam situation in January 1969. This chapter will identify the very important role of the media in the events that occurred during Nixon’s Administration, especially his covert actions in Indochina. The scope of this section covers Nixon’s term as president until his resignation. The chapter is divided into five sections: an introductory section with background information on Nixon before his presidency, U.S. media coverage of the bombing in Indochina, the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the media’s take on the Paris Peace Accords and Nixon’s resignation, and an analysis of Nixon’s Vietnam policy and the media coverage of the Vietnam War.

Introduction: Richard M. Nixon before He Became President

Richard M. Nixon, a Quaker from California, was a quiet, ambitious and mysterious politician. As a child, he dreamed of being a politician. When he was in the eighth grade, he wrote, “I would like to study law and enter politics for an occupation… so that I might be of some good to the people.”1 His mother believed his ambitious nature was probably a result of his “determination to help make up for [their] loss by making [them] very proud of him,” since two of Nixon’s brothers had succumbed to

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tuberculosis at an early age.\(^2\) Nixon may have felt some guilt for being alive when his brothers were dead.\(^3\) Nixon was a dutiful son, who put aside his early dreams of pursuing an education at Harvard and Yale to stay closer to home in order to help his family during the Great Depression. He enrolled at a local college, Whittier University, and excelled at numerous activities: he was a skilled “student politician, an accomplished actor, a champion debater,” and he started a club named the Orthogonians or “square shooters.”\(^4\) The club was comprised of “students who took pride in working their way through college.”\(^5\) Nixon remained a diligent student even when he started law school at Duke University. There he studied tirelessly and earned the nickname “Gloomy Gus.” In the end, all of the studying paid off as he graduated third in his class.\(^6\) At Whittier and Duke and throughout the course of his life his very presence “generated a powerful response from friend and foe alike. Many loved him; many hated him, but few knew exactly who he was.”\(^7\)

\(^2\) Hannah Nixon quoted in Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid.
After graduation, Nixon was forced to return home after being turned down by multiple East Coast law firms and the FBI. His mother got him a job at a small law firm back in Whittier. Nixon disliked working in a small-town law firm, so eventually he took a job in Washington, D.C. at the Office of Price Administration (OPA). At OPA Nixon worked hard in order to excel and to avoid socializing with the more liberal members of his office. He also developed conservative views and a strong disdain for government bureaucracy.\(^8\) Nixon worked at the OPA until 1942 when he joined the Navy and was deployed to the South Pacific. In the South Pacific, he skillfully acquired food, liquor and other supplies for the other troops. He also became a card shark; it is estimated that Nixon earned 6,000 to 7,000 dollars there from playing poker.\(^9\) Nixon sent every penny of it home to Whittier and used it to fund his first political campaign after he returned home from the Navy.

On his return to Whittier, he quickly reestablished old contacts with local Republicans. One of these contacts approached Nixon in 1946 to run for Congress. Nixon’s first campaign was against Jerry Voorhis, a five-term congressman. Nixon chipped away at Voorhis’s credibility by accusing him of being a Communist sympathizer during the onset of the Cold War and it won him the election. Nixon did not have trouble making these accusations, even though there was no evidence to

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support his allegations, because “in his eyes anything that helped him win the election was valid.”¹⁰ He held this belief throughout his political career.

Once in Washington, Nixon was assigned to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), where he made a name for himself by being tough on Communism, as in the Alger Hiss case. Nixon was adamant that Alger Hiss, a former advisor to President Roosevelt, was a Communist, so he staked his career on it. Nixon knew that if he was wrong the media would make sure that the Hiss case would end his career. In the end, Whitaker Chambers, Hiss’s accuser and a former Communist sympathizer, led them to a hollowed-out pumpkin that contained microfilm of State Department files in Hiss’s handwriting.¹¹ Nixon knew Hiss’s conviction would help his career, so he capitalized on it by running for a Senate seat the same year Hiss was convicted.

During his 1950 campaign for the Senate, Nixon earned the name “Tricky Dick” for his questionable campaign strategies.¹² For example, in the primaries Nixon cross-filed, which meant, “that he could run as both a Democrat and a Republican.” He also passed out pamphlets called “As One Democrat to Another,” even though he was a Republican. He once again resorted to calling his opponent a Communist sympathizer, offered voter incentives in the final hours and referred to his opponent as “the pink

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.
¹¹ Ibid., 37-44.
¹² Ibid., 51.
These tactics boxed his opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, into a campaign largely based on foreign policy. Nixon called all the shots and he was “rhetorically impregnable” when discussing Communism. His opponent did not have a chance. After four short years in politics and at the age of thirty-eight, Nixon was elected to the Senate by a landslide.

Once in the Senate, he won over both major Republican wings with his hard line on Communism and his focus on foreign policy. Nixon gained the attention of Dwight D. Eisenhower, leading presidential frontrunner for the Republican Party. He quickly won a spot on the ticket as Eisenhower’s running mate because “Nixon would be in the best position to bring balance and votes to the ticket.” Nixon also brought controversy to the ticket when the New York Post accused him of having a secret campaign fund that he used for personal expenses. The allegations were false, but it did smear his name and the only way Nixon saw out of it was to openly admit his personal finances to the American people. On September 23, 1952 Nixon delivered his famous “Checkers Speech” in which he disclosed all his assets and earnings, including the only gift his

13. Ibid.


16. Ibid., 33.

17. Ibid., 35.
family ever received and kept, their dog Checkers. The “Checkers Speech” won Nixon numerous fans and helped solidify the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket. On Election Day the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket garnered 55 percent of the popular vote, winning Republicans the White House and the majority in the House.

After being elected Vice President, Nixon became “the most influential vice president the nation had yet seen.”\textsuperscript{18} During his tenure, he concentrated on foreign policy, becoming the figurehead for controversial partisan policies during Eisenhower’s first term. At times Nixon was a liability for Eisenhower. For example, at a forum Nixon embarrassed Eisenhower when he stated that the United States, “the leader of the free world,” would probably put American troops on the ground in Vietnam to fight the Communist threat in Southeast Asia and that he supported that idea.\textsuperscript{19} This statement incited many headlines as well as anger from politicians. Eisenhower was forced to “tell reporters that the use of U.S. troops was unlikely but not impossible.”\textsuperscript{20} Incidents like these made Eisenhower question putting Nixon back on the ticket for his reelection. However, Nixon pressed the issue and Eisenhower begrudgingly accepted Nixon on the ticket.

\begin{flushright}
18. Ibid., 46.
19. Ibid., 48.
20. Ibid., 49.
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Eisenhower was then reelected and Nixon “entered his second vice presidential term as the Republican heir apparent.”\(^{21}\) During his second term, Nixon squared off against Khruschev in an impromptu debate on the “relative merits of the U.S. and Russian ways of life.”\(^{22}\) The debate was seen all around the world and Nixon came off as humorous yet tough on Communism.\(^{23}\) His cool collected manner during the debate earned him the Republican presidential nomination in 1960. Nixon was now set to square off against John F. Kennedy (JFK), the frontrunner for the Democratic ticket, in the first televised presidential debates. These televised debates became more important than traditional campaigning tactics, such as political rallies and old-fashioned hand shaking.\(^{24}\) During the first debate an injured and extremely fatigued Nixon looked “heartless and insincere” while a well rested and suntanned Kennedy seemed “poised and confident.”\(^{25}\) The first “debate attracted more than 100 million viewers” making it the “largest television audience” at that point in history.\(^{26}\) The televised debate boosted


\(^{24}\) Ibid.


