

News Media Coverage of the 1968 Attack on the American Embassy In Saigon

by
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Introduction

The 1968 Tet offensive is referred to as the turning point in the Vietnam War. Of the many battles of Tet, the attack on the American Embassy in Saigon stands out. It is neither the battle's size nor its casualties that makes it important. The significance of the embassy attack lay in the way it was conveyed to the American public. I argue that the 1968 attack on the American Embassy in Saigon served as a catalyst for the media to criticize the government's conduct of the Vietnam War and aided in turning the American public against the war. The news media aided this shift in opinion through its coverage and subsequent narrative of the attack on the U.S. Embassy. My goal is to examine the ongoing relationship between the media and the public by examining the major newspapers; the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the major news magazines, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*. It is important to observe that the news media is still a business that must appeal to its customers (readers and advertisers). As the public view changed, the media reflected that change in order to appeal to its audience. At the same time the news media's consistency of war coverage and

reflection of public sentiment helped further perpetuate the public's disapproval of the conflict and continued this cycle.

How did the media report the unexpected attack on the American Embassy and how did it affect public opinion of Vietnam? How does the press coverage of the embassy attack fit in the larger context of media coverage of the Tet Offensive in determining the relationship between the media and the public? Which one influenced the other in creating opinions of the Vietnam War? These questions are important not only because the news media was a major contributor to Americans' knowledge of the war but also because of the role the media plays in the society of the era and how its narrative became the historical narrative.

Vietnam is an exceptional case in both media history and military history. It is the first war in which technological advancements allowed the media to keep a constant stream of up to date information flowing to the American public. Vietnam was also a military action in which war was never officially declared and as a consequence the U.S. government's ability to censor the media was restricted.¹ These peculiarities raise several questions. What uncensored images of war was the public exposed to on a daily basis and did these images have any effect on their opinion of the war?

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the largest series of battles in the Vietnam War. Tet is the Chinese Lunar New Year and was a major holiday for the Vietnamese people. In past years both sides observed a cease-fire initiated by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong leaders, however 1968 was a different situation. Due to massive build up of Vietcong strength along the Demilitarized Zone and in North Vietnam the United States would only observe a 36-hour cease-fire rather than the weeklong Vietcong cease-fire. Much of the initial focus was on the

¹ The U.S. government still held some ability of censorship such as military strategy, troop movements and military locations.

Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) surrounding the U.S. Marine Base at Khe Sanh. The military build up and landscape at Khe Sanh bore striking similarities to the French base of Dienbienphu where Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh defeated the French to win the first Indochinese War. On January 30, 1968, Vietcong forces attacked 28 of South Vietnam's provincial capitals. The attacks were centered on many U.S. and South Vietnamese military installations and other recognizable targets such as the Presidential Palace in Hue and the American Embassy in Saigon.

While the Vietcong never gained complete control of any city and lost an estimated 15,000 troops at least, they were still successful in completing their mission, which was a show of force that was meant to disenchant U.S. and South Vietnamese public opinion by demonstrating that the Vietcong were neither done fighting nor could Allied forces keep civilians safe.² The Tet Offensive was an American military victory but in the public's eye it was considered a defeat due to the narrative the media constructed. How did the media treat this event and did it have any impact on how Americans viewed the Tet Offensive? These questions would best be answered by focusing on the media's treatment of and public reaction to a single event, the attack on the American Embassy on January 31st 1968.

My focus on the U.S. Embassy attack during the Tet Offensive is due to the chaos that surrounded the attack not only from the military's perspective but also from the media's. Since the attack took place in Saigon, headquarters of the media companies' in Vietnam, it was readily accessible to journalists. The attacks surprised the military, government, and the public, and in the midst of the chaos the media was there to report on it all. Reports constantly changed as to what went on and frequently contradicted "official" statements. These are the reasons why the media's involvement in the Vietnam War was filled with misconceptions and controversy.

² "The General's Gamble". *Time*, Friday Feb. 9th, 1968. Vol. 91, No. 6

The news media and its role in the Vietnam War have been debated during the war and in the years following. Political scientists, journalists, and historians in this field have explored the dynamic relationship between the military and the media. Of the various contributors to this field, journalists have stood out not because of their job related interest but because of their personal experiences. Journalists who were there wrote the majority of the major works on the media and Vietnam. Reporters such as Peter Braestrup, who was the Saigon bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, Don Oberdorfer who after serving in the Korean War also worked for the *Washington Post* in 1968, and Ron Steinman the Saigon bureau chief for NBC News, all contributed to the study of the media in Vietnam.³

There are three distinct approaches in the literature on the media in Vietnam. The first is that the media did have an effect on public opinion. Steinman, Braestrup, and Oberdorfer reject the notion that liberal journalists, editors, and news companies distorted and misrepresented facts to actively turn the public against the war. However these journalists do feel that it was their job to bring the public the truth in every event they covered. They attribute the misconceptions of media to the confusion and uncertainty that is true of all sudden attacks as well as their own shock and fear. They still observed the profound impact these words and images had on the American public. I think this is a very fair assessment of the media.

The second approach is that the media was not a factor in shaping public opinion. Daniel Hallin argues that media reportage supported U.S. political agendas and had little impact on public opinion.⁴ The third analysis treats the media as a reflection of public opinion, which is the

³ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story : How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, Abridged ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! : The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
Ron Steinman, *Inside Television's First War: A Saigon Journal* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press 2002).

⁴ Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," *The Journal of Politics* 46, no. 1 (1984).

basis for William Hammond's argument.⁵ Hammond's approach differs from Hallin's in that Hammond views the media as supportive of the war until public opinion gradually changed and that the media simply mirrored common sentiments.⁶ Hammond's approach is the best assessment of the relationship between the media and the public. I however, will take Hammond's argument a step further arguing that while the news media reflected public sentiments they also had the power to perpetuate aspects such as distrust of the government and opposition to the Vietnam War and that this circular pattern would not end until America's withdrawal.

A majority of scholars in the field of the media and Vietnam incorporate aspects from the first approach. Braestrup, who has the most extensive study published on this topic and perspective, explains in great detail the news media's role in covering the Vietnam War through the lens of the Tet Offensive. He examines America's major press outlets in a high stress situation that had a domestic and political impact that changed the conduct of the Vietnam War.⁷ Braestrup sees the media as not only having an effect on the American public, but also having significant political ramifications. Oberdorfer would agree with Braestrup's argument that the distortion of reality was through sins of omission and commission.⁸ Melvin Small writes that this type of reporting had never been done before and in the same vein has not been done since. He falls into the first approach writing, "Doubtless, much of what we reported from Vietnam influenced our audience: people at home and in government, the military, foreign allies, and our

Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵ William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. Pg.1

⁸ Ibid.

enemies.”⁹ He goes on to write about the lack of precedent for this type of reporting, “In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, communication was still in its infancy as far as speed was concerned, and events with new twists sometimes overshadowed the events documented in our pieces.”¹⁰

This is a major point the authors highlight in their arguments.

Hallin’s study takes away much of the agency Braestrup, Steinman, and Oberdorfer give to the press and media.¹¹ Hallin argues that the media portrayed the Vietnam War in a favorable light and in few instances did the media offer a critical review. Hallin notes that war was never declared in Vietnam and therefore many images, events, and reports were broadcast to the public that would have previously been unheard of. He then attributes the lack of depth and greater understanding of the war to “uncensored” journalism rather than oppositional reporting.¹² Hallin examines many other factors of the Vietnam War that could have eventually turned the American public against the war. One point he examines is the duration of the war. After years of continuous fighting and rising numbers of American casualties popular sentiment turned to prevent further human loss. Hallin also refers to the government’s repeated assurances that the end was near and the public’s disillusionment in the wake of Tet.

Oberdorfer, however, does not share the same view that the public or the media widely supported the war. He notes that first hand he witnessed in the year preceding Tet the erosion of public support and that the offensive greatly perpetuated this downward spiral. Oberdorfer believes that it is an exaggeration to say that the Tet Offensive alone was responsible for such a

⁹ Melvin Small, *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Pg.7.

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg.7.

¹¹ Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media."

Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

¹² Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

dramatic shift in opinion.¹³ This brings in another relationship between the public and the government that is also important in examining the media and Vietnam. Clarence Wyatt, who has several quotes from Oberdorfer, has a similar view of the Tet Offensive. As Hallin and Hammond view the offensive as a turning point, Wyatt views it as the climax not a cause of deteriorating support.¹⁴

Clarence Wyatt writes in response to the theory that the press was a major factor in American failure in Vietnam. Much like Hallin, Wyatt does not believe that the press was a major catalyst in turning the American public against the war. He highlights three main reasons why this line of thinking fails. First, it fails to understand the American press in Vietnam and what motivated it. Second, it fails to understand the full range of complexity of the relationship between the press and the government. Finally, it fails to understand the development of public attitudes toward the war in 1967. Wyatt's explanation for the negative shift in public opinion was that all of the elements such as prolonged fighting, policy failure, dissenting information, and growing opposition created a crisis of confidence between the public, government, and press.¹⁵ Wyatt's goal in *Paper Soldiers* is to provide a better understanding of the press and government institutions. This is a fairly naive assessment of the role of the news media. Historians and journalists have since recognized the impact the press had on the American public.

I believe that Hammond's work is unique because rather than approaching the media in Vietnam from a journalistic or public perspective, he explores the relationship through the lens of the military. He sees a definite conflict between the military and the media not from the point that the media was misrepresenting the armed forces to depict them in an unfavorable light but that it was the military that continuously attempted to alter stories to be supportive the U.S.

¹³ Oberdorfer, Tet! pg. xvi

¹⁴ Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*. pg. 168

¹⁵ Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*.

agenda. Hammond writes that for far too long journalists accepted the “official” statements and in the wake of Tet reporters and the public viewed these statements with overwhelming skepticism.¹⁶ Melvin Small’s study examines the major media outlets such as television, newspapers, and magazines and their contribution to the development of popular attitudes about the anti-war movement.¹⁷ He also notes that both President Johnson and Nixon were obsessed with the media and viewed it as the reflection of public opinion. Small adds that, “Opinion in America was affected most by the influential media, which either affected the perceptions of opinion leaders directly or affected other media, which in turn affected their readers, some of whom were local opinion leaders.”¹⁸

The influential media perspective, though controversial, provides a stable base for the argument that media coverage had a major affect on public opinion of the war. Steinman, Braestrup, and Oberdorfer offer similar evidence to support this perspective. However, these scholars were directly involved in reporting the war, which can be seen as both a strength and weakness. On one hand they provided first hand knowledge and expertise of the subject and know the internal workings of the journalism profession. On the other hand they could be placing undue agency in their trade and hold biases since they are not far removed from the subject of their study. Finally the three authors both defend and excuse the media in their arguments.¹⁹ They write that the media did not actively attempt to influence public opinion while attributing the flaws in their system to inexperience with relatively new communication technology and with war reporting.

¹⁶ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*.

¹⁷ Small, *Covering Dissent*. Pg.2.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg.4

¹⁹ Braestrup. *Big Story*. pg.3

Oberdorfer, *Tet!*

Steinman, *Inside Television's First War*.

Hallin provides an overview of the entire war and media's role throughout. There are however contradictions in his perspective. Hallin claims media had very little effect on public opinion yet he presents statistics noting that 58% of Americans got their only news from television and 56% from newspapers, which made up a significant percent of Americans' news sources. He also notes the lack of depth the journalists presented in their stories, which is the precise reason for speculation and misinterpretation that led many Americans to believe the Tet Offensive was a total loss. With a few exceptions there were many good points and arguments within Hallin's works that provide more depth in understanding the media in Vietnam.

The view of media as a reflection of public opinion comes through in both Hammond and Small's arguments. Hammond's study is one of the few works that takes a military perspective on this particular subject that will give me a more encompassing approach to the single event of the American Embassy attack. One of the few weaknesses in using Hammond's arguments is that he does not cover the effect of the conflicting media and military on public opinion.²⁰ Small's study is in depth but it focuses only on media coverage of a few specific anti-war protests. He does, however, stress the effect of media on the government in continuously noting that Tet shifted news organizations to an anti-war position.²¹

How media interpreted the embassy attack and public reaction to this news is important in understanding the relationships between the press, the public, and the government. Examining a single event allows this study to go more in depth in order to see the larger picture. This study combines arguments and examples from each perspective in order to examine how the media covered the attack on the American Embassy and its effects on public reaction and opinion. It also incorporates communications technology, government failure to provide an authoritative

²⁰ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*.

²¹ Small, *Covering Dissent*. Pg.12.

explanation, and the information the public received as well as responses to it. The government reaction to the media's coverage is just as important as the public reaction. The media did in fact affect or reflect public opinion passively or actively as it influenced government officials and their political decisions. What I incorporate from Hallin's perspective is the "uncensored" aspect of the war. However, I use it in regards to the images and reports connected with the attack. Due to advancements in communications technology, color printing, and little censorship, the war entered the homes of Americans and had a profound impact on their opinion of the Vietnam War and war in general. Consequently media coverage gradually changed with the public's opinion of the war and presented it in a way that would appeal to public sentiments in a way that ultimately reflected public opinion of the Vietnam War. My argument is important because not only does it provide an alternate view of the relationship between the media and the public but also explains the media's growing role in society and history.

Print media such as newspapers and news magazines are the primary focus of this study. Since most newspapers were dailies there was a need to rush information in order to get it into print for the next day. Newspaper coverage of the American Embassy attack appears in major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Los Angeles Times* over the course of several days (January 29th –February 10th) in order to assemble a coherent story including comments from major military and government officials. These particular newspapers were important because they were available nationally and had an abundance of readers all over the country.

Major news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* had in-depth articles with color pictures and were very important middlebrow news media outlets. These magazines are filled with articles on the Vietnam War and were very popular among the American public. Articles of

the embassy attack in news magazines contained a number of photographs of injured or dead American soldiers, military police, and Vietcong along with detailed accounts of the battle.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore major national newspapers' coverage of the American Embassy attack. Chapter one will cover the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor's* articles from January 29th to February 10th. It will analyze what was written as well as the photographs that were printed and investigate the impact they had on the American public. This chapter will include responses from reporters themselves in order to get a more in-depth view of how the press operated in Vietnam. Chapter two focuses on news magazines' coverage of the embassy attack. *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* provided in-depth articles and photographs not just of the embassy attack but also what it meant in the larger context of the Tet Offensive. Chapter three incorporates the coverage from newspapers and news magazines to explore the relationships the news media had with the military, government, and American public and explains the effect these relationships had on the public's understanding of the Tet Offensive and the Vietnam War.

