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Skepticism and Exposure:
Television Coverage of the Vietnam War

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After the end of World War II, the United States began its complicated and complex involvement in Vietnam. Following the conclusion of an intense independence struggle against the French in 1954, Vietnam was divided into a Northern communist state and a Southern democratic state. With the Cold War in full swing, the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations justified US support to South Vietnam through a strategy of “containment” to prevent against the spread of communism elsewhere in Asia.¹ Kennedy hoping to avoid entering the US into a direct combat role in Vietnam, ensured that the role of the US military advisors in Vietnam remained limited. However, as Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the Presidency upon Kennedy’s death, the events in Vietnam began to escalate. By 1965, the US found itself in a direct combat role fighting in Vietnam lasting until 1973.

Throughout the Vietnam War, television cameras captured the scenes of war and for the American public to see like they never had before. As the 1960’s progressed, more Americans spent more hours watching TV. The public began the shift from having newspapers and print media being the primary source of information to watching a news program on TV,

¹ David L. Anderson, “The American War in Vietnam,” in *The Colombia Guide to the Vietnam War* (n.p.: Colombia University Press, 2002), 50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/andel1492.12>.

which requires less attention to comprehend information.² As compared to words describing an event in a printed publication, an image, especially in the context of war, is much more powerful as one is able to shape their own opinions without having to create a visualization. Before the Vietnam War, the American public had never been regularly exposed to the powerful scenes of war. News programs provided a more impactful portrayal of the war with the commentary of the reports combined with gruesome scenes unfolding right before the public's eyes, in the comfort of their living rooms.³ As a result, when the United States began to take a direct military role in Vietnam, the scenes of the Vietnam War were displayed and analyzed for millions of Americans. Over time, the constant flow of television reporting from the frontlines in Vietnam produced an uneasiness among much of the American public, as the never-ending commentary combined with displays of the scenes and sounds of the war generated more considerable opposition to the US presence in Vietnam.

The Kennedy Interviews: September 1963

In January 1961, the new President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, faced the burdensome task of managing the Cold War in an increasingly hostile world. Kennedy faced many foreign policy setbacks early in his term, with the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba, heightened Soviet aggression in Berlin, and a weak showing at a summit meeting in Vienna with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.⁴ Having been labeled as being soft on managing the global spread of communism, Kennedy turned his attention to Southeast Asia, where the situation in Vietnam was worsening. Kennedy massively increased military assistance to South

² Michael Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (1982): 159, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024822>.

³ Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," 159.

⁴ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 265.

Vietnam to help prevent its collapse to communism to its Northern neighbors, but the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was becoming increasingly unpopular. Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, began to crack down on Buddhists, indicating to the Kennedy Administration that the US was supporting “a narrow-minded tyrant with little legitimacy among his own people.”⁵ As a result, Kennedy needed to reassure the American people that the limited US support to South Vietnam remained necessary. However, Diem would have to be held accountable for his actions.

Television provided Kennedy with the opportunity to address the pressing issues facing the US, including its increasing assistance to South Vietnam to halt the spread of communism. One of the first mentions of a potential US involved conflict in Vietnam came on a televised interview by CBS between Walter Cronkite and President Kennedy on September 2, 1963. Since in 1963, the only US combat troops in Vietnam were military advisors to the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), the main focus on the interview was not on Vietnam. Cronkite instead decides to focus most of the interview on domestic subjects, including the economy, civil rights, and the looming 1964 Presidential Election, with the discussion on Vietnam only lasting a little under two minutes. Many Americans would have been watching interviews like these as by 1963, national news programs became more profitable and were expanded in length from 15 to 30-minute broadcasts.⁶ Cronkite transitions into the discussion on Vietnam by describing the situation in Vietnam as the only “hot war we’ve got running at the moment” while text pops on the screen citing that on September 2, 1963, there was “16,200 US troops in Vietnam” and “82 US Killed.”⁷ Kennedy responds by firmly asserting his belief that the

⁵ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 76.

⁶ Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” 158.

⁷ “Cronkite Interview of JFK,” YouTube video posted by “Wakeupyousheep,” Nov. 8, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM3uaXp8DAk>.