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Kennedy at the polls allowing him to edge Nixon out on election night by a little more than 100,000 votes.\textsuperscript{27}

A defeated Nixon returned to California and eventually decided to run for governor in 1962. After a bitter campaign that year, Nixon lost the race for governor. He then delivered a speech to the media stating, “just think how much you’re going to be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference.”\textsuperscript{28} *Time* magazine declared that “barring a miracle, his political career ended” after he delivered that speech.\textsuperscript{29} However, their assumptions were wrong because Nixon was on the brink of a comeback. Six months later, Nixon appeared on *The Jack Paar Show* and won over the audience and viewers with his original piano composition and humor. During the interview, he showed the nation he was not afraid to poke fun at himself and that his career was not over. After the show, Nixon found work as a Wall Street lawyer, but eventually he found it uninteresting, so he returned to the world of politics. In the wake of Barry Goldwater’s defeat to Lyndon B. Johnson, Nixon began working “the Republican congressional circuit tirelessly, traveled to 35 states, barnstormed for 105 candidates. And when the party made a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Parmet, *Richard M Nixon*, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Richard Nixon speech “Gentlemen, This is My Last Press Conference,” delivered on November 6, 1962. Located in Rick Perlstein’s, *Richard Nixon: Speeches, Writing, Documents* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 112.
\end{itemize}
dramatic comeback in 1966, there was hardly a Republican who didn’t owe Nixon a favor. Then Nixon went on a tour of four continents to strengthen “his grasp on foreign policy.” Nixon used his new notoriety to win the Republic ticket for the 1968 election. Throughout the campaign he avoided discussing Vietnam and concentrated on the “forgotten Americans,” while his opponent, Hubert Humphrey, was forced to tackle the Vietnam issue head on because of internal feuding from within the Democratic Party. The election was so close that Nixon and Humphrey had to wait until the next day for the results, but by the next day Nixon was the obvious winner.


Nixon took office in January 1969 under the assumption that there could be no real military victory in Vietnam, but that he could “scare the North Vietnamese into submission.” He called his idea the Madman Theory; the optimal goal was to convince the Communists to end the war by making them think he was unpredictable and would resort to anything. Nixon was provided with an opportunity to test his theory when military advisors called for action against North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops in Cambodia. Nixon mulled over the idea of whether to allow bombing in Cambodia, in order to destroy what he believed were Vietcong sanctuaries. While “he would have


31. Ibid.


33. Ibid., 590.
preferred to resume strategic bombing in North Vietnam,” he feared that doing so would affect the peace discussions in Paris.³⁴ Meanwhile, in February the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive of 1969, “shelling or probing by ground attack some 117 military installations and population centers throughout the country.”³⁵ Over the next few weeks the North Vietnamese forces and Vietcong launched multiple large-scale attacks against the United States; their total “artillery attacks during March exceeded those [the Vietcong] had conducted during the Tet Offensive of 1968 by 1½ times. The number of rounds [the Vietcong] fired during those attacks [were] also greater, exceeding Tet 1968 totals by 31 percent.”³⁶ The North Vietnamese forces were gearing up for even more attacks during the next months. William Beecher of the New York Times summed up Nixon’s options in his article titled “Vietnam Dilemma: U.S. Sees Necessity to Deter Attacks But Wants to Avoid Risk of Escalation,” where he discussed the possible pitfalls of allowing these attacks to go unanswered and the possible negative aspects of retaliating. He also stated that despite the turmoil in Vietnam the general public seemed fairly content to allow Nixon time to deal with the situation.³⁷ The media also appeared content with giving Nixon time to figure out his quandary in

³⁴. Ibid., 591.


³⁶. Ibid., 67.


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Vietnam, but as the attacks continued both the American people and the media became more skeptical of the information being relayed back to the media. For instance, Charles Mohr of the *New York Times* stated that “investigations in the field have indicated in case after case that the intensity and results of the current enemy offensive were understated in communiqués and by official allied spokesmen.”

The Nixon Administration ignored these allegations and started making preparations to retaliate against the media and the North Vietnamese.

In mid-March, Nixon agreed to allow bombing in Cambodia because the Communists had fired rockets into Saigon. It appeared that “the only way to get the Communists to negotiate was to do something on the military front…something they [would] understand.” The bombing in Cambodia became known as operation “MENU, its individual components BREAKFAST, LUNCH, SNACK, [and] DESERT.” Nixon stipulated that these attacks be kept secret from the general public and other government officials. A great deal of this secrecy was achieved by creative bookkeeping. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the U.S. National Security Advisor, thought that the “key ingredient in the operation was total secrecy.” They both thought that if

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their covert bombing campaign was exposed it would cause an international crisis because it did not respect Cambodia’s neutrality.⁴²

Over the next few months, details of various U.S. bombing attacks in Cambodia began to leak out.⁴³ The biggest leak came in May in a New York Times article which gave a detailed account of operation MENU and discussed Nixon’s intentions in Cambodia. When the article was published, the public did not appear outraged. However, Nixon and Kissinger were livid as the only way the reporter could have found out about the operation was through someone leaking the information. Nixon wanted to hold someone accountable, so he asked for wiretaps to be “placed on the telephones of four journalists and thirteen officials, including a member of Kissinger’s own staff.”⁴⁴ This would be the first of many clashes between President Nixon and the media.

Nixon’s military strategy was getting him nowhere with the North Vietnamese Communists and the American forces were still suffering heavy casualties. During “Operation APACHE SNOW, the action at Dong Ap Bia (Hill 937) became known almost immediately as the Battle of Hamburger Hill” after American forces undertook heavy casualties.⁴⁵ The media focused even more on the casualties and Nixon was pressured to start reducing American troops in Vietnam. In June 1969, David Brinkley

⁴². Ibid.


of *NBC Nightly News* stated, “Today in Saigon they announced the casualty figures for the week. And though they came in the form of numbers each one of them was a man, most of them quite young, each with hopes he will never realize, each with families and friends who will never see him alive again.”46 In October, the media exposed Nixon’s bombing campaigns in Laos, a neutral state according to the 1954 Geneva Accords. The Nixon Administration denied it, although the U.S. had been bombing Laos since 1964 in efforts to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main supply route used by the Communists. When questioned about the flights over Laos, each Administration had remained adamant that those missions were nothing more than reconnaissance flights.47 The *New York Times* dubbed the bombings in Laos as part of a larger “twilight war” the U.S. was fighting against the Communists.48 *Time* also discussed the “unseen presence” of the United States in Laos.49 Moreover, news pieces appeared in various other newspapers. In these articles, the media discussed the secrecy around Nixon’s war strategies. Nixon felt as if the media coverage of the war was preventing his secret


strategies from working. He decided the media had to be stopped before they ruined his plans to coerce the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table.

Nixon’s staff formulated a strategy in order to thwart the negative media coverage. In October 1969, an official White House memorandum, titled *The Shot-gun Versus the Rifle*, clearly laid out Nixon’s strategy for communication with the media.\(^{50}\) The memo discussed using the Internal Revenue Service to look into the financial records of media organizations, collaborating with the FCC to monitor networks, utilizing anti-trust regulations to punish media conglomerates, displaying favoritism within the media, and coordinating a large-scale protest of negative network coverage via the Republican National Committee.\(^{51}\) Although few of these plans were ever put into action, Nixon continued to keep an eye on key media anti-war agitators.

By November, Nixon took a defensive approach to dealing with the media. In a televised speech, he appealed to the great “silent majority.” He expressed discontent with the media and the anti-war protestors and identified them as a small minority of the American people. Nixon also stated the following:

> I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and now try to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street…. and that if a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails


\(^{51}\) Ibid., 245-246.
over reason and the will of the majority, this Nation has no future as a free society.  

In this speech, he also discussed Vietnamization, stating that “strengthening the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves when we left” would be the America’s only option. In addition, he stressed that by strengthening South Vietnamese forces he could downsize U.S. forces in Vietnam, which would reduce American casualties and “in essence [turn] the clock back to a time when the American public knew little and cared less about what was going on in Vietnam.” This speech won many people over because it was no longer the question of whether or not the “United States was going to get out, but, rather, how and how fast.”

The Nixon Administration continued its attacks on the media with Vice President Agnew’s speech on November 13, 1969 at the Midwest Republican Conference. In his speech, Agnew attacked the integrity of network commentators and executive producers and compared network television reporters to judges presiding over national matters. Agnew questioned their credibility when he stated, “perhaps the

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53. Ibid., 182.