This study on the news coverage of the American Embassy attack during the Tet Offensive is important because it serves as an example of how the news media reported the offensive to the American public. Tet serves as the turning point in the Vietnam War, which is especially true when looking at the news media coverage and public opinion. The surprise offensive and embassy attack caught the media, military, government, and the American public off guard while it also contradicted previous statements from the president and government officials. The news media scrutinized the government for these contradictions and its conflicts with the military and the government affected what was reported and how it was presented to the public. While the news media reflected public sentiments it also had profound influence on them. This constant

give and take, perpetuated by the Tet Offensive ultimately aided in turning the American public against the Vietnam War.

Major Newspaper Coverage of the Embassy Attack

Introduction

Newspapers played a very significant role in constructing a narrative of the attack on the U.S. Embassy. Through their articles and photographs the major national newspapers contributed to the narrative by perpetuating ideas of disaster, shock, and defeat. Through not only their presence but also through their reporting the major newspapers advanced the primary goal of the Vietcong attacks, which was the perpetuation of a psychological victory just as the Vietcong had planned. Initial reports of the embassy attack were covered in every major newspaper in the country, papers that remain some of the most popular sources of news for Americans. According to the Roper Organization Office for the Television Information survey in 1964, 56% of Americans received their news exclusively from daily papers.²² Newspapers provided the public with the latest daily information along with editorials addressing ongoing situations such as the embassy attack and the subsequent Saigon battle. Even though some newspapers released relatively the same information and sometimes even the same stories due to their reliance on the AP, UPI, and Reuters, their editorials and reader responses were unique to the particular newspaper.²³

Four major newspapers that stand out as being the most highly read dailies in the country were the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. As many American newspaper companies relied solely on wire services the top newspapers, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* were a step ahead with

²² Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1986. pg. 106.

²³ (AP) Associated Press, (UPI) United Press International, Reuters- all wire services.

several correspondents in Vietnam while the *Christian Science Monitor* even had a correspondent based in Saigon.²⁴ With the necessary components of the press institutions in place each major newspaper was ready to capture the Saigon Tet attacks, which all four newspapers ultimately considered a psychological loss for the U.S. and South Vietnamese military as well as the American public.

The *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Christian Science Monitor* are subject to study when investigating the media and Vietnam for several reasons. First, these media companies had by far the greatest presence in Vietnam. While most newspapers sent one or two correspondents, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Post*, and *Christian Science Monitor* sent up to four correspondents as well as an entire crew for all the other tasks aside from reporting. The *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Post* had offices in Saigon and the *New York Times* even had their own wire service to speed up communications with their headquarters in the U.S. Finally, these newspapers, being the largest national papers, had a strong influence within the government. Recognized as the most read, government officials kept a close eye on these papers to determine the public's sentiment on certain issues, the American Embassy attack being one of them.

Each major newspaper was unique coming out of its respective city with the *Christian Science Monitor* based out of Boston, Massachusetts. They all offered their own perspectives reflecting the cities' views and sentiments but also appealed to the public outside of their immediate influences as national and international news providers. While the majority of the top newspaper companies had a presence in Vietnam the *New York Times* had the largest staff servicing 320 clients, which were local newspapers who used the *Times* articles, and four

²⁴ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1983. pg. 10.

American reporters contributing to the average of 895,000 newspapers in circulation in the United States.²⁵ The *New York Times* had its own telex line and rented office in Saigon and as with other newspapers the *Times* relied on the AP and the UPI mostly for late-breaking stories but they preferred to have their own reporters write the stories.²⁶

The second largest newspaper in Vietnam was the *Washington Post* also with four reporters in Vietnam. The *Post* had a circulation of 480,000 newspapers in North America.²⁷ The *Washington Post* also had an office in Saigon coincidentally down the hall from the *New York Times*. It did not have telecommunications of its own so they relied on the Reuters wire service to relay their messages to their headquarters in Washington. While the *Post* had reporters to bring in information they did not rely on their own reporters to write the stories like their *Times* counterparts and instead saved money and time by using the AP, UPI, and Reuters reports.²⁸ Rounding out the major influences in Vietnam was the *Los Angeles Times* with two reporters and a circulation of 950,000 newspapers in the United States.²⁹ Its two reporters operated independently and aside from frequently sharing a wire service with the *Washington Post* the *L.A. Times* for the most part remained on the sidelines in the competition between the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Each newspaper company had its own set of political influences from within and from the city their headquarters operated in. For example, the *Washington Post*, located in Washington, D.C., tried to cover the government's role and responses in terms of situations in Vietnam as well as the growing conflict among Democrats over Vietnam.³⁰ Within the *Washington Post* the

²⁵ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 10.

²⁶ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 10.

²⁷ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 10.

²⁸ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 45.

²⁹ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 10.

³⁰ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 46.

higher-level executives were split over Johnson's policy in Vietnam. Peter Braestrup claims that the "institutional biases" of the *Washington Post* were not ideological but "journalistic" biases as he feels that purely ideological biases do not fully account for the articles and ideas that were produced.³¹ Braestrup's claim may not be entirely accurate due to the fact that he was the Saigon Bureau chief for the *Washington Post*.

The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* had a large number of college subscribers and focused on the student responses to the embassy attack and took a tone more appealing to anti-war sentiments. Though the editors of both *Times* supported the anti-war stance any biases that surfaced in individual stories were solely on the part of the reporter. While Braestrup gives excuses for anti-war/anti-Johnson biases showing up in articles and reports, Nicholas Berry explains that it is the journalists' duty to observe, analyze, and evaluate government decisions and events. Berry responds to opposing attitudes with, "Can you imagine a sports reporter going to a football game and not reporting who won and why?"³² The *Christian Science Monitor* despite the implication of a conservative title, was anything but. The articles, editorials, cartoons, and reader responses all contained strong anti-war and even anti-Johnson tones. The major newspapers tried to appeal to their audience both local and in these cases national but in doing so perpetually presented anti-war and anti-Johnson views resulting in a symbiotic relationship between the public and the media on a local and national level. Johnson even commented in an interview with a biographer after he renounced his bid for the presidency

³¹ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 46.

³² Nicholas Berry, *Foreign Policy and the Press: An Analysis of The New York Times' Coverage of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Greenwood Press, New York, 1990. pg. 51.

saying that Communists controlled the *Washington Post* and both the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*.³³

The background and political ideologies of these four newspapers are important to understanding why the articles and editorials carried the tone that they did. They are also important in recognizing that many U.S. top national news authorities all present similar information not deviating much from one another and aside from the intense rivalries and competition that took place seem somewhat allied in their presentations. This is especially the case in coverage of the American Embassy attack and the following Saigon Battle that was reported roughly from its beginning on January 30th to February 9th when articles shifted from Saigon to the Battle of Hue and the build-up outside of Khe Sanh. Finally it is important to note the thirteen-hour delay between Vietnam and the United States that resulted in newspapers that were released in the morning contained stories close to a day old. This put pressure on the news organizations to get the stories the U.S. as fast as possible to make the morning deadline.

Newspaper Coverage of Tet

As the Tet Lunar New Year approached the Vietcong began to stir. The January 30th headlines of the major newspapers read, “Reds Open Up Da Nang, 7 Capitals Attacked: Allies Cancel Cease Fire as Communists Start Offensive.”³⁴ Da Nang along with the other provincial capitals such as Pleiku, Nha Trang, and Qui Nhon mentioned in the articles are all only a few hundred miles from Saigon allowing the *Times*, *Post*, and *Christian Science Monitor* reporters in their Saigon offices to prepare for what was shaping to be a major offensive. Little did they know that the offensive would come to their office doorsteps and the situation would be like nothing

³³ Melvin Small, *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. pg.29

³⁴ “Reds Open Up Da Nang, 7 Capitals Attacked: Allies Cancel Cease Fire as Communists Start Offensive”. Los Angeles, January 30th, 1968. pg.1.

they had ever before handled. In their articles, both the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that the actions taken by the Vietcong resembled the Viet Minh's Tet truce break with the French just before their major offensive culminating in the battle of Dienbienphu. The papers also noted the attacks took advantage of the new year as many South Vietnamese officers and regulars took leave to be with their families for the holiday.³⁵

These articles are important to begin with because they set the official line the newspapers take in regarding the Tet Offensive. From this point on coverage of the attacks would all refer to a similar historical strategy, a "Dienbienphu type defeat" looming over the suspected target of Khe Sanh that remained persistent in all other stories pertaining to the Tet Offensive.³⁶ The fact is that U.S. intelligence was still unsure of the NVA/Vietcong's plans and speculation on the part of the reporters only added to the confusion of the public in the situation that followed.

Peter Braestrup provides intuitive insight in writing, "The First Reports Are Always Wrong."³⁷ This quote is especially true pertaining to television reports but with the thirteen-hour delay newspapers had a little time to construct a comprehensive synopsis. This resulted in a partially accurate portrayal. However when four of the major national newspapers all contained bits of differing information a clear sense of what exactly happened was completely shattered. This was precisely the case on January 31, 1968, when Vietcong terrorists infiltrated the U.S. Embassy compound.

Each of the four newspaper publications on January 31st contained multiple articles of the embassy and Saigon attacks. The overall message was that a suicide squad surprised both

³⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Jan.30th, 1968.

³⁶ Saville R. Davis, "Viet Shift: U.S. Bolsters Forces for Khe Sanh Threat". *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 30th, 1968.

³⁷ Braestrup, *Big Story*

American and South Vietnamese forces by attacking the U.S. Embassy and several other targets throughout Saigon. The three main themes the newspapers covered from the day's activities were the embassy attack itself, George Jacobson's showdown with the last Vietcong, and the supposed security of the city and the newly constructed embassy. The headlines on the front covers of the four newspapers read, "Embassy Secure, Saigon Suicide Squad Wiped Out: Raid Climaxes Widespread Red Attacks," "Raiders Wiped Out After 6 Hours; Vietcong Widen Attack on Cities," "Vietcong Raids Pack Political Wallop," and the most assertive "Vietcong Seize Part of the U.S. Embassy."³⁸

The *Los Angeles Times* accompanied their article with photographs of a helicopter landing on the embassy roof, a MP carrying an injured Vietnamese, and a South Vietnamese soldier angrily shooting the body of a Vietcong guerilla on the ground. All this depicted the chaos and carnage that took place in and around the embassy that day. The article fairly accurately reported the series of events at the embassy followed by further insight that claimed the attack was both for propaganda and a diversion used to lure U.S. troops away from the north. The article notes that the U.S. was warned of the attack but still only a few men guarded the embassy compound. The *Times* suggested that the Vietcong's plan was to destroy the entire embassy ended with a quote from Westmoreland saying that their well-calculated plan ultimately failed.

The *New York Times* much like the *Los Angeles Times* provided a somewhat accurate account of the embassy attack and even used some of the same pictures adding maps of Saigon,

³⁸ "Embassy Secure, Saigon Suicide Squad Wiped Out: Raid Climaxes Widespread Red Attacks", *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

"Raiders Wiped Out After 6 Hours; Vietcong Widen Attack on Cities", *New York Times*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

"Vietcong Raids Pack Political Wallop", *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

"Vietcong Seize Part of the U.S. Embassy", *Washington Post*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

Vietnam, and Marines under fire. While the article does mention other targets that were shelled and invaded they stressed the significance of the American Embassy attack claiming, “The daring raid was the most dramatic of scores of attacks launched by enemy commando units that carried the Vietcong’s Lunar New Year offensive to the capital.”³⁹ The *New York Times* also stressed the fact that the embassy compound was severely understaffed despite warnings. Furthermore reporter Tom Buckley stated that the raids caught the South Vietnamese and the United States by surprise.⁴⁰ The *Christian Science Monitor* also alluded to the governmental impact of the attacks in their headline “Vietcong Raids Pack Political Wallop” as well as the surprise nature of the attacks but major details of the embassy attack appeared in the next February 1st printing.⁴¹

The *Washington Post* published the most inaccurate account of the embassy attack that misrepresented numbers, a timeline of events, and was filled with more speculation than fact. It too referenced the fact that the attacks were part of a larger scheme to divert attention from the north and referred to them as “...the best coordinated assaults on government held cities of the war.”⁴² The *Post*’s article did not even show photographs of the embassy or the Saigon street fighting making it the weakest article of the four. Based on the article’s lack of photographs, correct information, and conformation from official sources, the *Washington Post* appeared to have just pulled the story from wire sources.

There were several discrepancies between the articles, and these contributed to the confusion and disillusionment of the American public. First is whether or not the attackers

³⁹ Tom Buckley, “Raiders Wiped Out After 6 Hours; Vietcong Widen Attack on Cities”. *New York Times*, Jan.31st, 1968.

⁴⁰ Tom Buckley, “Raiders Wiped Out After 6 Hours; Vietcong Widen Attack on Cities”. *New York Times*, Jan.31st, 1968.

⁴¹ “Vietcong Raids Pack Political Wallop”, *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

⁴² “Vietcong Seize Part of the U.S. Embassy”, *Washington Post*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

gained control of the actual embassy chancery building. The second is exactly how many guerillas raided the embassy compound. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* both stated that in some reports the guerillas gained access to the actual embassy building. However statements from the Marines and General William Westmoreland denied these reports. The *Washington Post* on the other hand reported that the attackers not only gained access to the embassy building but also held the ground floor for at least an hour, ample time to access to sensitive materials. Reasons for this discrepancy were, one, no reporter had a decent vantage point during the attack. Secondly, the first report of Vietcong entering the embassy was confusing because the embassy compound was made up of several buildings including the main chancery building, and it is not clear which building they entered. The *Washington Post* obviously printed some of the first reports that their Saigon Bureau Chief, Braestrup holds as “always wrong.”⁴³

The second line of dissension between the major press forces was exactly how many Vietcong invaded the compound. The *New York Times* reported the “terrorist” squad was made up of seventeen men, the *Los Angeles Times* reported nineteen, while the *Washington Post* reported up to twenty invaders.⁴⁴ The final official count given in a statement by Westmoreland only a few hours after the raid was nineteen. The confusion of the press lay in their inability to distinguish between Vietnamese embassy employees and Vietcong. It was later discovered that several drivers for the embassy were in fact members of the Vietcong. This was reported in the

⁴³ Braestrup, *Big Story*.