South Vietnamese struggle against the North is their own. However, the US will be fully prepared to help the South by continually providing equipment and advisors.⁸ Kennedy is using the opportunity of the interview with Cronkite to express to a national audience his administration's stance on the conflict on Vietnam, primarily through his rather calm and relaxed demeanor. Kennedy is reasserting that the US will not directly intervene in the Vietnam conflict and will continue with the Cold War trend of aiding nations directly threatened by communist aggressors.



Figure 1. *CBS News Anchor Walter Cronkite Interviews President John F. Kennedy.*

Photograph by Cecil Stoughton, September 2, 1963. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

ST-C276-7-63.

Cronkite then shifts the conversation to the current state of the South Vietnamese Government, specifically regarding internal conflicts between Catholics and Buddhists. Kennedy describes the South Vietnamese Government actions under President Ngo Dinh Diem in regards to repressing Buddhists as being “very unwise” and states that with “changes in policy and even personnel” the government in South Vietnam would be able to entirely focus

⁸ “Cronkite Interview of JFK.”

on managing the struggle against the communists in the North.⁹ Moreover, when Cronkite asserts that Diem has “no intention of changing his pattern,” Kennedy reasserts his belief that it is up to Diem to change the course of action of South Vietnam with his statement coming across as almost like a warning to Diem. At the same time, the camera cuts away from Kennedy to a shot of Diem walking, which can be seen as a tactic by the network to allow the public to visualize Diem and see who Kennedy’s South Vietnamese counterpart is.

Kennedy concludes the segment of the interview on Vietnam by comparing the widening Vietnam conflict to the broader Cold War struggles in Europe. Kennedy is keen to assert his belief to his national audience of American television viewers that the US has secured much of Europe from the threat of communism, and his administration intends to do the same in Asia. After Cronkite presses him about heightened US involvement in Vietnam, Kennedy responds by reaffirming his belief that withdrawing assistance from South Vietnam would be a “grave mistake” and that the US “must participate -- we may not like it -- in the defense of Asia.”¹⁰ Stopping the spread of communism remains a vital foreign policy interest for Kennedy, specifically in Asia. By speaking in detail on Vietnam in a TV interview, Kennedy is reminding Americans that the US is involved in a global conflict against communism and that the US will need to expand its interests in Asia to prevent countries like South Vietnam from becoming communist.

A week later, on September 9, 1963, Kennedy conducted a similar TV interview on NBC with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, where escalating tensions in Vietnam was one of the main subjects. Like Cronkite’s interview, this interview on NBC presses similar topics concerning Vietnam, including US aid to South Vietnam and the Diem regime. Brinkley

⁹ “Cronkite Interview of JFK.”

¹⁰ Mount Holyoke College, “President Kennedy’s Television Interviews on Vietnam September 2 and 9, 1963,” *Documents Relating to American Foreign Policy: Vietnam*, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kentv.htm>.

presses other concerns that the American public might have in regard to an escalating conflict in Vietnam. Brinkley asks Kennedy if he has “any reason to doubt this so-called “domino theory” that if South Vietnam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go behind it?”¹¹ Kennedy notes that he is a firm believer in the “domino theory” and is warning the American public through this interview that the entirety of Vietnam could become communist like China and lead to a US involved conflict like the Korean War. Therefore, support to the non-communist South is vital to ensure the rest of Southeast Asia does not follow suit. Another interesting point brought up is the role of the CIA when Huntley asks President Kennedy, “does the CIA tend to make its own policy?” to which Kennedy responds with a firm “No.”¹² Huntley refers to the potential CIA's role in Vietnam due to the failed earlier actions taken by the CIA earlier in the Kennedy Presidency, such as during the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961. By putting Kennedy on the spot, on national television, Kennedy has to demonstrate to the American people that as President, he can manage the National Security apparatus. More specifically, Kennedy needs to ensure that the CIA does not face another blunder if the CIA becomes involved in Vietnam.

The issues regarding Vietnam by Kennedy in his television interviews underscored the importance of providing US assistance to the South Vietnamese. The conversations between Kennedy and the reporters allowed the American people to understand better their President regarding the details of the US commitments to Vietnam. Throughout, a composed Kennedy frequently underscored the importance of Vietnam to combat the spread of communism, by reaffirming the US commitment, while limited is necessary. However, Kennedy offers a warning to the Diem regime in Saigon that the US will not tolerate further persecution of Buddhists. Following the airing of the interviews in September, the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. The US now considered “a more extreme solution” that involved

¹¹ Mount Holyoke College, “President Kennedy’s.”