55. Ibid., 192.

56. Porter, Assault on the Media, 255.
place to start looking for a credibility gap is not the offices of the Government in Washington but in the studios of the networks in New York.”57 He also stressed the importance of the media and pointed out that the Nixon Administration had no intention to censor the media. Nevertheless he felt that American people should require some form of accountability; “we’d never trust such power, as I’ve described, over public opinion in the hands of an elected Government. It’s time we questioned it in the hands of a small unelected elite.”58 Agnew and Nixon’s requests seemed to work for a while to pacify the media and public outrage over the war, although rumors began surfacing in the media late in November about a massacre in a small village, named My Lai, that had occurred in 1968 during the Johnson Administration.59

By early 1970 Nixon’s Vietnamization program was in full swing and it appeared to be working well enough to start a “phased withdrawal of 150,000 [U.S.] troops over the course of the next year.”60 At the same time, many military officials in Vietnam and members of the Nixon Administration had doubts if the South Vietnamese

57. Ibid., 261.


60. Herring, America’s Longest War, 288.
forces could truly withstand the Communists forces. Nixon knew it was a risk removing U.S. forces from Vietnam, but he also knew he had to give the media and the anti-war protestors some concessions since he had promised the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{61} This concession was cut short after the coup in Cambodia.

After Cambodia’s Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in March 1970, a “pro-American clique headed by Prime Minister Lon Nol” rose to power.\textsuperscript{62} Nixon deployed troops to Cambodia to bolster up the new regime and to attack North Vietnamese forces in the country. George Herring, a historian, has stated that the “Cambodia Crisis represented yet another effort on the part of a profoundly insecure individual to prove his toughness to an ever widening list of enemies, real and imagined.”\textsuperscript{63} Nixon defended his decisions by claiming, “we take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia, but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we all desire.”\textsuperscript{64} But, as a result of that decision, large-scale protests broke out in the United States. As described below:

Demonstrations erupted at campuses across the nation, and the protest took on new force when four students at Kent State University in Ohio and two at Jackson State College in Mississippi were killed in angry

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 291.
confrontations with the National Guard and police. More than 100,000
demonstrators gathered in Washington the first week of May to protest
Cambodia and Kent State.\textsuperscript{65}

Congress even became outraged about Nixon’s incursion to Cambodia. Only a few
members of Congress were consulted prior to the troop deployment. In June 1970 the
Senate voted to terminate the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964, but they did not force
Nixon to end the war.\textsuperscript{66}

In early 1971 Nixon began to take steps to appease his political opponents in
America by speeding up the time frame of American troop withdrawals. He declared
that 100,000 troops would be removed from Vietnam by the end of 1971, which would
leave only 75,000 combat troops there.\textsuperscript{67} In order to facilitate this withdrawal and buy
time for his Vietnamization program, Nixon stepped up attacks on supply lines and
staging areas in Laos and Cambodia. Then Nixon agreed to provide air support for
South Vietnamese troops during a major ground operation into Laos. These South
Vietnamese troops suffered heavy losses, which called into question the viability of
Nixon’s Vietnamization program.\textsuperscript{68}

Meanwhile, back in the United States protests, demonstrations, and negative
media coverage continued to trouble the Nixon Administration. Every month brought

\textsuperscript{65} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 293.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 294.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 297.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 298.
more negative media coverage of the war or more American anti-war protestors. Early in 1971, the Winter Soldiers investigation by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) exposed many U.S. war crimes in Vietnam. Shortly after the conclusion of the Winter Soldiers investigation there were large anti-war protests in Washington that escalated into the “worst riots in Washington’s history.”69 After this, the media began covering the conclusion of Lieutenant William Calley’s trial for multiple murders during the My Lai Massacre in 1968. In the weeks that followed, newspaper articles debated what actions constituted a war crime in Vietnam and should a war crimes tribunal prosecute those actions. For the most part, the media coverage and the anti-war movement during the first half of 1971 focused on American war crimes, but the publication of the Pentagon Papers in mid-1971 shifted American focus to the decision making process for U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

**Publication of the Pentagon Papers and the U.S. Media Backlash, June 1971-May 1972**

On June 13, 1971, the *New York Times* began publication of excerpts from the Pentagon Papers, a compilation of a “previously secret Pentagon study of the origins and conduct of the war in Vietnam.”70 The publication of these documents was a

69. Ibid, 299.

“watershed” media moment because the documents exposed covert U.S. policies regarding Vietnam and the decision making process behind those policies. The Pentagon Papers were officially titled *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967.* Daniel Ellsberg, “a former Defense Department economist and employee of the Rand Corporation”, leaked the secret study to the *New York Times.* The study exposed serious ethical inconsistencies in the decision-making process for the war.

The initial articles in the *New York Times* caught the attention of very few people. The first article by Neil Sheehan was published on the front page of the Sunday edition with the title “Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement,” and instructions on where to find additional documents located within the paper. Another article, titled “Vast Review of War Took a Year,” traced the origins of the study. For days, the Nixon Administration debated their options. Nixon strongly believed that through these articles “the Democratic administrations would be

71. Porter, *Assault on the Media,* 82.


73. Shapiro, *The Pentagon Papers and the Courts,* 5.


shown in a bad light.” Kissinger, on the other hand, felt that the publication of these materials might jeopardize secret talks with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the PRC had recently agreed to begin talks to normalize relations with the United States. Normalization of relations with China was a critical part of Nixon’s strategy in Vietnam. He thought that if North Vietnam lost China as an ally it would be forced to concede on key issues during the peace negotiations. Few members of the administration knew of the negotiations with China and even fewer knew the full details of the Pentagon study, so many were undecided on how to address the situation with the New York Times. In the end, the administration decided to leap into action to prevent further publication of the secret study.

Thus, the Nixon administration took legal action against the New York Times citing that the publication of any part of the study endangered national security. Nixon’s Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler immediately began arguing that a government “cannot operate its foreign policy in the best interests of the American people if it cannot deal with foreign governments in a confidential way.”77 Then the administration tried to block any future publication of the materials within the study by asking for an injunction based on the Espionage Act.78 Judge Murray Gurfein made a quick ruling in favor of the administration, instructing the New York Times to cease publication of the

76. Porter, Assault on the Media, 85.


78. Porter, Assault on the Media, 89-90.
materials from within the study. However, despite government requests, he did not ask for the newspaper to return copies of the documents to the government. The *New York Times* begrudgingly agreed to comply with the court order and ceased publication, but it also launched an appeal.

Meanwhile, Daniel Ellsberg made more copies of the Pentagon Papers and delivered them to *The Washington Post* and various other papers throughout the country. Ellsberg feared that if he did not do so the story would lose momentum and that the Supreme Court might also side with the government. Nixon’s legal team quickly moved to block publication of the documents at other newspapers. Each court case moved quickly through the judicial system. On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the two primary newspapers involved in the initial publication and lawsuit. For the rest of the year the media coverage revolved around the Pentagon Papers. Full-length publications of the entire study began appearing in bookstores later in the summer. The administration began preparing charges against Daniel Ellsberg for theft and conspiracy and other miscellaneous charges under the Espionage Act of 1917. Although Ellsberg’s theft troubled the administration, the formal trial was delayed until 1973 because the administration had more important issues to focus on for the remainder of 1971.

79. Ibid., 90.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., 105.
One issue was re-establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC. In July 1971, Nixon announced China’s invitation to normalize relations with the United States by allowing him to visit China in 1972. Then, in October 1971, Nixon announced that the Soviet Union had also extended an invitation to him for an official visit to Moscow. In the meantime, Kissinger continued to meet secretly with the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese to negotiate a peace proposal. Both the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese refused the conditions that Nixon had proposed on a U.S. eight-point peace proposal in October. Nixon hoped that the peace proposal and diplomatic trips to China and the Soviet Union would help him win public support before he ran for reelection in 1972. Regardless of his intentions, Nixon did visit China in February and the Soviet Union in May, which opened doors for future relations between the U.S. and both China and the Soviet Union. His visits also greatly influenced the Vietnam peace negotiations for the remainder of 1972.