⁴⁴ Tom Buckley, “Raiders Wiped Out After 6 Hours; Vietcong Widen Attack on Cities”. *New York Times*, Jan.31st, 1968.

Vietcong Seize Part of the U.S. Embassy”, *Washington Post*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

“Embassy Secure, Saigon Suicide Squad Wiped Out: Raid Climaxes Widespread Red Attacks”, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

following week in several national newspapers. Again, these differing pieces of information only added to Americans' confusion and frustration not being presented a cohesive story.

The next set of stories centered on what the newspapers reported as a heroic action on the part of retired Colonel George Jacobson. Trapped in his villa during the six and a half hours of fighting Jacobson according to both of the *Times* had only a pistol and gas mask as marines tried to finish off the last Vietcong on the first floor of Jacobson's home. The *Times* reported that after being severely wounded the guerilla made his way upstairs only to be finished off by Jacobson himself. While the *Times* attempted to make this a grand story of courage and heroism, Jacobson was quoted saying, "I didn't do much because the military police and Marine guards had already crippled him and he couldn't shoot straight."⁴⁵ Finally, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* printed articles about the vulnerability of Saigon to attacks as well as the newly constructed embassy's fortress-like structure. The articles claimed that despite popular belief Saigon and the American Embassy were just like any other cities and installations in Vietnam and were vulnerable to Vietcong attacks. The *New York Times* also added that the attack on the embassy was somewhat symbolic because so much publicity surrounded the opening of the impenetrable embassy compound. "After more than two years of construction work, the New United States Embassy opened today. It has doors of solid teak, shatterproof Plexiglas windows, reinforced concrete walls and a massive terra cotta sun screen that will double as a blast shield." "We'll be able to withstand just about any type of minor attack."⁴⁶ Readers of these articles on the opening of the American Embassy were led to believe that the embassy compound was a fortress that was unconquerable. January 31st brought a large amount of articles reporting the

⁴⁵ Charles Mohr, "Foe Invades U.S. Saigon Embassy; U.S. Aide in Embassy Villa Kills Guerilla With Pistol". *New York Times*, Jan.31st 1968.

⁴⁶ "New U.S. Embassy Opens in Saigon: Building Designed to Thwart Most Attacks" *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1967.

attacks on the embassy and Saigon but many more would come as the fighting ensued and as the press tried to provide a rationale for the attacks.

The press used the articles on February 1st to try to make sense of the attacks and to recap with more accurate figures the U.S. Embassy battle. In these reflections stronger anti-war biases were much more prevalent both in tone and in content not to mention the political cartoons that accompanied the articles. Alongside photographs of Marines trying to retake the American Embassy next to their fallen comrades the *New York Times* recapped the embassy battle adding the subsequent explosions outside of the embassy compound. They followed up with a new analysis by reporter Hanson W. Baldwin entitled “Public Opinion in U.S. and South Vietnam Is Viewed as Main Target of New Offensive by Vietcong.”⁴⁷ As the article discusses the intentions of the raids according to the official line, Baldwin’s sources suggested differently claiming that, “The enemy hopes to foster war-weariness; to strengthen the opposition to the war in the United States and in South Vietnam, and to force negotiations at a disadvantage.”⁴⁸ Baldwin continued in a later paragraph offering an alternate official line, “The overall strategy of the enemy, as interpreted by the Pentagon, is aimed primarily at political and psychological objectives. The terrorists’ attacks in Saigon and elsewhere were intended as ‘headline grabbers’ as one officer put it, ‘to make us look silly’ and to impress United States and South Vietnamese public opinion with the enemy’s strength.”⁴⁹ This article along with articles of the initial attacks the *New York Times* has done what the Vietcong had hoped and captured attention world wide.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Public Opinion in U.S. and South Vietnam Is Viewed as Main Target of New Offensive by Vietcong”. *New York Times*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁴⁸ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Public Opinion in U.S. and South Vietnam Is Viewed as Main Target of New Offensive by Vietcong”. *New York Times*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁴⁹ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Public Opinion in U.S. and South Vietnam Is Viewed as Main Target of New Offensive by Vietcong”. *New York Times*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁵⁰ William Tughy, “Red Attacks Seen as Show of Strength to Viet People, World”. *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.1st, 1968.

The *Los Angeles Times*' headline article was much the same as the *New York Times*, referring to the attacks as being aimed at propaganda with the attacks' success depending on the reaction of the average citizen.⁵¹ They also included an alternate theory, rather than Westmoreland's claim that the attacks were aimed to divert attention from the north, they were in fact the exact opposite leaving the build up in the north a distraction from the widespread attacks on the cities of South Vietnam. The editorial article that followed featured a cartoon that depicted President Johnson in his bed calling the American Embassy as the caption reads, "...What the hell's Ho Chi Minh doing answering our Saigon Embassy phone...?".⁵² Though the cartoon was very humorous it also alludes to the inadequacies of both the U.S. and Saigon governments and militaries. The adjacent article starts off by placing serious doubt on Westmoreland's statements after the embassy attack and made their own assumptions, "The fact is that the Communists, in their attacks in Saigon and elsewhere, who scored a considerable propaganda coup, which is what they sought."⁵³ While the *Los Angeles Times* begins the article with a disclaimer that the opinions expressed are not official to the *Times* they did decide to print it in their newspaper, in a way associating themselves with the opinion. Finally the article ended with a paragraph that's rhetoric would be continuously used when referring to the embassy attack, "The Vietcong penetration of the American Embassy compound, following the North Korean seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, is undeniably a further embarrassment for the United States."⁵⁴

The *Washington Post* followed up their January 31st articles in much the same way as the *Times* using the same photograph as the *New York Times* and even a cartoon of their own. "Reds Press Offensive, Raid Many Viet Towns: Ho Cheers Vietcong 'Victory'" was the headline the

⁵¹ Tughy, "Red Attacks Seen as Show of Strength to Viet People, World". *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁵² "Political Warfare in Vietnam", *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.1st 1968.

⁵³ "Political Warfare in Vietnam", *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.1st 1968.

⁵⁴ "Political Warfare in Vietnam", *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.1st 1968.

Post ran.⁵⁵ The *Post* devoted much more attention to Ho Chi Minh's response to the attacks. Ho Chi Minh even referred to the embassy attack as being very humiliating for the United States. The cartoon that followed depicts General Westmoreland under a desk in the destroyed Saigon Headquarters cranking out sayings such as "we now have the initiative" and "the enemy offensive has been foiled..." with the caption "Everything's Okay...They Never Reached The Mimeograph Machine." This was yet another cartoon that poked fun at the military's ineptitude and blunderings in Vietnam.⁵⁶

Assessments and goals of the attacks continued in what would be a historic February 2nd edition of the major newspapers. Perhaps the most recognizable images of the Vietnam War and the Tet Offensive were shown as the papers reported the Saigon attacks. As the heavy fighting persisted in the city, the articles shifted from reporting the official line to granting the Vietcong with considerable success in achieving the goals of the offensive. The headlining photo on the first page of the *Times* and the *Post* is Eddie Adams' memorable image of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong guerilla in the streets of Saigon. Following articles were based more on the widespread offensive and persistent street fighting in Saigon the front pages of the major national newspapers showed the grim reality of the war that many would consider inappropriate on behalf of the press companies. Both the New York and *Los Angeles Times* later received major backlash from their readers for their choice of Adams' front-page photograph. Readers' responses called it "horrific" and "cold-blooded murder".⁵⁷ The *Times* response was that they showed the picture for what it depicted "bloody war in the streets of Saigon".⁵⁸

⁵⁵ "Reds Press Offensive, Raid Many Viet Towns: Ho Cheers Vietcong 'Victory'", *Washington Post*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁵⁶ "Everything's Okay...They Never Reached The Mimeograph Machine". *Washington Post*, Feb.1st, 1968.

⁵⁷ "Letters to the *Times*". *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.7th, 1968.

⁵⁸ "Letters to the *Times*". *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.7th, 1968.

Several themes persisted throughout the February 2nd articles such as the psychological and political aims of the attacks, the role of the South Vietnamese military, and the future of the war. Along with the series of the General Loan photographs other images of dead children and car fires accompanied the *New York Times*' article of the impact of the offensive. "The psychological impact of the surprise offensive on the people of the South is likely to prove considerable...For American public opinion, the facts would appear to have belied the official optimism that has been current since the gathering of leading United States commanders in Washington two months ago."⁵⁹ In these few sentences it is clear that the *New York Times*' tone has changed considerably from previously reporting primarily the official line from Westmoreland and now presenting a line of their own.

This line is further stressed in two editorials by reporters Tom Wicker and Tom Buckley. Under the headline "Vietcong's Attacks Shock Washington" Tom Wicker provides a quote from the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, "...the objectives of the attacks apparently had been a substantial psychological or propaganda victory" later adding the view of one senator's opinion that though the Vietcong did not come out with a military victory they did score a psychological victory in their surprise efforts.⁶⁰ Tom Buckley directly addressed the purpose of the embassy raid writing, "The Vietcong's choice of the new American Embassy as a major target appeared to indicate an attempt at humiliation. To the extent that the guerillas blasted their way through the stone wall and fought for six hours, the attempt succeeded."⁶¹

Raymond Coffey for the *Washington Post* along with Saville Davis and John Hughes for the *Christian Science Monitor* also commented on the psychological upper hand of the Vietcong.

⁵⁹ "Gains Stressed in Hanoi", *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶⁰ Tom Wicker, "Vietcong Attacks Shock Washington: Washington Is Dealt Hard Blow By the Successes of the Vietcong". *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶¹ Tom Buckley, "Offensive Said To Pinpoint Enemy's Strengths". *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

Coffey notes that as the Vietcong suffered a military setback adding the words of General Fred Weyand, “On the other hand the psychological and political impact of the onslaught would be considerable, obviously.”⁶² Davis and Hughes focused on South Vietnamese President Thieu’s declaration of martial law. Davis claims that, “The majority says that martial rule will be temporary. So, in its judgment, will be the considerable temporary success of the Vietcong on the psychological front.”⁶³ It is in these articles that the idea comes forth that not only did the Vietcong try to wage a psychological battle but succeeded in doing so. This became a popular view of the attacks both by the American public and the government.

The last set of articles on Feb.2nd deal with the U.S. and South Vietnamese military efficiency in protecting South Vietnamese civilians, another psychological target of the Saigon attacks. Joseph Kraft of the *Los Angeles Times* writes, “The war in Vietnam is unwinnable and the longer it goes on the more Americans, already badly overexposed, will be subjected to losses and humiliations, even in the places of maximum security.” He continues, “That is the message the other side is trying to get across by the wave of assaults on the Saigon Embassy and other places in South Vietnam. And because the message so obviously serves the adversary, it is tempting to dismiss it as propaganda. But the message happens to be substantially true.”⁶⁴ In his assertion Kraft believes that the United States is not giving serious enough consideration to the effect the attacks had on the civilian population and in further paragraphs he states that if the U.S. continued its policy towards the Saigon attacks they would be vulnerable to more humiliation.⁶⁵

⁶² Raymond Coffey, “Psychological Gains Seen for Vietcong”. *Washington Post*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶³ Saville Davis, “Three Fronts: U.S. Accents Viet Drives in Diplomacy, Politics”. *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶⁴ Joseph Kraft, “Recognizing the Realities in Vietnam is Imperative”. *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶⁵ Joseph Kraft, “Recognizing the Realities in Vietnam is Imperative”. *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

Ward Just of the *Washington Post* gives a quote by Senator Stephen Young that examines the South Vietnamese' role in defending against the attacks. He writes, "Stephen Young, in a speech on the Senate floor, said "the military junta in Saigon has failed miserably to shoulder its share of the burden in Vietnam. The fact is that for all intensive purposes the South Vietnamese army has ceased to fight."⁶⁶ The growing American opposition to the South Vietnamese military effort was seen throughout the country with major opponents in the U.S. Senate and House such as Senator Robert Kennedy. *New York Times* reporter James Reston uses words like "slackness" and "inefficient" when he referred to the South Vietnamese forces.⁶⁷ In another *New York Times* article it was reported that the attacks left the Saigon Government and South Vietnamese Army "disorientated to the highest degree" which leads to the heart of all of the articles that one of the aims of the offensive was to prove to the South Vietnamese that neither their government nor the American forces could protect them leaving an entire city's population in disillusionment.⁶⁸ According to the reporters and articles the Vietcong certainly succeeded in this aspect of the offensive while instilling ideas of a psychological victory in the American public.

As the Saigon attacks continued the major newspapers kept a steady stream of reports flowing to the public. Some reports were new, some just recapped the week of fighting while others were official responses from top U.S. officials including the president. The papers' articles from February 3rd to February 6th remained unwavering from the official line that the goals of the attacks were to achieve a psychological victory in order to bring about equal negotiations with the U.S. The papers did however stress that the government did not give enough credit to the Communists' attacks and that they did achieve a psychological victory over Saigon and South Vietnamese civilians.

⁶⁶ Ward Just, "Officials Suspect Major Aid From South in Viet Red Raids". *Washington Post*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶⁷ James Reston, "Washington: North Vietnam's Strategy of Terror". *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

⁶⁸ "Gains Stressed in Hanoi", *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

There were various new reports that came out of Saigon after February 2nd. Pockets of the city that were still embattled such as the Chinese district of Cholon captured the headlining articles along with several other stories. As of February 3rd the *Washington Post* reported that there were still periodical small arms and sniper fire on the American Embassy even though it was reinforced with extra guards after the initial attack.⁶⁹ The *Washington Post* also addressed how the Vietcong were able to infiltrate the city so easily through underground networks. In an article entitled “S. Viet People Resent Americans”, authors Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson attributed the penetration of the U.S. Embassy in the heart of Saigon to “the bitterness of the South Vietnamese people toward the United States.”⁷⁰ This article brings to light the strong anti-American sentiment that Pearson and Anderson claimed to be very prevalent in South Vietnam. Peter Arnett also of the *Washington Post* addressed the Vietcong’s strategy of infiltration. Arnett described how the Vietcong that stormed the embassy rode into Saigon in a truckload of flowers while other attackers took advantage of the holiday and slipped in the city like “out-of-town relatives attending a family reunion.”⁷¹ He added that the terrorists that stormed the embassy all had forged curfew passes that allowed them to move freely in the night. By February 6th top officials claimed that Saigon had been secure but the front page of the *Washington Post* said differently. Late in the evening on February 5th, Vietcong guerillas overran a Saigon police station and later burned another.