¹² Mount Holyoke College, “President Kennedy’s.”

backing a coup on November 1, 1963, leading to the removal and assassination of Diem.¹³ With Diem now gone, US leadership had hoped that there would be an increased likelihood for a less repressive South Vietnamese government while avoiding widening US military assistance any further.

The Battle of Ia Drang Valley: November 1965

By 1965, the US had escalated its military involvement in Vietnam to provide direct combat assistance to the South Vietnamese in their fight against communism by using American troops. Like his predecessor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, had been initially skeptical about committing American ground units in Vietnam as US military forces while having the potential to increase the effectiveness of halting communist advances, ran the risk of dragging the US into a prolonged conflict. Nevertheless, Johnson approved in March 1965 the commencement of Operation Rolling Thunder, a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam, as well as the placement of the first units of Marines to protect the Da Nang Air Base.¹⁴ While the initial mission of US units was limited and defensive, the North Vietnamese's growing threat forced the US to take an offensive stance. This new strategy resulted in increased confrontations with communist forces such as in October 1965 at Plei Mei, to which Major Charles Beckwith of described the enemy fighters as “the finest, most dedicated soldiers [Beckwith] had ever seen.”¹⁵ With the war continuing to intensify, American forces would find themselves engaged in one of the first significant battles involving the US in November 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley.

¹³ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 79.

¹⁴ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 90.

¹⁵ Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 134.

The Battle of Ia Drang Valley was one of the first instances where Americans witnessed the fighting in Vietnam on their TV screens. Throughout the battle, CBS News reporter Morley Safer was on the scene at Ia Drang, reporting on the events taking place in Vietnam. With the footage compiled in a special report entitled “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley” a week after the battle's conclusion, Walter Cronkite introduced the introduction to Safer's report. Cronkite begins by stressing that the “people of America were jolted” to discover that the average weekly casualties in Vietnam had surpassed those during the Korean War.¹⁶ Cronkite continues by telling the viewers that the Battle of Ia Drang Valley had been “the biggest, the costliest, the most significant battle yet fought by American troops in Vietnam.”¹⁷ There was also a large replica model of the battlefield present, designed to help the viewers visualize the mountains and jungles of the Ia Drang Valley. Never before had the American people seen coverage of the war to this level, indicating a change in the presentation of news and combat footage to viewers in the years to come.

Safer implores a unique strategy in reporting the story of the Battle of Ia Drang Valley as the special report does not just chronicle the events of the battle, but also relies on interviews of American soldiers to give viewers personal accounts of the events of the battle. One interview was with Brigadier General Richard K. Knowles described the unconventional war tactics that needed to be taken by US troops to “go for the enemy, where ever he may be.”¹⁸ Interviews with military leaders like Knowles helped convey the implementation of new strategies in Vietnam to win battles like in the Ia Drang Valley. Safer continues by highlighting many of the symbols that would become synonymous with the Vietnam War, including lush

¹⁶ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley” *CBS Evening News*. CBS. Nov. 29, 1965, <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.653177>.

¹⁷ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

¹⁸ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

jungle landscapes, aerial bombing runs, and wounded American soldiers. Safer also had to describe the usage of helicopters, as they had never before been used on such a large scale as they were in Vietnam. Safer uses terminology such as “Huey” to describe helicopters and “L-Z” for large open spaces to land helicopters.¹⁹ Safer’s commentary in the special report, combined with powerful images from the front lines, allows the American public to get a firsthand glimpse into the early stages of combat in Vietnam. Ultimately the special report helps to reassert that in order to win the war, the US will have to use new mobile tactics against an atypical opponent.

Safer also attempts to invoke American memories of World War II and the Korean War by drawing comparisons to the Vietnam War. While images of injured American soldiers emerge on viewer’s screens, Safer describes his own experience at Ia Drang Valley. Safer makes the comparison that witnessing the events at Ia Drang Valley had been “almost like looking at old newsreels of Korea and the Pacific War -- the same young, old faces, the same shattered landscape, the same agony.”²⁰ Unlike World War II and the Korean War, the war in Vietnam differed as it was televised for all of America to see. World War II and the Korean War had been fought in a different time, one before the age of mass television viewership, with Americans having to rely almost entirely on news mediums without visual components such as print and radio. Because of the televised nature of the war, the Vietnam War eventually became more unpopular over time as Americans never before had continuously been exposed to the images of war.