The Media’s Take on the Paris Peace Accords and Nixon’s Resignation

During the Presidential Election of 1972, Nixon squared off against Democratic Senator George McGovern. Nixon had won over many critics during the course of 1972 with his decisive action in Vietnam and his diplomacy in China. He was ahead in the polls heading into the election, but he still feared what the Democrats had up their sleeves. As a result, a plan was hatched to gather information against the Democrats by breaking in to the Democratic National Committee headquarters. In June five burglars

broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Complex. The burglars were apprehended during the course of the break in. One of the men apprehended had ties to the Committee to Re-elect the President. Allegations began swirling that the Committee had hired and paid off these burglars to not only break in, but also plead guilty. The media pursued the story relentlessly throughout the rest of 1972. Many members of the press believed Nixon was involved. Regardless of this, Nixon won the 1972 election by a landslide. Meanwhile, Kissinger continued secret talks with the North Vietnamese and with the South Vietnamese; he implemented a series of strong arm tactics and he “routinely deceived” both North and South Vietnam. These tactics resulted in a draft for a peace proposal in October. South Vietnam’s president, Nguyen Van Thieu, was adamantly against the proposal and North Vietnam also opposed signing it. The Nixon administration, on the other hand, declared that the October proposal meant that peace was at hand.83

Now that Nixon had secured four more years in office, he focused all of his energy on securing an end to the war. He threatened the South Vietnamese to agree to the proposal or he would sever ties with them. In North Vietnam, he used “jugular diplomacy,”84 which entailed a massive bombing campaign there. During this bombing campaign, “the United States unleashed the most intensive and devastating air attacks of the war, dropping more than 36,000 tons of bombs, exceeding the tonnage for the entire

83. Herring, America’s Longest War, 313.
84. Ibid., 315.
period between 1969 and 1971.” By January 1973, all parties were back at the negotiating table.

In the final days of the negotiations, Nixon “reaffirmed that if Thieu accepted the treaty, he would provide South Vietnam with continued support and would respond with full force if North Vietnam violated the agreement.” Nixon also secretly promised North Vietnam “$3.25 billion in aid for reconstruction and another $1.5 billion in commodities.” When Nixon obtained the approval he needed, on January 27, 1973, the United States, North Vietnam (DRV), South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam), and the Provisional Government (PRG) of South Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords.

Meanwhile, Nixon began preparation to withdraw even more troops and he turned his focus to domestic issues. By 1973, many of the domestic events of 1971 and 1972 had begun to haunt the Nixon Administration. During the course of Daniel Ellsberg’s trial, it was revealed that the government had placed illegal wiretaps and had broken into Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office. The presiding judge dismissed all charges against Ellsberg as a result of the government’s misconduct leading up to the trial and

85. Ibid., 316.
86. Herring, America’s Longest War, 318.
87. Ibid., 326.
because of its failure to provide records of the wiretaps. Then the administration came under attack for the Watergate break in. The Senate Watergate Committee launched a new investigation in early 1973 after more information regarding the burglary emerged in the media. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the New York Times pursued the story relentlessly and they refused to divulge their source within the government, whom they later dubbed Deep Throat. Nixon tried to thwart further investigation into the break-in throughout 1973. The administration was then faced with another scandal when Nixon’s Vice President, Spiro Agnew, was forced to resign in October after being accused of taking bribes. Nixon appointed Gerald R. Ford, the House Minority Leader, to take Agnew’s place in December because of his loyalty, integrity and “confirmability.”

As 1973 drew to a close, impeachment proceedings began against Nixon. The Watergate saga played out daily in public hearings that were broadcast on television. At the end of the proceedings, Nixon stood implicated as a co-conspirator. In August 1974, Nixon resigned. Jim Brown, a freelance reporter, described the situation best when he said, “Immediately after Watergate there was a silence, as though a bleeding man had slipped into a shark pool. After that it was a feeding frenzy. The press corps shredded


90. Braley, Bad News, 520.
the President and all his men. They were skeletonized.”91 Nixon’s resignation came just as an escalation in fighting occurred in Vietnam. Nixon’s successor Gerald Ford would be left to handle the deteriorating situation in Vietnam.


Richard M. Nixon is one of the most intriguing presidents that the U.S. has ever had.92 He is an enigma not for what he achieved, but for how far he was willing to go to achieve it. During his presidency it became obvious to many members of the media that he “had decided that the end justified any means.”93 The bulk of his policies in Vietnam failed to meet the *jus in bello* criteria of just war theory. Nixon’s tactics often failed to address the ethical dilemmas innate in coercive diplomacy. Nixon and the press were destined to clash because “no president was more elusive in his personal relations, more enigmatic in his political stratagems, or more inscrutable in his fundamental motivations.”94 Nixon’s presidency was consumed by ambitious covert policies in Vietnam and by an “overt campaign against the media” in the United States.95

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This campaign against the media started early in his administration and increased in intensity after the publication of the Pentagon Papers. Early on, his only desire was to circumvent the media in order to create and implement polices in a vacuum void of public opinion and media scrutiny. Then he started seeking ways to bring down media opponents, especially after the publication of the Pentagon Papers, which forever changed his and the military’s strategies in Vietnam. After its publication, “officials both in the United States and South Vietnam preferred to hold back even when strong action appeared necessary, rather than provoke an outcry in the press that might somehow damage what was left of official credibility.”

Nixon’s acute awareness of how the media perceived and portrayed the war influenced most of his decisions regarding the war. The media during Nixon’s presidency emerged as a Fourth Estate, comprised of both truth seekers and antagonists with the ultimate goal of exposing Nixon’s unjust war in Vietnam. From Nixon’s standpoint the media was an impediment to implementing his foreign policies, but in reality the media coverage during his presidency was a force that was much more complicated.

CHAPTER V

THE FINAL CURTAIN OF THE VIETNAM WAR: MEDIA COVERAGE UNDER PRESIDENT FORD, 1974-1975

In August 1974, Gerald R. Ford became the first President in United States history to not be elected into office. Ford was appointed to the role of Vice President when Spiro Agnew was forced to step down in 1973 under suspicion of tax evasion. As Vice President he was the first in line for the presidency after Nixon’s resignation. This chapter will discuss the role of the media during the Ford Administration, which witnessed the final events of the Vietnam War. The scope is from Nixon’s resignation in August 1974 to April 1975 when the Vietnam War ended. This chapter is divided into four sections: a brief background on Ford’s life before his presidency, media coverage of the trials and tribulations of his administration in 1974, U.S. Government involvement in Vietnam and media coverage at the conclusion of the war, and a review of Ford’s Vietnam policy and the media coverage of the Vietnam War from 1974-1975.

Introduction: A Brief Background on Gerald R. Ford before His Presidency

Ford, an “unflappable” Republican, was born in Omaha, Nebraska, as Leslie Lynch King, Jr., although he would spend the majority of his childhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan, under the name Gerald R. Ford because he was raised by his mother, Dorothy Gardner King, and stepfather, Gerald Rudolff Ford.1 As a child, Ford was a

hard worker; he excelled in school and football and earned the respect of his teachers and coaches. Through his hard work on and off the field, Ford earned a spot at the University of Michigan. It was there he began to truly love politics. He majored in economics and political science and maintained a B average. After graduating in the top fourth of his class, he became the first part-time student at Yale Law School after he took additional classes and impressed the Dean in a series of personal interviews.\(^2\)

While at Yale he also worked as an assistant coach to the football team and on weekends he volunteered at Wendell Willkie’s campaign headquarters in order to support Willkie’s bid as the Republican (GOP) Presidential candidate. Ford idealized Willkie’s isolationist policies and would later base many of his political policies on Willkie’s political model.\(^3\)

In 1941, Ford graduated from Yale Law School and moved back home to Grand Rapids to start a law firm with his friend Philip Buchen. In the early days of the law firm, Ford balanced his income by teaching and working as an assistant football coach. He worked tirelessly trying to build up his law firm and at the same time he established the Home Front (a reform based GOP organization). But then Pearl Harbor was bombed in December 1941 and, in the aftermath of the attack, Ford decided to enlist in the Navy, so he quickly wrapped up pending court cases. While in the Navy, Ford earned various medals, ten battle stars, and was eventually promoted to Lieutenant

\(^2\) Ibid., 14.

\(^3\) Ibid., 16.
Commander. He also kept track of domestic politics in Grand Rapids through his adopted father, Gerald Ford, Sr. and his law partner, Philip Buchen. Ford was eager to return to Grand Rapids and get involved in local politics because his naval experiences made him more interested in pursuing this field.

Ford returned from the Navy in 1946 and signed on to the law firm Butterfield, Kenney, and Amberg. In his spare time, he worked with the Home Front and eventually became the president of the organization. Next, Ford set his eyes wrestling power away from Frank McKay, a powerful GOP leader who “exerted an iron-fisted control over virtually every patronage job at every level of government in Michigan’s Fifth District and beyond, plus the bulk of the state’s juiciest contracts.”