After February 2nd many articles about the Saigon and embassy attack are very critical of the South Vietnamese government and military. One of the harshest critics of the South Vietnamese government was Senator Edward Kennedy, Democrat from Massachusetts. Senator Kennedy appeared both in the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* on February 6th for

⁶⁹ “S. Viet Planes Strafe Reds in Saigon Suburbs”, *Washington Post*, Feb.3rd, 1968.

⁷⁰ Drew Pearson, Jack Anderson, “S. Viet People Resent Americans”. *Washington Post*, Feb.3rd, 1968.

⁷¹ Peter Arnett, “How VC Infiltrated Saigon”. *Washington Post*, Feb.4th, 1968.

speaking out against the corruption and apathy among the citizens and officials in South Vietnam. He refers to the government as “tottering toward disaster under the weight of its own corruption and indifference to the war”, and criticizes them for not increasing their war effort.⁷² Eugene Risher a UPI staff writer claims that “despite warnings from the U.S. military command that large-scale attacks were imminent, up to 50% of the men [South Vietnamese Army] in many units had left their posts to spend the Tet lunar new year holiday with their wives and children in Saigon.”⁷³ Finally, Joseph Kraft examines the various situations that occurred throughout South Vietnam and offers a very strong conclusion. “That is a government, as we have now seen, with a police chief who shoots captives out of hand...that is a government with corrupt military authorities who do not turn out troops to help protect the American Embassy. This is a government, in other words, that cannot enlist the support of the local population.”⁷⁴ This is only a sample of the negative articles on the South Vietnamese government in the national newspapers but as we will see will proliferate in newsmagazines, U.S. government officials, and in public opinion.

Conclusion

Newspapers contributed to a major debate. Were the Vietcong successful in the attacks on the American Embassy, Saigon, and others throughout South Vietnam? While the papers’ reports on the Presidential reaction took the side that the attacks were insignificant, the rest of the editorials and articles of each major newspaper said differently. Two articles from the *Washington Post* gave President Johnson’s view of the attacks as being inefficient and, “that he did not believe they could win a psychological victory.”⁷⁵ One reason for this statement was that

⁷² Richard Hardwood, “Ted Kennedy Assails S. Vietnam Corruption”. *Washington Post*, Feb. 6th, 1968.

⁷³ Eugene Risher, “Viet Army Dropped Guard in Spite of Warnings By U.S”. *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.6th, 1968.

⁷⁴ Joseph Kraft, “The Lesson of the Nightmare: Power Alone Won’t Do the Job”. *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.7th, 1968.

⁷⁵ Carroll Kilpatrick, “President Sees Repulse of New Drive”. *Washington Post*, Feb.3rd, 1968.

Johnson did not want to help the Vietcong earn this psychological victory by admitting that they had succeeded and two, many of his top advisers just told him what he wanted to hear and down played the attacks. Several articles opposed the President's claim however, using as their main piece of evidence the attack and partial seizure of the American Embassy. An article from the *Los Angeles Times* stated, "The extensive and sustained terrorists attacks by the Vietcong, including penetration of the American Embassy in Saigon, demonstrate once more the ability of the Communists to reap political gain from military sacrifice."⁷⁶ Joseph Harsch of the *Christian Science Monitor* writes, "The military storm which swept through the main cities of South Vietnam last week and around the very walls of the American Embassy in Saigon did not seriously damage the military strength or posture of American forces. It did sweep away any idea that the Vietcong are a disintegrating political force."⁷⁷ Other articles called the Saigon attacks "political and psychological devastation" and "tremendous psychological victory". The obvious imbalance between the official reports and the rest of the articles were overwhelming, sending a very strong message to the readers of these national newspapers that there was much more evidence to undermine the President's assessment.

Evidence suggests that the national newspapers, after the initial reports, the embassy and Saigon attacks were considered psychological victories. These newspapers outlined the goals the Vietcong had for the attacks and in turn followed through, just as the Vietcong had planned, making the attacks and their psychological success the headlines on the front pages. These outright declarations of success mainly surfaced in editorials in the following days of the embassy attack but nevertheless stand out. The editorials and even the breaking news articles also were critical of the official line. It is evident especially in articles about the success of the

⁷⁶ "Times Editorial Views of the Week", *Los Angeles Times*, Feb.4th, 1968.

⁷⁷ Joseph Harsch, "Johnson Listens To Viet Dissenters". *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb.5th, 1968.

attacks in which Johnson denies Vietcong victory. Then the reporters use the evidence to the contrary against him. Though the reporters' opinions are not as strong as we will see in the following chapter, they still color the representations of the articles giving the major national newspapers an anti-war perspective.

News Magazines' Coverage of the Embassy Attack

Introduction

News magazines added to the construction of a Tet disaster narrative in a way that newspapers did not. Not only did the weekly magazines have time to assemble a cohesive story but also they provided color pictures of the Tet attacks. As newspapers recounted the attacks over numerous days, weekly newsmagazines covered all the attacks into only a few articles that strengthened the impact of the articles on their readers. The magazines also offered letters from their readers that commented on their coverage of the Tet Offensive.

Weekly magazines were a major source of news and information in 1968. The major advantage that news magazines have over newspapers is that they are printed weekly rather than daily and could give more analysis to a specific event. While newspapers provided breaking Vietnam news, newsmagazines placed these events into context. They told what these events actually meant. They also provided further responses to them not only from the public but also from government and military officials. In addition to news articles, magazines by 1968 provided colored photographs- something that newspapers could not offer their readers. Most readers of the weekly magazines received their news from a variety of sources but as Daniel Hallin demonstrates, the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office survey in 1964 showed that of the surveyed participants, 8% “got most of their news” from magazines.⁷⁸ Hallin’s study and the Roper report asserts that weekly magazines were respected as a major source of news in the United States and had a profound impact on their readers.

⁷⁸ Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1986. pg. 106.

The three major weekly magazines in 1968 were *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*. Each magazine had its own focus and appeal. *Time* and *Life* coming from the same company (*Time-Life*), based out of New York, offered their readers a balance between articles and photographs. *Time*, founded in 1923, boasted yet that it "...is one of the most authoritative and informative guides to what is happening in the worlds of health and science, politics, business, society, and entertainment."⁷⁹ In 1968 *Time* had a circulation of 3,700,000 magazines.⁸⁰ Its sister magazine, *Life*, founded in 1936, was more devoted to reporting the news through photographs. By 1968 both publications were established as trustworthy, award winning, news sources. At the beginning of the Vietnam War conservative anti-communists such as Henry Luce dominated the *Time-Life* Company and it was considered the most important news outlet in the country according to Clarence Wyatt.⁸¹ By 1968 however, growing dissent within the company mainly between a liberal Saigon bureau and a conservative New York headquarters produced a more balanced interpretation as observed by Peter Braestrup, fellow journalist and Saigon Bureau Chief for the *Washington Post*.⁸²

Newsweek was a separate company, founded in 1933 by Thomas J.C. Martyn, a former editor of *Time*, *Newsweek* offered informative articles, much like *Time*, along with color photographs and in 1968 was regarded as leaning more towards a liberal interpretation of the news, frequently criticizing U.S. government officials and highlighting flaws in American foreign policy. The magazine was, in fact, so critical of the South Vietnamese Army that the Saigon Bureau Chief, Everett Martin, was deported from Vietnam prior to the Tet Offensive by

⁷⁹ *Time's* heading on Reprints and Permission Website page. <http://www.time.com/time/reprints/>. Time inc. 2006.

⁸⁰ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1983. pg. 10.

⁸¹ Clarence Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. W. W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1993. pg. 29.

⁸² Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 41.

the South Vietnamese government. *Newsweek*, in 1968, had 2,090,000 magazines in circulation.⁸³ Though they had their differences and were constantly in competition with one another, *Time-Life* and *Newsweek* were widely regarded as an excellent source of news and as the top press authorities.

Peter Braestrup's *Big Story* offers the best description of how exactly the news magazine companies operated during the war.⁸⁴ In reporting the war newspaper companies relied heavily on their field reporters from Reuters, the Associated Press, and the United Press International to provide the paper with as much information as was available at the time. However the weekly news magazine reporters were only part of a larger process that involved a great deal more research and analysis.

The internal operations of the news magazine companies are very important in understanding how journalists reported news to the public. All of the major news magazines worked in relatively the same fashion. The first step in this process was for the magazine's Saigon bureau to send a list of possible stories to their headquarters in New York. The New York writers and executives would meet and decide which stories the Saigon reporters followed up on plus a list of suggestions they had. All communication between the Saigon bureau and New York headquarters took place via cable and telephone. Once the field reporter got the necessary lists from New York the reporter followed up the story and wrote an article to send back to New York. These stories went to the New York writer and researcher who used information from newspapers, mainly the *New York Times*, other bureaus, and Washington in order to get the government reaction to the particular event. This story then went through a series of editors in which new questions arose and the story may have been sent back to the field reporter in Saigon.

⁸³ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 10.

⁸⁴ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*

This process could last until the night of the final print and in the end the field reporter may have only recognize one or two lines in the finished article.⁸⁵

Both *Time-Life* and *Newsweek* had their own bureau in Saigon and their own internal processes and methods. *Time-Life* had a significant advantage over *Newsweek* having their own Telex communication network with their New York headquarters that greatly increased the speed of communications overseas. Telex was a cable service much like that of the wire services and television networks.⁸⁶ In addition to editors and reporters the *Time-Life* and *Newsweek* bureaus were staffed with a number of Vietnamese who served as drivers, messengers, secretaries, and custodial attendants who took care of the duties beyond journalism.⁸⁷ Knowing the internal workings of the news magazine companies is essential to understanding why they reported the Vietnam War the way they did especially in the case of the American Embassy attack.

Time, *Life*, and *Newsweek* all covered the embassy attack and each offered their own perspective not only on the attack itself but what it meant in the larger picture of the Tet Offensive. News magazines obtained more information each week and their articles that focusing on the embassy attack spanned over two to three weeks roughly from February 9th to February 23rd. In all three magazines embassy coverage was coupled with the Battle of Saigon. *Time-Life* and *Newsweek* also offered their readers a chance to comment on these events in letters to the editor. Though the top editors picked these letters, they represented a wide range of views from their readers whether they were liberal, conservative, moderate, hawks or doves. The letters represented only a small cross section of their readers' opinions but are important in recognizing the different views of the era. The following section is an analysis of articles, photographs, and

⁸⁵ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 40.

⁸⁶ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 41.

⁸⁷ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 41.

letters of *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* to present the news magazines' interpretations of the attack on the American Embassy and the responses from their readers.

Newsmagazine Coverage of the Embassy Attack

The February 9th, 1968 cover of *Time* magazine featured a portrait of General Vo Nguyen Giap the chief commander of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) along with the caption across the title reading "Days of Death in Vietnam" and subtitled "Hanoi's General Giap". The cover is painted with a brilliant blend of reds, blacks, and yellows, with fire, smoke, and figures with guns, which offers a very dismal image of the war. The first article "Double Trouble" only mentions the embassy attack as part of the larger series of attacks *Time* dubbed the "Red Offensive" later referred to as the Tet Offensive.⁸⁸ The article is called "Double Trouble" due to the offensive and the previous week's crisis when the North Koreans' seized the American ship U.S.S. *Pueblo*, under the assumption the ship was in North Korean waters. The North Koreans killed one and imprisoned 82 *Pueblo* crew members.⁸⁹

Time's article entitled "The General's Gamble" offered more insight to the embassy attack and the meaning of the offensive. It described the extent of the attacks in the South and the military response to them. *Time* referred to the attacks as "A victory of sorts" and later quoted General Westmoreland's response, "a very successful offensive. It was surprisingly well coordinated, surprisingly intensive and launched with a surprising amount of audacity".⁹⁰ This quote alone gives the impression that not only did the attacks catch the U.S. and South Vietnamese military completely off guard but also that the top U.S. commanding officer recognized that the Vietcong were successful in their mission.

⁸⁸ *Time* Magazine. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁸⁹ "Double Trouble". *Time* Magazine. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹⁰ "The General's Gamble", *Time* Magazine. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

The next paragraph is perhaps one of the most controversial paragraphs in this issue and is an example of when personal beliefs influence reporting. “Some psychological success could hardly be denied the attackers. In the raid on the poorly defended U.S. Embassy in Saigon, they embarrassed and discomfited the U.S., still coping with the stinging humiliation of the *Pueblo* incident. They succeeded in demonstrating that, despite nearly three years of steady allied progress in the war, Communist commandos can still strike at will virtually anywhere in the country.”⁹¹ This paragraph was hardly supportive of the U.S. military and emphasized the vulnerability of American and South Vietnamese installations. It was not this reporter’s job to accept or deny psychological success because while the embassy was poorly defended the U.S. secured the compound only hours after the initial attack.

As the article progressed, *Time* detailed how such a large force assembled in Saigon undetected. *Time* described how weapons and ammunition were smuggled into the city in baskets with flowers and food. *Time* also explained how funerals provided a cover for weapons to be buried in coffins and that only after the attacks did Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence notice the large amount of funerals the previous week.⁹² The article continued to cover the extent of the battle in the streets of Saigon noting that Communist commandos stormed military sites executing South Vietnamese police and U.S. officers, even firing shots at General Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker’s homes. *Time* makes it clear in the article that the fighting did not stop and once one part of the city was secure another would fall into chaos. This article further comments on the inability of the U.S. military to foresee or even deter the offensive. As a result, the article placed a great deal of doubt in its readers.