The special report concludes with Safer reminding the American people of the massive burdens that war has in terms of the moral support for war over time, and the potential for loss of American lives. Safer asserts that based on his observations at Ia Drang, the American

¹⁹ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

²⁰ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

military is very well equipped, and should be easily able to fight against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong. The special report tries to make clear to the American people understand their predicament as Safer encourages the viewers that “the enemy knows he cannot, in the end, defeat us in the field, but by killing Americans he hopes to demoralize us at home.”²¹ While the North Vietnamese were undeniably united in their struggle to unite the people of Vietnam under communism, there was skepticism in the US as early as 1965 if the US should get involved militarily in Vietnam. One of the most significant concerns about entering a war involves the levels of casualties. Safer warns the American people in closing that “the question remains, are the American people prepared to lose more and more young men in Vietnam.”²² Over time, these uncertainties regarding Americans' opinions over the Vietnam War become more defined, particularly as the reporting of Vietnam with a combination of powerful images and critical commentary resulted in decreased US public support for the war over time.

Morley Safer's coverage of the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley helped to provide Americans a new glimpse into the escalating Vietnam War. The report offered a display of the escalating US role in the Vietnam War in 1965 through the scenes of the increasing offensive ground operations, which were supported by the nearly 200,000 American troops in Vietnam by the year's end.²³ The reporting helped to provide the public with a clearer vision of how the war in Vietnam would play out, which would not have been possible if it was not for television. With the conclusion of the Battle of Ia Drang Valley, the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was keen to declare the battle a major US victory. However, private

²¹ “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

²² “The Battle of Ia Drang Valley.”

²³ Thomas G. Paterson, *American Foreign Relations: A History* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 372.

concerns arose over the rising American casualties and the potential need for a further expansion of the war.²⁴ As a result, as the war progressed, television programs covered more battles like Ia Drang, allowing the American people to derive their conclusions regarding the progress made in Vietnam.



Figure 2. *U.S. cavalrymen carry a fellow soldier to an evacuation zone after he was seriously wounded in a North Vietnamese ambush in South Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley, mid November 1965. Photograph by Peter Arnett, November 14, 1965. The Associated Press.*

The Tet Offensive: January-February 1968

As the war progressed into 1968, the Johnson Administration and MACV continued to express their optimism that the US was making steady advances in pushing back against communist aggression in Vietnam. US military leaders like General William C. Westmoreland expressed his confidence that the US was, in fact, “winning this war” and that American support was making a difference on the battlefield.²⁵ With reports to the public of battlefield

²⁴ Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 140-42.

²⁵ Charles Peters, *Lyndon B. Johnson* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 140.

successes made by the nearly half a million strong American force in Vietnam, Westmoreland was confident that the US in 1968 was capable of carrying out an “all-out offensive on all fronts.”²⁶ However, unknown to the American public, and underestimated by US leadership, the North Vietnamese by 1968 were seeking to shift the balance of the war themselves. The North Vietnamese would try to achieve this by carrying out a “massive offensive throughout South Vietnam aimed at inspiring a general uprising to overthrow the Saigon government,” in line with the Vietnamese lunar new year holiday of Tet.²⁷ During the ensuing Tet Offensive while “Americans at home had become accustomed to a familiar pattern of images” of the war on their televisions, “on the evening of January 31, 1968, the spectacle suddenly changed.”²⁸ Instead, the surprise communist offensive, as shown through television news specials, was an enormous shock for the American public, raising more questions and opposition regarding the US involvement in the Vietnam War.

The scenes of the Tet Offensive that unfolded on television sets across the nation startled many Americans as the coordinated North Vietnamese attacks that contradicted the reports made by the military that the US was winning the war. On January 31, 1968, NBC News broadcasted “Vietcong Terror: A Guerrilla Offensive,” a 15-minute special report that disclosed the details and images of the Tet Offensive. The report begins by explaining the communists believed the US and ARVN forces would be caught off guard due to the lunar new year holiday of Tet.²⁹ The viewers were given a sense of the scale of the Tet Offensive as maps depicted Vietcong attacks in major cities of Saigon, Hue, Kontum, Nha Trang, and Qui Nhon

²⁶ Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 251.