Ford decided to square off against Bartel J. Jonkman, a congressman from the Fifth District, who was a strong supporter of McKay. During the campaign, Jonkman downplayed Ford’s qualifications and stressed Ford’s youth, but Ford emphasized his personal policies and he socialized with voters. By Election Day, voters were tired of Jonkman’s negativity, so Ford captured a solid victory over Jonkman for the Republican ticket. Ford went on to win against the Democratic candidate for his district by landslide proportions during an election year when the Democratic Party had clinched tight control over the presidency and the House.


5. Schapsmeier, Gerald R. Ford’s Date with Destiny, 29.
Congressman Gerald Ford brought the skills he learned on the football field to the House. He united the Republicans in the House through discipline, preparation and teamwork.\textsuperscript{6} In 1963, President Johnson appointed him to the Warren Commission, a committee constructed to investigate the assassination of JFK. The Warren Commission’s investigation led Ford to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald (JFK’s assassin) acted alone and was psychologically unstable. Ford later published a book titled 	extit{Portrait of the Assassin} that discussed Oswald’s life and mental health issues leading up to JFK’s assassination. After Ford completed his involvement with the Warren Commission and published his book, he was elected House Minority Leader. Over the years, he emerged as a strict opponent of President Johnson’s Great Society programs because of the vast amount of federal spending these programs required. He stated, “Republicans believe that government should have a heart — without losing its head.”\textsuperscript{7} As House Minority Leader, he blocked many of Johnson’s proposals and also opposed his military strategy in Vietnam.

Ford felt strongly that gradual escalation would lead to a long-term land war in Southeast Asia. However, he supported the idea of containing Communism by fighting for South Vietnam’s independence.\textsuperscript{8} He partnered with Everett McKinley, Senate Minority Leader, and championed the idea of a “no concession no deal policy,” which

\textsuperscript{6} Brinkley, \textit{Gerald R. Ford}, 5.

\textsuperscript{7} Schapsmeier, \textit{Gerald R. Ford’s Date with Destiny}, 95.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 95-96.
meant the U.S. should only make agreements with Communists if they made concessions.\(^9\) Ford believed that the Communist threat in South Vietnam could not be thwarted by putting more troops on the ground; he stated that the Communist threat in Southeast Asia could not be stopped by “pouring in more and more men and by these brave men pouring out more and more blood.”\(^{10}\) Johnson and Ford clashed in the headlines.\(^{11}\) While the Johnson Administration spurned giving interviews regarding Vietnam, Ford was accessible and cooperated with reporters. Although some reporters disagreed with his views on Vietnam, they all for the most part agreed that Ford had an outstanding relationship with the press. The National Press Club even awarded Ford the Meritorious Award, to thank him for his cordial press relations.\(^{12}\) Throughout Johnson’s term as president, Ford made a name for himself by being vocal on Vietnam and opposing Great Society programs. Johnson, at the end of his term as president, invited Ford to a private meeting by stating, “I want to have one last word with a man who has sometimes been an adversary, sometimes a supporter, but always a respected

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legislator.”¹³ They concluded their adversarial relationship by mutually agreeing that neither questioned the other’s integrity or patriotism.¹⁴

When Nixon took office in 1969, Ford did his best to be supportive of the new Republican administration even if he disagreed with some of their policies. During Nixon’s first term in office Ford was forced to support renewed relationships with China and various other projects, like the creation of new federal agencies, even though he opposed them in order to display solidarity with Nixon. Much of Ford’s disdain for China was put aside after he took a trip to China in June 1972. He was amazed and slightly frightened by China during the visit and eventually conceded that Nixon’s policies towards China were “mutually advantageous in maintaining a world balance of power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and that mutual trade relations would benefit both countries.”¹⁵ Ford also had the opportunity to pursue projects that he did approve of like welfare reform and Nixon’s policies in Vietnam. Ford’s schedule was busier than ever and as Nixon’s first term in office drew to a close Ford concluded that he would run for one more term in 1972 and then retire from the House. Ford won again in 1972 and embarked on what he thought was his last term as a politician in Washington.

During Ford’s last term in office, two Republican scandals would prevent him from retiring. Late in 1972 rumors began circulating about Nixon’s involvement in the

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¹³ Ibid., 119.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 128.
break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters located at the Watergate Complex. When Ford asked Nixon whether he had any involvement, Nixon denied any wrongdoing. Ford accepted this and vehemently defended the President. Then, in late 1973, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article alleging that Vice President, Spiro Agnew, had accepted bribes and was possibly guilty of tax fraud. Agnew’s scandal, coupled with the Watergate investigation, made many people question who would be indicted first, Nixon or Agnew, and if the United States would have its first “jailbird President.” On October 10, Agnew resigned “from office in return for a plea-bargaining arrangement whereby he would plead *nolo contendere* to a charge of not paying income tax on $29,500 allegedly received as a kickback in 1967 from a contractor,” in addition to being placed on three years probation and paying a $10,000 fine. By October 12, Nixon had offered Gerald Ford the position of Vice President due to Ford’s “confirmability” and integrity. Over the course of the next month, the government launched a large investigation into Ford’s life, “perhaps the most exhaustive investigation of his personal and political life than any potential President


19. Ibid. 136-137.
has ever submitted to. After the investigation, the Senate and the House approved his nomination and Ford was confirmed as Vice President on December 6 under the 25th Amendment to the Constitution.

The media and politicians from both sides of aisle (Democrats and Republicans) welcomed Ford into office as Vice President. Most of the media coverage after his nomination and swearing in focused on the rumors that Republicans and Democrats alike supported his nomination for Vice President in order to oust Nixon. Before Nixon’s and Agnew’s political scandals, Ford was an unlikely Presidential candidate and even Ford never considered himself in that position. Rumors soon ran rampant through Washington that Nixon would be forced to step down or quit under his own volition. Immediately after being sworn in as Vice President, Ford asked Nixon point blank if he intended to step down and Nixon said no. Ford accepted Nixon’s answer and agreed to support Nixon and proclaim Nixon’s innocence in the Watergate scandal. Over the next few months Ford defended Nixon to the media and his contemporaries, but as more evidence began to accumulate against Nixon it became hard for Ford to deny Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate scandal. On August 6, 1974 Ford was forced to distance himself away from Nixon because if Nixon stepped down Ford would


be the first person to benefit. Finally, on August 8, 1974 President Nixon informed Ford of his decision to resign and later that night President Nixon announced his resignation in a televised press conference. The resignation took effect the next day at noon and Ford was sworn in at 12:03 p.m. on August 9 as the 38th President of the United States.  

**Media Coverage of the Trials and Tribulations of the Ford Administration in 1974**

Shortly after his swearing in, Ford entered the White House press room and promised reporters to be “candid.” He also said he hoped that they would continue to report the “good and bad, mistakes and maybe a few pluses.” Next, President Ford retained Henry Kissinger as his Secretary of State and he nominated Nelson A. Rockefeller as his new Vice President because of his interest in global affairs. He then contemplated possible solutions to resolve the escalating Watergate problem.

In the first month of his presidency, Ford was constantly bombarded with questions regarding Watergate and the possible fate of Nixon. During his first press conference reporters asked him how his administration would differ from the previous

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25. Ibid.

administration and Ford stated that he would be “open and forthright” and that he would “expect the same of his staff.” He also said that he would “make decisions and take the blame for them or whatever benefits might be the case for them.” When a reporter asked him how he would prevent a future Watergate situation from occurring, Ford stated that there would be “no illegal wiretaps and none of the other things that helped precipitate the Watergate crisis.” Then, when another reporter asked him if he would develop a code of ethics for his staff, Ford replied: “The code of ethics that will be followed will be the example I set.” Ford was determined to reaffirm the integrity of the presidency and to separate his administration from Nixon’s, but he believed he could only do so if he resolved the Nixon issue.

On September 8, 1974, almost a month after assuming the presidency, Ford pardoned Nixon because he felt it was time to “seal the book” on Watergate. Ford felt that Nixon’s pardon was a necessary evil in order to “bind up the internal wounds of Watergate more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars.”