⁹¹ “The General’s Gamble”, *Time* Magazine. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹² “The General’s Gamble”, *Time* Magazine. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

Making use of the week's delay in its coverage material *Time* attempted to assemble a coherent analysis and definition of the significance of the attacks. After giving praise to General Giap, referring to him as a genius, the article speculates that the attacks had three main goals; "to embarrass the U.S. and undercut the South Vietnamese government", which is evident by the embassy attack, "to frighten urban South Vietnamese and undermine pacification in the countryside", and "to give the impression to the U.S. public that the war is in a stalemate."⁹³ Like many other news organizations, *Time* incorporated Westmoreland and Johnson's view that the attacks were merely diversions to take focus away from the perceived real threat to the Khe Sanh U.S. Marine base believed to be the next Dienbienphu.⁹⁴

"Battle of Bunker's Bunker" was a more in-depth account of the raid on the U.S. embassy. The article's clever title refers to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and the fortress like year old embassy that became known as "Bunker's Bunker". *Time* labeled the attack "The most daring attack of the week," then adding, "certainly one of the most embarrassing".⁹⁵ After listing the astonishing features of the "impregnable" embassy, the reinforced concrete buildings, ten-foot walls, and shatterproof Plexiglas windows, *Time* commented that despite these impressive attributes nineteen Vietcong terrorists still overwhelmed just five guards, invaded the compound, and "ramped through it for 6 ½ hours" before the embassy was secure.⁹⁶

Unlike the initial reports from newspapers, television, and radio, *Time's* research allowed the article to accurately report that the Vietcong never entered the main chancery building due to the "heroic" efforts of Sergeant Ronald Harper to close the thick front teakwood doors of the

⁹³ "The General's Gamble", *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹⁴ "The General's Gamble", *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

Dienbienphu was the site in which General Giap defeated the French to win the First Indochinese War and end French rule in Vietnam.

⁹⁵ "The Battle of Bunker's Bunker", *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹⁶ "The Battle of Bunker's Bunker", *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

building. The article reported that the “terrorists” became frantic running “aimlessly” around and through various buildings in the compound until marines and military police mounted a counter attack followed by the arrival of the 101st Airborne Division of paratroopers on the embassy’s roof.⁹⁷ *Time* added that the Marines, paratroopers, and military police were given orders to kill every Vietcong in sight for fear that they had gained secret information. The article ends with U.S. forces finally securing their own embassy as retired Army Colonel George Jacobson finished off the last guerilla in his home within the embassy compound.⁹⁸ The article did not offer great insights to the motives of the guerillas and was more of a play-by-play of the attack though the tone suggests that it was a humiliating ordeal for U.S. and allied forces.

The photographs that accompanied the articles illustrated the sheer chaos of the attacks in and around the American Embassy. The first article “Double Trouble” featured a photograph of U.S. military police taking cover in an effort to re-take the embassy with the caption “U.S. Reinforcements Beside Dead G.I.s At Saigon Embassy: A very dear price for the temporary encouragement.”⁹⁹ This was one among many images of press coverage that showed dead or wounded U.S. soldiers. Coupled with an assortment of battle images, napalmed burned and maimed bodies, fleeing civilians, and mounds of unidentifiable dead bodies, is one of the most famous photographs and most recognizable image from the Saigon attack. Taken by award winning photographer Eddie Adams is General Nguyen Ngoc Loan’s execution of a Vietcong leader in downtown Saigon only blocks away from the re-captured U.S. Embassy.¹⁰⁰ In this shocking photograph, Adams captured the moment right as the bullet entered the prisoner’s head. The photograph depicts the primordial brutality of the war. It ended up on millions of

⁹⁷ “The Battle of Bunker’s Bunker”, *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹⁸ “The Battle of Bunker’s Bunker”, *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

⁹⁹ “Double Trouble”, *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

¹⁰⁰ “The General’s Gamble”, *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

Americans' coffee tables and forever ingrained in their minds as an image of the Saigon battle and the embassy attack.

The February 16th issue of *Time* magazine made only a few references to the embassy attack that further illustrated the embarrassment. It did feature readers' responses to the *Time* articles in the letters to the editor. The letters represented a fair range of opinions, and both liberal and conservative readers were disturbed by the magazine's content. The first letter from William G. Bowen, United States Navy, compared *Time* to the press and television in their giving undeserved credit to the Vietcong in the article "The General's Gamble" when they wrote that "communist commandos can still strike at will virtually anywhere in the country".¹⁰¹ Bowen's qualm was that while the Vietcong were successful and the attacks well executed, it was their best effort and would never recover from the losses they took.¹⁰² Historically his assessment is correct, and it is clear that Bowen perceived the paragraph as unsupportive of the U.S. military and an overstatement of Vietcong power.

The next few letters come from a slightly different standpoint but are equally important responses. The first is an example of the response General Giap had hoped for and that *Time* provided the American public.

"Sir: Yes, the Communists undeniably won a victory of sorts. The sort that once again makes it painfully clear that we are fighting a war we cannot win – a war in which we have nothing to gain and much to lose."
Robert Gastman, Oxford, Ohio¹⁰³

One of the main reasons why the U.S. Embassy was selected as a target in the series of attacks was so the American public would vividly recognize the significance of the attacks. No longer was the battle taking place in locations Americans could not pronounce or spell, the attack was

¹⁰¹ "Letters to the Editor", *Time* Magazine. February 16th, 1968, Vol.91, No.7.

¹⁰² "Letters to the Editor", *Time* Magazine. February 16th, 1968, Vol.91, No.7.

¹⁰³ "Letters to the Editor", *Time* Magazine. February 16th, 1968, Vol.91, No.7.

on the symbolic center of the American effort.¹⁰⁴ This is only the response from one reader but as *Time* chose it, the article represented the views of many.

The last letter addressing the articles of the offensive coverage was yet another consequence the communists had counted on that *Time* took part in disseminating to the American public.

“Sir: What earthly purpose do you serve by showing our wounded or dead in such heartbreaking pictures? What consolation is this for the families who have lost men in battle? You speak about the poor taste the comedians use on television today – well, you top them all with your choice of pictures. I am wondering if some of the news media are trying to color the public’s view about war.
Mrs. David A. Cunnison, Great River, N Y¹⁰⁵

It was no secret to Hanoi what images the press media were sending and airing in the United States. General Giap realized that the longer the war dragged on the more the American public would continually be exposed to both Vietnamese and American atrocities. The Tet Offensive was a gigantic helping of those horrific images most coming from the bloodiest battles such as Hue and Saigon according to *Time*.¹⁰⁶

Though *Time*’s coverage of the embassy attack was only covered in-depth in one issue the rhetoric of “embarrassment” and “stalemate” would resonate until the war’s end. In many more articles *Time* would refer to the embassy attack when writing of unforeseen assaults and military blunders. After the Tet Offensive coverage *Time* shifted from a self proclaimed “balanced” view to a more liberal approach much like it showed in the embassy reports.¹⁰⁷ It is evident that *Time*’s approach to the war shifted, but it was not alone as the American public and fellow news magazines shifted as well.

¹⁰⁴ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1971, 2001. pg. 5.

¹⁰⁵ “Letters to the Editor”, *Time Magazine*. February 16th, 1968, Vol.91, No.7.

¹⁰⁶ “Battle of Saigon”, *Time Magazine*. Vol.91, No.7.

¹⁰⁷ “The General’s Gamble”, *Time Magazine*. February 9th, 1968, Vol. 91, No. 6.

Time's partner *Life* published a number of articles containing the embassy attack along with the photographs that popularized the magazine. While the articles are short *Life* relied on their photographs to tell the story, which in some cases is a dangerous venture because photographs can tell a very different story than what actually happened. The photographers' choices of angles and objects as well as the set up for the photograph can all have an affect on the final product of the image. Coverage of the embassy attack and the Battle of Saigon is a case where the photos did tell a very different story and can blur the understanding of the situation. *Life's* photographs, though stunning, captured the very bloody and casualty existent essence of war, large and in color. The photos are left with little explanation leaving *Life's* readers to decide for themselves how effective the attacks were.

The cover of *Life* on February 9, 1968, featured two American military police escorting a Vietcong prisoner through the streets of downtown Saigon as Marines and civilians look on. The Vietcong commando is bleeding heavily from his mouth and cheeks, as it appears that he was beaten with the butt of an M-16 assault rifle. Wearing only a tattered and torn t-shirt and shorts the guerilla is led barefoot down the street with his hands up and blood streaming down his arms. The emblem of *Life* and the issue's title appear in color yet the photograph remains in black and white, possibly due to the amount of blood covering the Vietcong. The title reads, "New frenzy in the war Vietcong terrorize the cities: Suicide Raid On The Embassy".¹⁰⁸ The caption that accompanies the photograph is, "A guerilla is taken alive during the Embassy battle".¹⁰⁹ This caption describing the photograph is very misleading. At first glance a reader may draw the conclusion that this Vietcong guerilla was a part of the C-10 sapper unit that infiltrated the U.S. Embassy. After reading the article however, the reader would be confused as it states that all of

¹⁰⁸ *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

the guerillas in the embassy compound were killed. This is one of the more recognized photographs of the war and consequently an image linked to the embassy attack. Interestingly enough it is the same photograph that Don Oberdorfer uses for the cover of his book *Tet!*¹¹⁰ This powerful photograph evokes feelings of pity and sympathy for the civilian-dressed Vietcong.

The first article appears as an Editor's Note entitled " 'I'm a light sleeper in Vietnam'" and is Richard Swanson's account of the embassy attack and its aftermath.¹¹¹ He describes the incessant, heavy gunfire all around and the initial failed attempts by marines and military police to re-capture the U.S. Embassy. Swanson writes of the casualties of the American guards and the Vietcong guerillas strewn across the embassy grounds. Swanson's most valuable contribution to our understanding of the atmosphere surrounding the attack is his description of the Americans' frustration with the attack through the cursing of the dead Vietcong that lay aside their fallen comrades. The editorial that follows, "The Vietnam Front Comes First", only mentions the embassy attack but its sentence, "...the daring raids on the provincial capitals and the suicide attack on the U.S. Embassy are preludes to a new and possibly decisive phase of the war", is an assessment of the Vietnam situation, which they later add marks the war's escalation.¹¹² This single example represents how the press placed the U.S. Embassy attack at the forefront of the Tet Offensive and influenced how its audience viewed the attack's significance. It is a representation of how the embassy attack and the disaster narrative became the narrative of the Tet Offensive.

The feature article of the embassy attack begins with stunning action photos of American military police, GIs, and Vietnamese civilians. The first photograph's caption reads, "An American MP, followed by an embassy employee, races for cover during the battle at the

¹¹⁰ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!*

¹¹¹ *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

¹¹² "The Vietnam Front Comes First", *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

embassy.”¹¹³ Below the first photograph is an image of a wounded and bloody Vietnamese civilian on the back of an American MP after he was shot by U.S. forces for failing to stop at a road block.¹¹⁴ The next is a photo of two American MPs carrying a wounded GI away from the embassy and out of harms way, a common image in embassy and the Saigon battle coverage. As the photographs progress images of U.S. soldiers firing on their own embassy and carrying away dead Vietcong fill the pages along with a photograph that appeared in *Time* of American military police taking cover beside the dead American guards which received much criticism.

The article gave a brief summary of the battle alongside photographs of the rest of the Saigon attack. Placing the embassy attack as its central focus, *Life* wrote, “Though the raid on the embassy was perhaps the boldest, it was only one of a well-coordinated timetable of Communist attacks that raked South Vietnam last week.”¹¹⁵ They ended the article by writing, “The scattered but coordinated attacks, coupled with the build-up in the north, added up to a calculated effort to stretch American resources, both psychological and military, to the breaking point.”¹¹⁶ Once again by implying the Vietcong’s intention to score a psychological victory over the American military, *Life* aided the Vietcong’s psychological victory over the American public through its depiction of the attack in horrific photographs, its credit to intelligent Vietcong coordinating, and its vaguely drawn conclusions and speculation. Even though the photographs were representations and snapshots of what the reporters witnessed it still contributed to the disaster narrative that was created and Americans’ memory of the offensive.

The February 23, 1968, issue of *Life* featured an editorial looking back on the countrywide offensive and the Vietnam situation. In the article *Life* openly claimed that the

¹¹³ “The Six-Hour War For The Embassy Saigon”, *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

¹¹⁴ “The Six-Hour War For The Embassy Saigon”, *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

¹¹⁵ “Timetable Of Terror In The Cities”, *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

¹¹⁶ “Timetable Of Terror In The Cities”, *Life*, February 9th, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 6.

Saigon attack as well as other cities' attacks were an example of U.S. failure in Vietnam. It claims that due to the high number of civilian casualties, citywide destruction, and hundreds of thousand refugees, the U.S. had failed in its primary objective to protect the South Vietnamese people. *Life* writes, "Giap's ruthlessness won him no cities, but he did demonstrate the U.S. military might, cannot enforce our promise to protect even the urban Vietnamese people."¹¹⁷ The article asserted that force was not an acceptable form of diplomacy. These are all comments not at all supportive of American policy and evoked feelings of doubt in their readers. This perpetuated ideas of U.S. military failure and defeat in Vietnam. As authors such as William Hammond have noted, the *Life* article may have simply been a reflection of the American public's ideas of the attacks, but as we have seen *Life* has also provided the photographs and articles the public used to base their views of the progress of the war ideas.¹¹⁸ By drawing these types of conclusions *Life* can hardly be excused, as Braestrup advocates, from impacting its readers views.

The last of the newsmagazines and certainly not the least was *Newsweek*, which was most critical of President Johnson's policies and ability to govern, according to media scholar Melvin Small, and of the South Vietnamese Army as we see from the deportation of Saigon Bureau chief Everett Martin.¹¹⁹ Small even quotes an interview with Johnson after his presidency saying that the *Newsweek* Company as well as several other newspaper and television networks was run by communists.¹²⁰ Even before Tet, *Newsweek* advocated a peaceful withdrawal of American troops and even more so after Tet in March, suggesting peaceful negotiations.¹²¹ Though *Newsweek*

¹¹⁷ "Wherever we look, something's wrong", *Life*, February 23rd, 1968. Vol. 64, No. 8.

