

News Media Coverage of the 1968 Attack on the American Embassy During the Tet  
Offensive

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## ABSTRACT

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. 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.

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