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29. President Ford’s First Speech After Being Sworn In, August 9, 1974. Located in CSPAN Archives
Nixon’s pardon was a gross injustice against the American people, such as the White House Press Secretary, J.F. terHorst, who resigned.  

Although Ford had anticipated a negative reaction, he hoped that in time people would come to understand his reasons for granting the pardon. But he failed to realize just how much it would anger his contemporaries, the media and the general public. For example, when Ford went to Pittsburgh the following day to speak to the Board of Urban Transportation, angry protestors stood outside his hotel and booed him. His fellow politicians also expressed misgivings about Nixon’s pardon because, without a legal investigation into Nixon’s involvement in Watergate, Americans might never know the “full dimensions of Nixon’s complicity in the worst political scandal in American history.” 

Time magazine thought the pardon only incited more questions regarding the Watergate scandal, especially questions regarding the fate of others already indicted for their involvement in Watergate. In the end, the “pardon eased the plight of the man who


received it, but gravely complicated the future of the man who granted it, Gerald R. Ford.\textsuperscript{34} Consequently, in part due to Nixon’s pardon and to residual hostility towards the Republican Party, the Republicans lost control of Congress in November 1974. The new Democrats in Congress became known as the “Watergate babies” and they “reflected an isolationist disillusionment over Vietnam” in addition to moving to restrict the President’s foreign policy agenda.\textsuperscript{35} Their policies focused on human rights and, as a result, they did not support further military intervention in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{36}

**Ford’s Handling of the Vietnam Problem and Media Coverage of the End of the Vietnam War**

In the fall of 1974 the U.S. Congress reduced military aid to South Vietnam to $700 million. Earlier, in 1973, the South Vietnamese had received $2.3 billion while in early 1974 they had received $1 billion.\textsuperscript{37} This change, by the United States, coupled with the withdrawal of American troops, accounted for a loss of $400 million in annual

\begin{itemize}
  \item [\textsuperscript{36}] Edward and Schapsmeier, *Gerald R. Ford’s Date with Destiny*, 188.
\end{itemize}

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revenue, which had a devastating impact on South Vietnam’s economy, political structure, and military strategy.\textsuperscript{38} The instability that resulted led to wide scale corruption in South Vietnam and an increase in military desertions. The North Vietnamese seized on this opportunity and launched a military attack on Phuoc Long, northeast of Saigon, in December 1974. Three weeks after the onset of this attack, the North Vietnamese captured the entire province. In the weeks that followed, the U.S. failed to respond to the attack, which confirmed that the U.S. was no longer willing to fight in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, the North Vietnamese concluded it was time to launch major attacks against South Vietnam.

Over the next few weeks, the North Vietnamese launched multiple attacks on key cities and areas of South Vietnam. In February 1975, the North attacked Phuoc Binh and South Vietnam’s forces there were ill prepared to respond to the attack. During the course of the battle, the South Vietnamese forces crumbled and they also suffered numerous losses due to friendly fire. Media coverage of the event depicted South Vietnam’s efforts to defend the city as shameful and cowardly.\textsuperscript{40} Then, in March 1975, North Vietnamese forces launched a successful attack on the Central Highlands. Fearing the worst, South Vietnam’s President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered a withdrawal

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 330.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 332.

from the highlands. North Vietnamese forces had already cut off many avenues of escape, which forced South Vietnamese forces to retreat alongside refugees down Route 7. This caused numerous civilian casualties and the destruction or capture of the majority of South Vietnam’s forces.\textsuperscript{41} The media dubbed the incident on Route 7 the “convoy of tears” and painted both North Vietnam and South Vietnam as the culprits of the savage attacks on refugees fleeing to the South.\textsuperscript{42} The media also stressed the pointlessness in continuing to support South Vietnam’s military when they seemed to have lost the desire to fight.\textsuperscript{43} Both Americans and South Vietnamese were shocked by how quickly the Communists had gained ground throughout South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{44}

By April 1975, Communist intrusion into South Vietnam had created panic throughout the South. Thousands of refugees migrated towards Saigon in order to escape the anarchy in other parts of South Vietnam. Americans also began preparing to leave Vietnam. Many American officials began flying their families out of South Vietnam, although no formal evacuation plan had been established by the United States. In addition, a massive evacuation began of South Vietnamese orphans to various

\textsuperscript{41} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 333.


countries. President Ford launched Operation Babylift, which was designed to bring thousands of Vietnamese orphans to America, Australia, Canada and Europe. For weeks, the media covered the deteriorating situation and the growing refugee problem in South Vietnam. *Time* magazine and many American newspapers focused on the impending doom of the South Vietnamese government. William McWhirter, a *Time* correspondent, sent the *Time* headquarters the following cable:

> The real enemy that is now engulfing the country is not those 16 North Vietnamese divisions but the spreading upheaval, fear and chaos among its own people and its armies, who are growing as desperate and afraid of one another as they are of the invasion. People are resigned and preparing for the worst. They seem to have forgotten what it was that fortified them all these years, if anything more than a basic trust in U.S. military strength. For Americans, it is like watching a skin transplant that didn't take disintegrating in front of them. For the South Vietnamese, it is something far worse. It is the loss of family and nation, and none of them seems to know what to do about it. It is now everyone for himself. One fears that it will become even more destructive unless it is checked somehow.

The end was near and everyone seemed aware of it. Without U.S. support, South Vietnam would most likely collapse in a matter of weeks.

Back in the United States, President Ford continued to lobby for more military aid for South Vietnam, but he faced a Congress stunned by South Vietnam’s abysmal


fighting record. Congress refused to approve any more aid for South Vietnam citing that the retreating South Vietnamese forces had “abandoned more equipment in the northern provinces than could be purchased with additional funds, and they argued that no amount of money could save an army that refused to fight.”47 In mid-April Congress approved aid for the evacuation of Americans, support staff, and other humanitarian efforts; they also agreed to allow Ford to send American troops to facilitate the evacuation of these people from South Vietnam.48 The U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, delayed the operation for days in order to prevent panic amongst those in Saigon, but by the time the operation was underway pandemonium had already broke out in Saigon.49 Thousands of high-risk Vietnamese were quickly flown to U.S. naval carriers just off Vietnam’s shores, but there were still thousands more waiting to be evacuated.50 Then, as North Vietnamese troops closed in on Saigon on April 29, 1975, Ford launched Operation Frequent Wind, which was an evacuation plan designed to extract the last remaining evacuees in South Vietnam. South Vietnamese begging to be evacuated surrounded the U.S. embassy, but there was no more time or room on each helicopter. At dawn on April 30, 1975, the last of the


embassy staff and the marines who were entrusted to guard and protect the embassy were evacuated. Their departure occurred about three and half hours before the South Vietnamese government surrendered at the Presidential Palace to North Vietnamese troops.  

The last fleeting images and stories of the Vietnam War by the U.S. media documented the American evacuation of Saigon. Don Oliver, a war correspondent for NBC News, covered the evacuation of the U.S. embassy. Oliver’s footage showed the frantic and disorderly selection process that occurred during the final days of evacuation. Other correspondents captured the final moments of the war aboard U.S. naval ships just off Vietnam’s shore. NBC News correspondents aboard the USS Blue Ridge documented the arrival of South Vietnamese helicopters carrying military deserters and their families. Approximately 18 South Vietnamese helicopters landed with refugees and after they disembarked the helicopters were flown or pushed into the ocean in order to preserve deck space for those being evacuated.  

For the few correspondents that stayed in Saigon to capture the end of the war, they were permitted to document the Communist victory. However, they were not permitted to send any of their footage or new stories out for days. There was a total news blackout in Saigon for eight days and then communications were restored and correspondents were permitted to contact their headquarters to notify them they were okay, although they were still not


permitted to send their news pieces.\textsuperscript{53} During the month of May correspondents were allowed to roam Saigon and report relatively freely, but by the end of that month most of the remaining foreign correspondents were told to leave.\textsuperscript{54} When the reporters returned to America, they delivered their delayed reports to their employers. Jim Laurie and Neil Davis, war correspondents from \textit{NBC}, compiled their footage in a news piece titled, \textit{NBC News Special Report: Communist Saigon}, that aired on May 26, 1975. The news piece documented the looting of the U.S. embassy, the desperation of many Vietnamese seeking evacuation, North Vietnamese tanks crashing into the gates surrounding the Presidential Palace and the anger the South Vietnamese felt toward America’s departure from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Communist Saigon} depicted the end of U.S. media’s involvement in the war and the tragic conclusion of America’s dream for South Vietnam.