¹¹⁸ William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*. University Press of Kansas, 1998.

¹¹⁹ Melvin Small, *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994.

¹²⁰ Small, *Covering Dissent*. pg. 29.

¹²¹ "The Dusty Agony of Khe Sanh", *Newsweek*, March 18th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 12.

tended to lean towards more liberal views, it still competed with *Time* reaching millions of readers worldwide.

Newsweek featured the U.S. Embassy attack as the cover story for the February 12, 1968 issue. The headline was “Hanoi On The Attack” with a photo of American military police and GIs taking cover while trying to re-capture the embassy.¹²² Inside, the article’s title reads “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow” and appears alongside a photograph of a “slain” Vietcong laying symbolically next to a broken United States Embassy crest.¹²³ From the very beginning this article implies that the U.S. and South Vietnamese suffered a major psychological loss, consequently this line of thought persists even today when discussing the Tet Offensive and the battle of Saigon. The language used in the *Newsweek* article is much stronger than the *Time* and *Life* articles previously discussed. This strong language is seen in the second sentence, “After months of confident American predictions that the enemy was on the run, the Communists staged their bloodiest military strike – an astonishingly well-coordinated guerilla offensive against the supposedly secure cities of South Vietnam.”¹²⁴ This sentence refers to the persistent reassurance from President Johnson and General Westmoreland that the Communists were losing numbers and faith and a U.S. victory was in sight. *Newsweek* makes it a point to highlight this and other contradictions throughout the rest of the article.

After noting a long list of cities and regions that were attacked, including the invasion of “the very U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon,” *Newsweek* wrote that the fighting still continued and there was no immediate end in sight.¹²⁵ The article then addressed the reaction and response from political leaders in Washington and the American public. It reads, “On Capitol Hill, hawks

¹²² *Newsweek* Magazine, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹²³ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹²⁴ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹²⁵ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

and doves alike lamented the “humiliation” inflicted on the allied cause and complained that they had been misled about the Communists’ capability. And on the home front, bewildered Americans sitting before their TV sets watched the stunning spectacle of U.S. troops storming their own embassy in Saigon to oust guerilla invaders.”¹²⁶ This statement reaffirms the fact that all Americans were surprised with this attack and felt the U.S. suffered a humiliating psychological blow.

Later in the article, *Newsweek* used statements from General Westmoreland and White House officials to try to make sense of the attacks. They quoted press secretary George Christian’s response that the allies had “advanced word of the guerilla raid”, then questioning if this was the case then why were there only three marines guarding the embassy?¹²⁷ *Newsweek* also addresses Westmoreland’s theory that the attacks were designed to draw attention from Khe Sanh. The article states that this theory was shortsighted focusing only on the military objectives rather than the political and psychological effect of the attacks.¹²⁸ Once again, *Newsweek* alludes to the contradictions within the official line and places doubt in U.S. military intelligence. As we now see, there was no massive battle at Khe Sanh and *Newsweek* was accurate in its conclusion that the attacks were designed for psychological and political reasons but by doubting U.S. military strategy and emphasizing the numerous contradictions in the official line they contributed to the Communists’ psychological victory over the American people.

Under the sub-heading “The VC’s Week of Terror”, the article provides an in-depth account of the embassy attack. After describing that all of Saigon was asleep from the all-day feasting and drinking in celebration of the lunar New Year, the article narrates the covert movements through the shadows of the nineteen embassy raiders of the elite C-10 Sapper

¹²⁶ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹²⁷ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹²⁸ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

Battalion. “Thus began last week’s bold and bloody assault on the sprawling U.S. Embassy compound in the heart of Saigon.”¹²⁹ With paragraphs that read like they are taken out of a novel, *Newsweek* recounts the efforts of the marine guards and later the MPs that struggled through sniper fire to defend and secure the embassy compound. After describing the battle in great detail the article added that upon General Westmoreland’s inspection he tried to downplay the significance of the attack saying that the sole purpose was to create chaos. “If that was their sole purpose, the Communists have clearly scored a resounding victory”, was *Newsweek*’s response to Westmoreland’s claims.¹³⁰

The remainder of the article describes the battle of Saigon and the other cities where major fighting still persisted. Their assessment of the Saigon attack however was very different from *Time* and other press companies’ conclusions on the effects of the attack. As their opposition such as the U.S. military and government officials stated, the Vietcong failed in their objective to gain supporters by their use of indiscriminate violence. *Newsweek* took the opposite approach claiming that, “Many South Vietnamese, in fact, seemed to place the greatest blame on their government – and the U.S. – for failing to provide them with protection.”¹³¹ This point is further addressed in an essay following the article by former Saigon Bureau Chief Everett Martin, entitled, “The Devastating Effect on the People”. He writes, “With good reason, rural South Vietnamese have long doubted their government’s ability to defend them, but today those in the cities who thought they were immune from the war realize that they too are no longer safe. Worse yet, they now have reason to doubt the capability of U.S. power to defend them.”¹³²

Though Martin’s claims may be substantiated it still perpetuates a theory that the South

¹²⁹ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹³⁰ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹³¹ “Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Psychological Blow”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹³² “The Devastating Effect on the People”, *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

Vietnamese were discontented with the American effort and withdrawal would be the only honorable solution.

The photographs featured in the article, while not as shocking as those in *Life*, still depicted the chaos that resulted from the Vietcong's attack on the embassy and Saigon. The first page shows American MPs firing over the embassy walls and through windows at the guerillas inside along with a photo of Colonel Jacobson being thrown the handgun that he would later use to kill the last of the raiders. The next page is a solo photo of a dead guerilla lying on a pile of rubble inside the embassy grounds. Finally, as *Time* featured, *Newsweek* too used the most recognizable image of the Tet Offensive and possibly the war, Eddie Adams' photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan's public execution of the Vietcong prisoner. Later in the issue in an article containing an interview with Adams, *Newsweek* wrote that the image was just one of many that were all part of the week of "shock and revulsion – all fed into American living rooms everyday with the newspapers and television."¹³³ With this issue *Newsweek* can add themselves to the list of media venues guilty of the "repetition of horror".¹³⁴

Reader responses to *Newsweek's* articles on the embassy attack and the Battle of Saigon were not seen until the February 26th issue and continued up until the March 22nd issue. Much like *Time*, the letters to the editor carried mixed emotions but were overwhelmingly dominated by anti-war views. Three letters stand out under the sub-heading "The U.S. Presence in Vietnam". The first is simply a reader's praise to *Newsweek's* comprehensive approach to the beginning of the Tet Offensive, responding to the February 12th article "The War in Vietnam". It reads;

¹³³ "'In These Long Nights We Pray'", *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

¹³⁴ "'In These Long Nights We Pray'", *Newsweek*, February 12th, 1968. Vol. 71, No. 7.

“After a week of hearing only my government’s lies via the local press, it was a pleasure to receive *Newsweek* and find out what really happened in Saigon...Thank you.”¹³⁵
Donald A. Cooper, Venice, Calif.

If nothing else this letter shows that Mr. Cooper is an example of the “middle brow” reader the news magazines are designed to appeal to choosing to supplement his daily news with *Newsweek* to get a better understanding of the situation in Saigon from one of his trusted sources. The next letter is a response to Eddie Adams’ photograph of General Loan.

“If the photograph of Police Chief Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing an uncommunicative Vietcong suspect represents the sort of ‘democratic freedom’ that the United States is fighting for in South Vietnam, I think Loyal American Flag Wavers should haul down Old Glory and wash the blood out of the stars.”
Betty Crews, Raleigh, N.C.¹³⁶

Though her words may seem harsh Ms. Crews’ opinions represent those of many Americans who abhorred the South Vietnamese government in its treatment of the opposition, its inadequate military, and its inefficient government policies, all of which not only were recognized in the media but also by many prominent politicians including Robert Kennedy.

The next sets of letters come from the March 4th, 11th, and 18th issues of *Newsweek*. These letters are written after the U.S. had changed the tide of the battle but the American people are still unconvinced of the recent success. The first letter is perhaps the most powerful coming from an M.P. named Paul Healey who was not only at the embassy but was a part of the 716 Military Police Battalion that recaptured the embassy compound. After correcting *Newsweek*’s misinformation about the group who actually recaptured the embassy Healey continued to write, “I was the first American to enter the embassy after it was besieged. For the record, our battalion responded to eighteen different attacks on U.S. installations and BOQ’s and BEQ’s, not to

¹³⁵ “Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, February 26th, 1968. Vol.71, No.8.

¹³⁶ “Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, February 26th, 1968. Vol.71, No.8.

mention the Korean and Philippine embassies and the race track area.”¹³⁷ This letter highlights that the American Embassy was not the only embassy attacked nor was it the only American installation that came under fire. The stress that the media placed on the significance of the embassy attack was so overwhelming that very rarely were any other embassies or installations mentioned.

The last two letters are hardly complimentary to *Newsweek* but represent a cross section of the American public’s views on the Saigon attacks.

“Your incisive and penetrating report can only accentuate the frustration of the people at home over what is being accomplished in Vietnam. After seven years of war the best the Pentagon can offer is how many people it killed yesterday. But it is perfectly evident now that there have been two very significant accomplishments: upwards of 2 million innocent Vietnamese have been made refugees through the destruction of their homes by their ‘benefactors’, and every major town in South Vietnam, including Saigon, has been infiltrated in force by the enemy to the complete consternation of our command.”

Rolene Reake, Naples, Fla.¹³⁸

Reake’s reaction to the Saigon attacks is representative of others that the long war had taken its toll on. Obviously disgusted with the way which the government was handling the war and empathetic towards the Vietnamese civilians whose lives were affected, Reake’s reaction was not uncommon. The last of *Newsweek*’s letters pertaining to the initial Saigon and embassy attacks comes from a soldier’s perspective.

“With the heading ‘Hanoi Attacks and Scores a Major Political Blow’, you begin the most slanted reports on the war. I can picture Ho Chi Minh dressed in his pajamas gleefully waving *Newsweek* under the noses of his disenchanted followers as he tries to sell them on the idea that the Tet offensive resulted in some sort of victory. You went on to call it ‘an astonishingly well-coordinated guerilla offensive against the supposedly secure cities of South Vietnam.’ It is elementary that the only purpose of a defense is to repulse an attack. It is also very basic that to guarantee immunity from attack is a military impossibility...”¹³⁹

A. A. Mennillo, Saigon

¹³⁷ “Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, March 4th, 1968. Vol.71, No.9

¹³⁸ “Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, March 11th, 1968. Vol.71, No.10

¹³⁹ “Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, March 18th, 1968. Vol.71, No.11

Though Mennillo represents the kind of opinion General Westmoreland was trying to promote, he still presents a great point regarding the “Major Political Blow” referring to the title *Newsweek* so graciously labeled the Saigon attacks and the overall offensive. In some minds this represented a truthful representation of the attacks; in others it supported North Vietnam’s propaganda. In any case, militarily this statement is false but as the media adopted the “psychological victory” approach it soon became just that.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from looking at how American newsmagazines interpreted the attack on the U.S. Embassy and the Battle of Saigon. First, like other media outlets, the newsmagazines perpetuated the idea that the Vietcong, by temporarily holding the American Embassy and the unknown surprise attack on the city of Saigon, scored a decisive psychological victory over the U.S. and South Vietnamese. Second, in their attempt to construct a powerful competitive story all three magazines presented a horrific portrait of the war with many components designed to inspire feelings of sympathy among their readers for the Vietnamese people including the Vietcong who are portrayed as ordinary civilians. Finally, all three newsmagazines used the embassy attack and the Saigon battle for shock value, to show the American people the contradictions between the government’s official line and the realities of the Vietnam situation in a location that was easily recognizable for their “middle brow” readers. By using shock and destruction along with recognizing the failure of the U.S. military the news magazines contributed to the creation of a disaster narrative.

It is clear that, just as Johnson used the press to gain American support, one of General Giap’s goals was to do the same. The offensive was designed to show Americans that the war was not over and the will of the Communists remained strong. According to Braestrup, Giap did

not intend for the embassy attack to be the focal point of the offensive but as Wyatt agrees it was a chance for the press to write a great story and above all it was American.¹⁴⁰ The very idea that the embassy attack and the Battle of Saigon were, ignoring the military facts, a psychological victory, was a construction of the American press and in the newsmagazines was supported with graphic color photographs of dead and wounded Americans. Braestrup even notes that Hanoi never claimed a psychological victory at the embassy but he and other newsmen awarded the Communists this victory because it had taken them by surprise.¹⁴¹

Newsmagazines' uses of the shocking and horrific images of war, coupled with the "embarrassing" embassy attack left their readers with a painful distaste for the war and doubt in their government's ability, turned much of their audience against the war. As if Mrs. Cunnison's fears of the media trying to color the public's view about the war were true, all three newsmagazines were guilty of promoting images of inadequacies, embarrassment, and probable failure with breath taking stories and photographs that touched the hearts and minds of the American public. As Giap had hoped, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* aided his effort in achieving the goals of the Tet Offensive that can all be seen through the coverage of the U.S. Embassy attack and the surrounding Battle of Saigon.

¹⁴⁰ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 118.

Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*. pg. 185.

¹⁴¹ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg. 118.

The Media, Military, Government, and Public Opinion

Introduction

In order to fully understand the public reaction and the media coverage of the American Embassy attack, the relationships between the media, military, government, and the public must be discussed. The relationships the media has with each of these entities were very important and ultimately affected the relationship that most concerns this study. That is the relationship between the media and the public. The relationship between the media and the military for example greatly affected what the news media outlets were allowed to transmit to the American public. While the government also contributed to this aspect its relationship with the media was more heavily focused on the conflict and accusations they made to one another. President Johnson for instance, after his Presidency claimed the *Times*, *Post*, and the *Time-Life* company were run by communists and as we saw in both newspaper and news magazines the media was not slow to point out and criticize flaws within official statements and foreign policy.

The Media and the Military

American media and the U.S. military in Vietnam had a very interesting relationship. The way they interacted, the dissemination of information, and the policies the military operated with the media were the critical components of the relationship that had the greatest impact on the relationship between the media and the American public. The military and the press operated very closely with one another in the sense that many reporters traveled with platoons and were exposed to the same dangers as the military combatants. Unlike in previous wars, it was extremely easy for journalists to travel and have military access in Vietnam. A freelance journalist could go to a local newspaper, get a press pass, and buy a one way ticket to Vietnam.

With a press card the freelance journalists could move freely throughout the country of Vietnam, hitching rides with any military vehicle that had space.

William Hammond describes the media and the military as developing a corrosive animosity as the Vietnam War dragged on.¹⁴² While the military regarded the news media as a necessary evil they created an entity to deal with the media. The sector of the military that was responsible for handling press issues was part of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). The MACV's Office of Information or MACOI consisted of forty-nine officers and was headed by Brigadier General Winant K. Sidle.¹⁴³ Everyday General Sidle's staff prepared information reports for journalists to keep them up to date and well informed in order to prevent reporting flawed information. The briefings took place twice a day at 9 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., which soon became known as the "Five O'clock Follies" because of their overt optimism and obvious pro-military biases.¹⁴⁴ Journalist Peter Braestrup regarded the military reporting as the most useful for journalists because they were able to produce a large amount of information though much of it contained built in military distortions such as exaggerated troop numbers and inflated enemy death tolls.¹⁴⁵

A very popular belief among those who saw conflict between the military and the news media was that the military withheld information from journalists for fears of negative reporting. The opposite though, was true. The military through the MACOI flooded journalists with information with hopes that this tactic would overwhelm them. Top military officials knew that in order for reporters' stories to have weight they needed to have testimony from ranking officers. Many high ranking officers were instructed by President Johnson and General

¹⁴² William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*. pg.1.

¹⁴³ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.15.

¹⁴⁴ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.15.

¹⁴⁵ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.18.

Westmoreland to answer as truthfully as possible even when the answers may be embarrassing or unfavorable for the U.S. military because the truth was better than hearsay most of the time.¹⁴⁶

There were several reasons military officials and journalists believed worsened the conflict between the two in Vietnam. Major General Sidle's biggest problem with the news media is that the news companies in the United States were sending over young and inexperienced correspondents to cover very complicated and delicate issues. A study done by the American Society of Newspaper Editors measured the quality of the press corps in Vietnam and found that as a whole the reporting that was done was not professional. "The reasons cited included: too many inexpert free-lancers and stringers; too many short tours; too many reporters trying to make a name for themselves."¹⁴⁷ General Sidle agreed that the ASNE drew very valid conclusions and based on his experiences he believed that there were just too many reporters. Braestrup stated that even when U.S. Marines stormed the embassy yard to re-take the compound there were more reporters than armed troops.¹⁴⁸

General Sidle commented that many of the young reporters had no appropriate background to even cover a war. He recalled one reporter from a major U.S. newspaper asking him what a battalion was.¹⁴⁹ Another one of Sidle's complaints was that reporters were serving too short of tours. With the constant flow of reporters going in and out of Vietnam it forced news companies to send inexperienced journalists. A further consequence was that reporters could not provide sufficient background on certain topics because they had no prior contact with them. He commented that the longer journalists stayed the better their reporting was.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*.pg.34.

¹⁴⁷ Harrison E. Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons From a War*. Harper & Row, New York, 1984. pg.110.

¹⁴⁸ Braestrup, *Big Story*.

¹⁴⁹ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.110.

¹⁵⁰ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.111.

Sidle also writes about how many of the reporters did not check their stories before filing them. He attributes this to laziness and distrust of the military to provide the facts. Sidle claims that stories that remained un-checked produced low-quality and un-professional reporting. Checked or un-checked the stories were sent back to the United States and had to go through another step, which Sidle viewed as flawed. He claims that there were many cases that good reports were edited by ignorant and biased editors that slanted reports to the point of inaccuracy.¹⁵¹ The result in one example was a very inaccurate portrayal of the South Vietnamese Army that Sidle regarded as very negative.¹⁵²

Finally, General Sidle viewed advocacy journalism as the most important point when addressing the military's view of the flaws in journalism during the Vietnam conflict. He writes that many journalists, especially the younger ones, came into Vietnam with the idea that the war was immoral and unjust and this was even more prevalent after the Tet Offensive. "These advocacy journalists seemed to think that Americans were incapable of reaching sound, reasoned opinions based on plain old factual, complete, and objective reporting. So the reporter tried to convince his audiences via his *news* coverage that his opinions should be their opinions."¹⁵³ Though, General Sidle and journalists' views such as Peter Braestrup's do not coincide, Sidle provides an example of the military's view of how the news media operated in Vietnam.

It is evident that the Tet Offensive put strains on the relationships between the media, military, government, and the public that heightened the conflict between these entities. General Sidle believes that there was even less objective and sound news reporting during the Tet period. He attributes two main reasons why the news media viewed Tet as such a tragedy. First, Sidle believes that the scope of the attacks were unparalleled in the history of the Vietnam War.

¹⁵¹Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.111.

¹⁵²Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.111.

¹⁵³ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.111.

Second, he witnessed the Saigon press corps go into shock while the reporters had a desire to believe the worst, the outcome of which was disaster-type reporting.¹⁵⁴ General Sidle takes a very common militaristic approach to the Tet Offensive. While he admits that the attacks shocked him as well, they only persisted with intensity of the first few days. He claims that the press media refused to let go of the story and persisted with the disaster reporting even after it was apparent that the Vietcong had suffered a crippling loss.¹⁵⁵ This is seen especially in the major newspapers, *Times* and *Post*, and even more in *Time-Life* and *Newsweek*. General Sidle concludes, “Therefore, the initial shock to America of the offensive itself was compounded and continued beyond reason by the reporting. The calm, professional, factual reports that should have followed the first few days never materialized. In retrospect, there appeared to be a conspiracy never to admit that the original coverage was greatly overblown.”¹⁵⁶

From General Sidle’s perspective using words such as conspiracy it is no wonder many were led to believe that the press pro-actively and consciously turned the public against the war as part of a left-wing communist agenda. Peter Braestrup agrees with General Sidle on the point that the news media was shocked by the attacks and wrote out of fear for their personal safety as well as the military and civilians in the areas that were attacked. He does not however condone the idea that there was an active conspiracy on the part of the press.

John Lawrence, a freelance reporter for several major television stations disagrees with General Sidle and Braestrup on the shock of the offensive as well as the inexperience and immaturity of the press corps. He calls this view an overreaction of the time and continued animosities from old hostilities between the military and the press media.¹⁵⁷ Lawrence recalls

¹⁵⁴ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.165.

¹⁵⁵ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.165.

¹⁵⁶ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.166.

¹⁵⁷ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.172.

that on January 11th 1968, he along with other reporters were invited to General Fredrick Weyand's office where they were briefed on a massive Vietcong build up that planned for a mass offensive that would have a great impact on the people of Vietnam as well as the U.S. and South Vietnamese military.¹⁵⁸ After this many of the news agencies requested aid and additional personnel support from their offices in the U.S. Lawrence believes that not only were reporters somewhat prepared for the attacks they handled themselves with poise under pressure.¹⁵⁹ As for the misreports especially in the case of the American Embassy attack, Lawrence claims that journalists can only report as accurately as their sources of information. In the case of the misinformation in the embassy attack the press got the story wrong because at first the American military got the story wrong.¹⁶⁰ These are examples of the constant back and forth finger pointing and bickering between the military and the news media, originating during the Vietnam conflict and still being argued today.

The Media and the Government

The relationship between the media and the government could seem at times complicated, confrontational, and unprecedented in the way that at no time in American history did the government and the press have this type of relationship. At no other time during the conflict in Vietnam had the United States Congress declared war in Vietnam. In a war that has been declared the government grants the military censorship powers over the press and a chain of command must be followed in order for stories to be printed or aired. In past wars there were strict rules regarding press access to the fronts, which led to many arrests. In Vietnam the policy was basically report at your own risk. From 1961-1975 approximately sixty correspondents died

¹⁵⁸ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.173.

¹⁵⁹ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.175.

¹⁶⁰ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.176.

or are still listed as missing in Indo-China.¹⁶¹ This new and unprecedented policy the government took with the press in Vietnam ultimately set them up for disastrous conflicts, which would have a significant impact on how the press reported the war and how the public viewed it.

The government and the press' relationship was further complicated due to the fact that the South Vietnamese government was also involved. From the start of the Diem regime, journalists detested the corrupt government and many reporters such as Peter Arnett and Malcolm Browne were threatened and even beaten for their articles unfavorable of the South Vietnamese government.¹⁶² Unfortunately not much changed when President Thieu came to power in 1967 and the South Vietnamese government still attempted acts of censorship both legal and illegal. As we have seen in the major newspapers and news magazines the press frequently reported prominent U.S. politicians such as Edward Kennedy denouncing the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government. These reports were especially seen in response to the South Vietnamese poor defense of the U.S. Embassy during the Tet Offensive.¹⁶³

The government much like the military also offered daily conferences as a way to promote the "official" line on the events that took place. The committee that was created to manage the dissemination of information to the press was called the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSTPAO) and was headed by Barry Zorthian. The main function of the JUSTPAO was to promote propaganda for the South Vietnamese Government to put the Vietnamese people at ease. Many of the briefings seemed very positive reporting that the allies were very close to victory and the general upbeat notions that President Johnson boasted on the home front.¹⁶⁴ While Zorthian seemed to always look on the bright side he also encouraged the

¹⁶¹ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.i.

¹⁶² Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.155.

¹⁶³ Richard Hardwood, "Ted Kennedy Assails S. Vietnam Corruption". *Washington Post*, Feb. 6th, 1968.

¹⁶⁴ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.13.

journalists to get out in the field and see for themselves. To further encourage the reporters to conduct their own field reports JUSTPAO massively organized military transportation for reporters throughout the country, an advantage they had over the MACOI.¹⁶⁵

Through evidence presented in previous chapters we have seen that the relationship between the press and the government was not without conflict. Each side had their conflicts with the other. On the press side journalists viewed the government's overall policy and strategy in Vietnam as problematic and by 1968 were extremely annoyed with what they viewed as lies coming from President Johnson and other top government officials. Many reporters such as David Halberstam criticized the government for not reacting quickly to present an official line in times of crisis such as the embassy attack and the Tet Offensive. The government on the other hand felt betrayed by the press who constantly pointed out inconsistencies in official statements and viewed the press as trying to influence general public sentiment. Government officials also expressed discontent with the press' ability to report political events and to find meaning in policy. These issues fueled an ongoing conflict between the media and the government that still inspires debate today.

A common belief and misconception of the press is that journalists viewed the Vietnam War as immoral and consequently wrote negative articles to promote an American loss. A reason for this misconception is in the way journalists approached the war. Philip Knightly, a Vietnam and press historian writes, "They [American journalists] were against the way in which the war was being fought, and they were against the corrupt government of Diem."¹⁶⁶ However, constantly criticizing the corrupt South Vietnamese government and American war policy

¹⁶⁵ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.15.

¹⁶⁶ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.155.

presented the stance of being against the war and was compounded by the overwhelming news flood coming from American journalists in Vietnam.

In defense of this type of criticism David Halberstam describes the list of flaws inherent to the Vietnam situation. He writes that “The war was an extension, finally, of a policy conceived in lies and fear, the fear not that Vietnam would be lost to Communism but the fear that if that happened the Democrats would lose Washington to the Republicans, a misconception of the other side, and an unwillingness to understand what the French Indochina war had done to nationalism.”¹⁶⁷ As Halberstam addresses a journalist’s view of the flaws in the Vietnam War he continues and describes that the difficulties and the pressures of reporting this war came from the way it started. “Since the people who started the war and made the combat commitment completely and absolutely misassessed the strength, vitality, resilience, and historical dynamism of the other side, since they largely misassessed the comparable strengths of their ally, since they did not understand the dynamic of the French Indochina war and what that had done, there was from day one a flaw in American policy.”¹⁶⁸ Halberstam was a very respected reporter in Vietnam and his views were shared by many of his cohorts.

Government aid and JUSTPAO head Barry Zorthian writes about his views of the media in an essay. He writes that though the press was good with covering broad overviews of military operations, “Far too infrequently, in fact virtually never, did reporters transmit accurately the policies and objectives of the National Liberation Front and the government of Hanoi.”¹⁶⁹ He goes on to claim that the press continued to present a flawed political analysis of the North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, and U.S. governments. The press’s inability to portray certain complexities has also come under scrutiny from political scientist Daniel Hallin and remains to

¹⁶⁷ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.114.

¹⁶⁸ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.114.

¹⁶⁹ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.137.

be one of the crucial factors in many Americans' misconception of the embassy attack and the Tet offensive. The media's inability to make sense of larger complex issues affected the way that the American public perceived the Vietnam War. This made a significant impact on governmental decision-making and foreign policy. This became another strain on the relationship between the government and the media.

Peter Braestrup has perhaps the most well researched and inclusive study on the media and Vietnam during the Tet Offensive. This is where some of the most conflict between the media and the government took place. Much like Halberstam, Braestrup faults the government and more importantly President Johnson for not responding promptly to the embassy attack and the Tet raids. As the journalists in the field continuously reported the "disaster" the president did not provide an official explanation so the American public was left with only the worst-case scenario.¹⁷⁰ Braestrup also notes that the surprise of Tet and the articles about inconsistencies in the official line forced President Johnson to confront the contradictions in his Vietnam policy.¹⁷¹ He feels that the press reports affected the government in Washington more than it did the American public because noting the inconsistencies drew divisions in the Democratic Party that resulted in chaos in the election-year politics.¹⁷² Braestrup concludes that, "The ultimate responsibility for candor and coherence before the crisis and for firm leadership and coherence in crisis lay not with the media but with the president. By failing to meet this responsibility, Lyndon Johnson made the Tet crisis in Washington and his own humiliation, in large measure, a self-inflicted wound."¹⁷³ This was a very similar attitude shared by journalists and depicted their dissatisfaction with the way the government went about the war in Vietnam.

¹⁷⁰ Braestrup, *Big Story*.

¹⁷¹ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.169.

¹⁷² Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg. 169.

¹⁷³ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg. 171.