In truth, President Ford’s presidency had little to do with end of the Vietnam War because Vietnam’s fate was sealed long before he became President. Congress


mostly blocked his policies in Vietnam and the few that were permitted reflected a desire to make amends for South Vietnam’s desperate situation in 1974. Ford showed a degree of integrity and sincerity that few would call into question before his decision to end the Watergate scandal. Most of America’s press corps crucified him, but the few that did not seemed to understand that an investigation into Nixon’s actions would have tarnished the U.S. presidency for years to come. Unfortunately, his decision to pardon Nixon would have long-term effects on his foreign policy, especially in Vietnam.

Nixon’s pardon made many people question Ford’s future decisions and contributed to massive Republican losses in Congress. The new Congress had no desire to support Ford’s Vietnam policies. If Ford had been granted carte blanche he would have most likely escalated the war for a few more years. As a former naval officer, he had no desire to give up on Vietnam, but the decision had been made for him by Nixon and Congress. The media also appeared critical of his attempts to lend South Vietnam more American military aid, but for the most part America’s media seemed content with documenting the final demise of South Vietnam’s government.

From August 1974 to May 1975, America’s press corps acted as historians documenting the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Their articles documented North Vietnam’s victories and their steady approach on Saigon, which fueled panic in South Vietnam amongst Americans and Vietnamese. The few scathing articles that did come out at the time were targeted at South Vietnam’s unruly military, which had taken to deserting, looting and attacking other Vietnamese. The media’s contentment with being
historians seemed to stem from a desire for closure and from a sense of remorse. Their images and stories often reflected a great deal of shame and regret for America’s involvement in Vietnam. Many of them had predicted the end, but few truly grasped how quickly it would come. Their final stories, filled with shame and regret, would serve as the foundation of America’s perceptions of the Vietnam War.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE MEDIA’S ENCORE — LASTING IMPLICATIONS OF VIETNAM WAR MEDIA COVERAGE

The media is an integral part of America’s foreign policy machine especially in wartime and no war better illustrates this relationship than the Vietnam War. This war is one of the most controversial wars the United States has ever participated in, due in large part to its outcome and to its media coverage. The primary goal of this chapter is to discuss the media’s mercurial role in U.S. foreign policy. This chapter is divided into three sections: a brief summary of the media’s involvement in the Vietnam War from Kennedy to Ford, the mercurial nature of the media, and the future of wartime media coverage.

Summary of U.S. Media Coverage during the Vietnam War from Kennedy to Ford

U.S. involvement in Vietnam escalated during the Kennedy administration as a result of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Both the President and the media turned their attention to fighting Communism throughout the world. During the first year of Kennedy’s presidency the media focused on the Communist threat, but by 1962 the media’s attention focused on Ngo Dinh Diem. U.S. media coverage of Vietnam War from 1962 to 1963 contributed to the deterioration of Kennedy’s relationship with Diem, especially with regard to the Buddhist Crisis. The press corps disdain for Diem’s family and his policies colored many of their interpretations of the situation in Vietnam. By 1963 the situation had reached a boiling
point and the media’s negative views of Diem appeared to seep into the minds of Americans and many U.S. government officials. Their viewpoint was absorbed into the upper echelons of the U.S. government and through this process the U.S. press became a de facto fourth branch of government. Media coverage of the Buddhist Crisis fueled more animosity towards the Diem regime. This also placed a great deal of pressure on the Kennedy Administration to distance itself from Diem’s policies and in doing so it sealed Diem’s fate and the fate of Vietnam for years to come.

President Johnson inherited an extremely volatile situation in Vietnam as a result of Kennedy’s policies in Vietnam. He also acquired a fairly tamed press corps that appeared to be appeased for the time being by the removal of Diem. American voters also seemed pleased with this change in leadership, although the generals who held power after Diem did not bring stability to South Vietnam. Media coverage of the war increased dramatically during Johnson’s presidency because the American people became more invested in the war. During Johnson’s presidency media coverage acted as a bellwether of public opinion in America. For example, when the Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred, the public and the U.S. media supported Johnson’s escalation of the war, including his decision to officially send ground troops to Danang in March 1965.

Even as television coverage of the war increased, public opinion still dictated the media’s coverage of the war. From 1965 to 1967 Johnson deployed more troops to Vietnam and the public became more eager to understand the war, so war correspondents personalized their media coverage in order to Americanize the conflict
in Vietnam. Public opinion and media coverage of the war began to shift in 1966 as more and more troops died in Vietnam, but the media and the public did not completely turn against the war until the Tet Offensive of 1968. The media coverage of the Tet Offensive contradicted all the positive details of the war that the Johnson administration had been feeding the media and the public during the early years of the war. Television coverage of the incident shattered the heroic American dream of a just war in Vietnam and the footage of a Vietcong being executed by a South Vietnamese General reinforced doubts of South Vietnam’s legitimacy. For the rest of Johnson’s presidency both the public and the media wanted out of the Vietnam War. Later, Johnson’s successor Richard Nixon thought he could achieve just that in addition to peace with honor.

Nixon’s presidency was marked by a period of strong mistrust between the media and the government and the public and the government. His contempt for the media and for members of the public led him to believe that covert operations were the way to achieve success in Vietnam. He knew that the American people would not support jugular diplomacy and that they would no longer tolerate a long drawn out war. From Nixon’s perspective, the war had to end by any means and as quickly as possible. As a result of his covert tactics, the media emerged as a fourth estate; independent of the government’s political philosophies and driven by a desire to expose the U.S. government's illegal activities, especially Nixon’s covert operations in Cambodia and Laos. Meanwhile, he counter attacked through wiretaps and through break-ins in the
United States. The more the media tried to expose him, the more he launched covert
assaults on them. At the height of this mutual mistrust, two events would tip public
opinion against Nixon for the rest of his presidency. The first was the publication of the
Pentagon Papers, which exposed covert U.S. government policies and the thought
process behind those decisions regarding the war in Vietnam. This publication of the
Pentagon Papers made many Americans see the flaws in America’s involvement in
Vietnam. Nonetheless, Nixon managed to coordinate America’s withdrawal from the
war in 1973 with the Paris Peace Accords, which he hoped would help him reclaim the
support of the people. The second event that turned public support away from Nixon
was the Watergate Scandal, which continued to generate more public hostility because
it ruined Nixon’s credibility and career. It exposed many of his covert attempts to
discredit members of the public and the media, in addition to his secret attempts to
cover up illegal activities of the government. The media coverage of the Watergate
scandal forced Nixon to resign from office, leaving Ford to witness the fall of South
Vietnam. President Nixon succeeded in ending U.S. involvement in the war, but he had
not succeeded in ending the war.

The end of the war came during Ford’s presidency. Ford’s attempts to stall
South Vietnam’s demise were blocked by Congress, so he was forced to watch the end
of the war from the sidelines. The U.S. press corps did not push for renewal of U.S.
involvement; they appeared resigned to the fact that the end was near and that nothing
was going to be done to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam. They stood by as
somber, regretful, and humble observers when North Vietnamese forces swept through South Vietnam. The final images of the Vietnam War captured by the U.S. media document the final destruction of America’s dreams for Vietnam and the mutual retreat of the U.S. government and the U.S. press corps.

**The Mercurial Nature of the Media**

The mercurial nature of the media takes on a wide variety of forms during wartime; it has the ability to promote, reflect, alter, and document American perceptions. At no other point in time has this been truer than during the Vietnam War because “the role of the press throughout the war was hardly consistent: neither a hero or better, nor a villain or worse, the press seldom deserved either the credit or the blame it widely received for bringing the war to an end.”

The media coverage of the Vietnam War was simply a contributing factor that changed the way Americans, including lawmakers, view not only the United States government but also its intervention in foreign wars. During the Vietnam War, the media emerged as agenda setters, bellwethers, truth seekers, and observers.