William Hammond is much along the same lines of thought as Braestrup and he argues that the news media attracted negative attention when its reports conflicted with the official line. Hammond uses the Tet Offensive and the attack on the American Embassy as both a marker and specific event where there was much dissent between what was reported and the government response. Hammond writes that the news media and the official line did not conflict as much prior to Tet than it did after. He states that in the wake of Tet President Johnson had so many inconsistencies in his record that few believed that the Tet Offensive was a major setback for the Vietcong.¹⁷⁴ He goes on to write that as the war progressed correspondents that were coming to the country were younger and they brought their progressive anti-Johnson views with them supporting General Sidle's claim that the young inexperienced reporters were quick to openly criticize the government's and President Johnson's inconsistencies.¹⁷⁵

The Media and the Public

The press media undoubtedly disseminated these conflicts, beliefs, and faults to the American public through national newspapers and news magazines. Though it is impossible to calculate what information each and every American citizen gained from these sources it is evident through public reactions and letters to the editors that these conflicts were recognized by the various readers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines.¹⁷⁶ The discursive relationship between the press and the government led a handful of the American public to believe that the two opposed each other, which in turn led to blanket and unsubstantiated claims that the media lost the war. Even from this common misconception we see that the public did see a conflict between the

¹⁷⁴ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*.pg.292.

¹⁷⁵ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*.pg.292.

¹⁷⁶“Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, February 26th, 1968. Vol.71, No.8.

“Letters to the Editor”, *Newsweek*, March 4th, 1968. Vol.71, No.9

“Letters to the Editor”, *Time Magazine*. February 16th, 1968, Vol.91, No.7.

press media and the government that affected the public's relationship with the news media and the government as well.

While the relationship between the news media and the American public was affected by the media's connection with the government and the military, it is necessary to discuss the dynamics of the media's relationship with the public. First, the news media was a business and just like any American business it needed to appeal to its consumers. Second, the media was both a reflection of public sentiment and a perpetuator of ideas for the public to base their perception of the war on. The reports of first the U.S. Embassy attack and the subsequent Tet coverage in newsmagazines and national newspapers depicted a negative view of the war, which led an increasing amount of Americans to form negative ideas not only about the war but also the way and quantity of information they received. As the Tet Offensive continued this cyclical relationship gained steam and the ideas and reflections strengthened, coupled with the duration of the war itself the majority of the public turned against a continued presence in Vietnam.

Many journalists such as Peter Braestrup, Peter Arnett, Don Oberdorfer, and Ron Steinman have recognized in print that the media was a business and like other businesses thrived on competition. During the Vietnam conflict however competition led to many of the flaws the media suffered from such as misreporting and distortion of information. Braestrup and Oberdorfer both write that competition to get the story out first between news companies created a type of reporting in which, Braestrup describes, the first reports were always wrong.¹⁷⁷ Though at the start of Tet there was much confusion, it is the news media's job to make sense of that confusion and not perpetuate it to the public. Americans were frustrated because they were just as confused as the press initially were, the only problem being that the American public remained in a state of bewilderment due to the conflicting stories.

¹⁷⁷Braestrup, *Big Story*.pg.75

Strong competition between the companies such as the *Times* verses the *Post* or *Time-Life* verses *Newsweek* had yet another outcome. The news media found that stories that covered action-packed events sold better to the American public than just death tolls and diplomacy. Tet was a major point in the war in which there was a lot of action so stories even of the smallest attacks continued after the major offensive had been quelled and presented an image to the American people that the few scattered small attacks were just as intense as the initial ones. This was a critical misconception that undoubtedly took away public support for the war.

Peter Arnett writes of his experiences in Vietnam and reporting stories to the American public. “We chose to write about what we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears, rather than practice selective reportage that enthusiastically enhanced national objectives in previous wars.”¹⁷⁸ He goes on to attribute this to the Civil Rights Movement feeding journalists’ social consciences and or the fact that the best and brightest minds from top universities were entering the journalism profession. In any case Arnett confesses that journalists’ efforts in Vietnam “shook up the system” and by their unfiltered coverage journalists affected many Americans’ ideas about the war. Furthermore, Arnett confesses that he personally as well as his colleagues must live with the backlash that they inspired with their coverage of the war.¹⁷⁹

Along the same lines of competition, news companies needed to appeal to their audience, meaning, news companies needed to produce a final product that their audience would find interesting and captivating. This is achieved not just from the reporter’s point of view but also from the company he or she works for. There were many steps especially in news magazines’ process of publicizing the story so that a number of actors could influence the tone of the coverage. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* for example were located in areas of

¹⁷⁸ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.132.

¹⁷⁹ Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*. pg.132.

multiple college campuses that greatly contributed to their profit. Since the majority of readers in these areas were more liberal, editors of the *Times*, also liberals, printed stories that were liberal in nature and contained what everyone wanted, action. The *Post* on the other hand covered more politics appealing to the majority of those in Washington.

While news companies tried to appeal to their audience, Hammond reminds us that the news media was also a reflection of the public's ideals and beliefs. He writes that as the war progressed Americans were increasingly dissatisfied with U.S. casualties and little to no progress and the media was simply a reflection of their sentiments not to mention their need to appeal to their audience. "Taking its lead from its sources within the increasingly divided American elite, the press followed along, becoming more and more critical of events in South Vietnam as withdraws continued and the war gradually lost whatever purpose it had held."¹⁸⁰ It is evident through the news magazines and major newspapers especially in the events of Tet that the news media created and perpetuated ideas of disaster at the American Embassy and the rest of South Vietnam but was also a reflection of what the public thought was interesting and important news.

Conclusion

The relationship the media had with the government and military undoubtedly had an effect on the relationship between the news media and the American public. While journalists in Vietnam were briefed by military officials the American public received reports of military optimism coupled with the reporter's image of a stark reality. As the conflict raged on between the U.S. government and the press media, the American public was forced to choose whom to believe and since the media pointed out many of the inconsistencies and out right lies of the government, journalists, not politicians, ultimately became the more trusted source. These factors created a dynamic relationship between the news media and the public that fed off each others'

¹⁸⁰ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*.pg.296.

ideas and beliefs with the duration of the war and flow of reports the driving force that perpetuated increasingly negative opinions of the war and President Johnson.

Conclusion

When the dust finally settled following the Tet Offensive, it was clear that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had scored a resounding military victory that crushed the Vietcong who would never fully recover from their loss. Tet is now considered the turning point in the Vietnam War, a war in which the United States would ultimately lose. Scholars and journalists such as Daniel Hallin, Peter Braestrup, and Don Oberdorfer write that after Tet news coverage had changed becoming more critical of official statements.¹⁸¹ The American citizenry also increasingly opposed the war and the presidency so vocally that President Johnson refused to run for reelection. The attack on the American Embassy serves as most Americans' perceptions of the Tet Offensive because articles and reports of the attack dominated the news media. The U.S. Embassy in Saigon served as the most recognizable location for Americans, a seemingly impenetrable fortress that was the symbol of U.S. presence in Vietnam. Evidence taken from articles in newspapers; *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Christian Science Monitor*, and news magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* constructed a narrative of the attack on the American Embassy as embarrassment, disaster, shock, and ultimately psychological defeat. The embassy attack serves as a model that fits directly into the narrative the news media constructed of the Tet Offensive as a whole.

By looking at accounts from journalists, military officials, and newspaper and news magazines' coverage of the attack on the American Embassy during the Tet Offensive we see that the press was both a reflection of public opinion as well as a perpetuator of ideas. The news

¹⁸¹ Hallin, *The Uncensored War*. pg.178.
Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.xi.
Oberdorfer, *Tet!*. pg.xvi.

media reflected their readers' interests by covering an event that the American public was able to recognize. However, the same news organizations also perpetuated ideas of the attack as "disaster" and "psychological victory" that remained the American public's view of the attack and subsequently the Tet Offensive. Journalists Peter Braestrup and Don Oberdorfer acknowledge the influence the news media has in American culture. Every aspect of the press had the power to influence those that consumed it. The photographs that were taken and the editors' choice of which ones to print, headlines and articles' word choice all had tremendous influence in the American public's ability to create a cohesive narrative.

Articles from the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* constructed a flawed representation of the embassy attack and the Tet Offensive. It was flawed because journalists reported the attacks as shock and drama. While there was no immediate danger with reporting shock and drama journalists interpreted shock as disaster and defeat.¹⁸² With headlines like "Vietcong Attacks Shock Washington", "Ho Cheers Vietcong 'Victory'", "Psychological Gains Seen For Vietcong", and "Vietcong Attacks Pack Political Wallop" the photographs and articles that followed created a narrative of defeat.¹⁸³ The U.S. government failure to provide a clear response to the attacks worsened the situation by leaving the only explanation of the terrorists' strikes to the news media. In the case of the embassy attack some press companies printed false reports that, read with other national newspapers, further confused the American public. Even with further clarification of the attack from the press. The clarifications still did not have as powerful an impact as the first reports.

¹⁸² Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.517.

¹⁸³ Tom Wicker, "Vietcong Attacks Shock Washington: Washington Is Dealt Hard Blow By the Successes of the Vietcong". *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

Raymond Coffey, "Psychological Gains Seen for Vietcong". *Washington Post*, feb.2nd, 1968.

Reds Press Offensive, Raid Many Viet Towns: Ho Cheers Vietcong 'Victory'", *Washington Post*, Feb.1st, 1968.

"Vietcong Raids Pack Political Wallop", *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 31st, 1968.

"Vietcong Raids Shock Washington", *New York Times*, Feb.2nd, 1968.

The smoke cleared and it was apparent that South Vietnamese and U.S. forces had undoubtedly accomplished a military victory. The press printed a few “catch up” or “corrective” stories that appeared not as headlines but as short articles near the ends of the newspapers.¹⁸⁴ In the news magazines’ case the stories were rarely revisited because there were newer and fresher topics that were covered. Braestrup explains the outcome of the news media’s perpetuation of the disaster narrative. “The result was that the media tended to leave the shock and confusion of early February, as then perceived, “fixed” as the final impression of Tet, and thus as a framework for news judgment and public debate at home. At Tet, the press shouted that the patient was dying, then weeks later began to whisper that he somehow seemed to be recovering, whispers apparently not heard amid the clamorous domestic reaction to the initial shouts.”¹⁸⁵

Former government officials such as Nixon and Johnson claimed that the Vietnam War was lost because of the actions of the liberal media that opposed the Vietnam War turned the American public against the war. This view has been largely discredited in works by Hallin and Oberdorfer who offer compelling evidence that up until the Tet Offensive the press was in favor of the war. Braestrup, however, excuses the news media for the flawed reporting during Tet that perpetuated ideas of disaster and defeat due to the chaos that put the press institutions under a great deal more of stress. While the media cannot be held accountable for events such as Vietcong terrorists taking over the American Embassy, they are responsible for what they report to the public. Even if reports were flawed due to human error they are still responsible for the narrative they create and in turn are partially responsible for the narrative the American public created for themselves. We see from Hallin and Oberdorfer’s work that the news media was not dominated by liberal leftists that reported stories in a way that purposely turned the public

¹⁸⁴ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.517.

¹⁸⁵ Braestrup, *Big Story*. pg.517.

against the war but actively or not the press still created, especially in the case of the American Embassy, narratives of disaster and defeat. America's loss of the Vietnam War cannot be placed completely on the news media. There were a number of reasons why the U.S. was defeated such as poor war policy, ineffective military strategy, inadequate cooperation with the South Vietnamese and so on. Although the news media cannot take the full blame it does share responsibility of the American failure in the Vietnam War.

The media's role in Vietnam continues to be a controversial subject. As more studies are published more ex-government officials such as Westmoreland and McNamara continue to attribute failure in Vietnam with the press. The field is dominated heavily by studies of the Tet Offensive, which leaves the study of the relationship between the news media, military, government, and American public prior to the offensive unexplored in great depth. As the U.S. pursues more military actions the role of the media in terms of generating or discouraging public support will be in question. As Braestrup, Steinman, and Oberdorfer note, the press media is still influential on the public and government. Hallin, Hammond, and Wyatt present evidence that it is not influential and if it appears to be it is merely a reflection of public and government sentiment. The news media and Vietnam offers a case study of how the media interacts with society and the role it should play in the future.

The news media in Vietnam serves as a model of how the media should not operate under times of conflict. In subsequent conflicts nations' leaders tried to gain control of the news media in order to prevent a "Vietnam-like" debacle. In 1982, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher refused to allow foreign correspondents to cover their war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Even images of British disasters took up to twenty days to reach television sets at home

because films were ordered to be sent by sea.¹⁸⁶ The United States implemented the British style of media control during the Reagan and Bush years. Not only did Regan and Bush want to control the news media they also wanted to appear to be in control of it.¹⁸⁷ In military conflicts such as Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 the government controlled the news media so much that the government was able to make its own news that showed images and stories of what officials deemed appropriate.

Years after the Vietnam War small encounters and conflicts prepared the government and the military to deal with the news media in a full-scale war scenario. In the Persian Gulf War where the U.S. fought Iraq for Saddam Hussein's invasion of U.S. protectorate Kuwait, the American government controlled every aspect of the news media. Images of night vision bombings of buildings and bridges replaced images of dead and wounded soldiers.¹⁸⁸ Through policies of censorship the government allowed the military to control journalists' exposure to action and materials and literally put the news media on the sideline where as in Vietnam journalists were on the field.¹⁸⁹

While the U.S. government still controls the media coverage of Iraq very similar to how it did in the Persian Gulf War, advancements in communications technology are making it increasingly difficult to control the images the American public has access and is exposed to. Easily portable cellular phones now have the capability of digital photographs and video that can be streamed to any device with similar capabilities. Any digital video and photograph can be downloaded to the Internet to be viewed by anyone with computer access. The media has been totally integrated into American culture. We are now living in an age where terrorist

¹⁸⁶ Tom Englehardt, *The End of the Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. pg.273.

¹⁸⁷ Englehardt, *The End of the Victory Culture*. pg.280.

¹⁸⁸ Englehardt, *The End of the Victory Culture*. pg.287.

¹⁸⁹ Englehardt, *The End of the Victory Culture*. pg.291.

organizations can send video recording of prisoners' beheaded all over the world or a person can watch the execution of a military dictator. The media with all its technology is a great power in American society. This power left ungoverned, as we have seen, holds the potential for diminishing public support for America's overseas adventures.

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