The agenda setting media sets the tone for public discourse and is often propagandistic in nature because it informs Americans about what issues they should focus on and how they should interpret them. The media has the ability to give an issue

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political salience.² For example, throughout the duration of the Vietnam War the U.S.
press corps perceived and interpreted the war from an ethnocentric standpoint that
furthered their perception of American ideals. The war only became a front-page issue
in 1961 when Kennedy increased the number of military advisors. Once the media
arrived in Vietnam they focused mainly on stories that affected or involved Americans
and paid little attention to the Vietnamese side.³ The Vietnamese perspective only
became significant when their stories began contributing to the larger narrative of the
war.⁴ Even when media attention turned to the plight of the Vietnamese in the aftermath
of the My Lai Massacre, media coverage concentrated more on what the incident said
about Americans than on the sheer horror of the murder of five hundred Vietnamese
civilians. To historian George Herring, “It was the sort of thing Americans did not do. If
that was what the war was doing to us, we reasoned with a perverse and ethnocentric
kind of logic we wanted no part of it.”⁵ American citizens and the media were only
okay with the war when it aggrandized the iconic image of an American hero, so in the


early years of the war (1961-1965) the American media jumped at the chance to support America’s fight against Communism. During those years the situation in Vietnam became a microcosm for the Cold War and the media personalized the war in order to promote the U.S. agenda. The same can be said about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because the media personalized each conflict by labeling it as President George W. Bush’s war against Saddam Hussein or President Bush’s war against Osama bin Laden. This type of over simplification often leads to confusion, but eventually it decreases as the general public becomes more aware of the key issues.

Typically, the media is a reflection of the general population’s opinions and usually at the beginning of a conflict the government has the public’s support. Therefore, the media supports and promotes the U.S. government’s policies at the beginning of most major conflicts. Often there is an initial stage of trust that remains until either the public’s opinion sways or more information is gained that disproves the initial facts at hand. For example, in 1965 when LBJ officially sent troops to Vietnam the media supported LBJ since it believed the government’s version of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Likewise, in 2001 the media supported President George W. Bush’s War on Terror because the United States was in mourning and there was little evidence to contradict his interpretation of events. As Herring has observed: “In one stunning and hugely destructive moment, in an outpouring of fear and anger, much of the intellectual

and emotional baggage left from Vietnam seemed buried beneath the huge piles of rubble in New York and Washington.” Skepticism seemed to be swept away by patriotism, which was “suddenly in vogue again.” But, as more details of the growing conflict in Iraq emerged, the more the media criticized the war and the same was true with the Vietnam War.

The most prominent manifestation of the modern media is as truth seeker. There is an innate skepticism within the media that emerged during the Vietnam War because of the absence of government transparency. In Vietnam, this turning point came in 1968 when the North Vietnamese forces staged the Tet Offensive. The North Vietnamese were defeated and driven back, but they gained a strategic psychological advantage over both the United States and the South Vietnamese. Their strength and boldness forced many members of the media to question the credibility of U.S. government sources, which had down played the strength of the North Vietnamese forces. For the rest of the war the U.S. media devoted themselves to exposing the gaps in government credibility. In the case of the War on Terror, the media and public opinion began to turn sour in 2003 just as the U.S. started efforts to rebuild Iraq. This down shift in public opinion was a result of the exposure of more information regarding U.S. involvement in Iraq including human rights violations and the significant increase in the number of


8. Ibid.
American soldiers killed in action.⁹ There also appeared to be a credibility gap and evidence mounted against the U.S. Government that the “administration’s case for war had been based on flimsy evidence, distortions, and outright fabrications.”¹⁰ Both the public and the media failed to question the validity of U.S. involvement in the war until after America was already committed due to the media and public’s fickle nature.

The attention span of the media is extremely capricious and as a result the media sometimes opts to serve merely as observers rather than as critics. For instance, at the conclusion of the Vietnam War the media served as eyewitnesses to the fall of South Vietnam’s government. Their stories reflected a somber and remorseful tone for America’s involvement in the war, but overall most of them elected to report the facts without personal criticism. This also happens in the early stages of a conflict due in large part because the media strives to inform the public of the facts before analyzing them. This is especially true during short wars. An excellent example of this is the Persian Gulf War, where embedded reporters had little opportunity to criticize the war because of its short duration. Critical analysis of a war by the media usually occurs during long wars or at the conclusion of a war. In the case of the Vietnam War, careful analysis revealed that the war had long-term effects on public support for U.S. intervention overseas.

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⁹. Ibid., 347.

¹⁰. Ibid., 348.
One long-term effect has been America’s reluctance to engage in foreign wars. This reluctance has become known as the “Vietnam Syndrome,” a terminology coined in 1980 by Ronald Reagan in a speech titled “Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety” to address America’s apprehension to committing to foreign wars. Since the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the United States has favored non-intervention in foreign disputes, partly because foreign wars rarely end quickly and have a tendency to require a huge sacrifice of U.S. military lives. In addition, there is some shame from America’s involvement in Vietnam that influences future foreign endeavors. The Vietnam War was the first war America ever lost and all parties involved with the war paid a very high price in human lives. The Vietnam Syndrome remained dominant until 1990 when America engaged in the Persian Gulf War in order to drive invading Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Both the media and the general public supported the Persian Gulf War. Since then, the U.S. has also participated in wars in Afghanistan, in 2002, and in Iraq, in 2003. Initially, in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan the public and the media supported each war effort. However, support then began to wane, as a result of the high cost in lives, money and worldwide political capital. Most Americans are no longer willing to pay that price unless a victory can be guaranteed. But success on foreign soils cannot be


guaranteed because of the many variables involved in war, such as leadership factors, divisions within the population, and economic resources.

This aversion to go to war has permeated all U.S. involvement in foreign disputes; even in cases where the U.S. has intervened there is a lingering hesitance by politicians and the public to support the war effort. The Vietnam War “has left a bitter aftertaste that clings to almost every mention of direct military intervention.”\textsuperscript{13} Some of this disdain and hesitancy stems from mistrust of the government. Both politicians and civilians doubt if they are being told the truth. Unfortunately, Vietnam set a precedent for wide-scale manipulation of the general public in order to win the war. Over the years part of the trust has been regained, but there is still a lack of transparency and gaps in credibility that continues to fuel rifts in future interactions between the media and the government during wartime.

**The Future of Wartime Media Coverage**

War and conflict are inevitable and there will always be media coverage to document them. The future of wartime media coverage is dictated by advancements in technology. During the Vietnam War, television became the predominant news source in America and the images broadcast into the American living rooms were regarded as the “unvarnished truth.”\textsuperscript{14} Now, in the early years of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, three


technological developments have altered wartime media coverage: the Internet, various new portable technologies, and social networks. The Internet has become the major news source in the 21st century by bringing 24-hour instant access into the homes of people all over the world. It has granted users an opportunity to gain knowledge and become an expert at any given topic. It has also made wartime media coverage readily accessible worldwide to well over a billion people.\(^\text{15}\) The popularity of the Internet can largely be attributed to advancements in portable and personal technology items. The creation of personal computers, cell phones, Ipods, and various other devices keep the flow of information moving regardless of any government’s decisions to censor this flow. New developments in technology, such as the camera phone, have also given the common person the opportunity to become reporter and publisher all in one. A civilian can take to the streets and document conflict from a completely different perspective than the organized media and the government. No modern society that has embraced technology can fully censor every member of its society. In addition to these advancements, the development and growth of social networking sites have allowed people to gain quick access to real time events and vast numbers of people. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, Blogger, Myspace, and Facebook provide people with a voice and a platform to present their viewpoints on current events and the political decision-making process. These sites expand the traditional definition of media. As the

definition of media continues to expand to encompass the citizens of the world, wartime media coverage will only grow in complexity and influence.

Thus, the media’s growing influence during wartime is in part a result of the diverse roles of the media during the Vietnam War. Vietnam War media coverage laid the foundation for uncensored access and for government transparency. Undoubtedly, new developments in technology will continue to build upon the Vietnam War media framework by demanding more government transparency and uncensored access in the years to come, but only time will tell to what degree. U.S. foreign policy will have to grow and adapt to a world where every person is a potential reporter or correspondent during wartime.
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