²⁷ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 115.

²⁸ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 536.

²⁹ John Richard Thackrah, “Vietnam War,” in *The Routledge Companion to Military Conflict* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), 262.

with ten provincial capitals and many other US military bases targeted as well.³⁰ Furthermore, the report outlined that in the past two days of the Tet Offensive, 232 American soldiers were killed with over 900 injured, making it apparent to the American public that some of the most deadly fighting in Vietnam was unfolding with more yet to come.³¹ The biggest shock to the American public would have been witnessing the fighting that was taking place in the middle of Saigon at the American embassy where Vietcong had infiltrated the compound. The report showed a video of embassy officials and guards firing guns to try and reenter and retake the embassy building along with scenes of injured soldiers on stretchers receiving medical treatment. Having the scenes of Tet visible for the American public to see on their TVs was not helpful for the military's claims that the Americans were winning the war. MACV was more concerned with the potential for a massive conflict near the DMZ at Khe Sahn as the sporadic attacks of Tet did not include a single NVA regular soldier at the start and were instead conducted mostly by the Vietcong.³²

The consensus from those reporting on the NBC News special was that the events of Tet proved that while America was not losing the war in Vietnam, it was certainly not winning it either. The scenes of fighting in the middle of cities like Saigon would have been disheartening for the American public to see as most of the fighting had taken place in the jungles and countryside of Vietnam before Tet. Instead, the "perfectly timed attacks" by the Vietcong would be ingrained in the minds of Americans and discussed in the media for months to come.³³ While MACV attempted to spin the events of Tet as being "final acts of desperation" by the Vietcong, the more realistic observation by most Americans summed up by Frank

³⁰ "NBC News Special Report, January 31, 1968." YouTube video. Posted by "NewsActive3," Sept. 27, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA8n114eYXc>.

³¹ "NBC News Special Report, January 31, 1968."

³² Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 257.

³³ "NBC News Special Report, January 31, 1968."

McGee after the special that Tet was the beginning of a “new, far more hazardous phase of the war.”³⁴ Because of the TV coverage of Tet, the public became more restless about the events taking place during Vietnam, with more and more Americans beginning to advocate more vocally about bringing an end to the war.

Walter Cronkite, at the end of the February 27, 1968 broadcast of the CBS Evening News spoke directly to his audience about the results of the Tet Offensive which in turn raised more doubts about the US making significant progress in Vietnam in the minds of millions of Americans who tuned into the broadcast. After returning from a trip to Vietnam, Cronkite explained to the viewers his own opinions and thoughts on the state of the war after the Tet Offensive. Cronkite summed up the events of Tet by stating that “to say that we are closer to victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past.”³⁵ Continuing, Cronkite argues that while military commanders and politicians were falsely telling Americans that the US was winning the war, but in reality, the US was “mired in stalemate” being “the only realistic, if unsatisfactory conclusion.”³⁶ Because of television, the American people were able to see the war unfold in front of them, which, when combined with critical analysis like that of Cronkite, contradicted the claims made by US officials. The broadcast concluded with a composed Cronkite signed off by stating that “it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.”³⁷ The message that America is not winning the war may not have made those in the government and military command happy, but it was the reality that was being expressed to

³⁴ “NBC News Special Report, January 31, 1968.”

³⁵ “Report from Vietnam (1968),” YouTube video. Posted by “tpleines,” May 22, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn4w-ud-TyE>.

³⁶ “Report from Vietnam (1968).”

³⁷ “Report from Vietnam (1968).”

the American people every night on the news. Optimism and support for the war eroded further after the Tet Offensive, contributing to the eventual American withdrawal from Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive is often regarded as a significant turning point in the Vietnam War, as the television reported every day about the progress made during the battle. Since the start of the war, the NVA and Vietcong had been infiltrating men and supplies into the South in hopes of inciting a massive uprising, which they hoped would force the US to leave Vietnam. Tet was a clear military victory for the US who repelled the advances from the North Vietnamese and suffered fewer casualties, but the North Vietnamese gamble had succeeded in further deteriorating support for the war in the US. The television coverage of Tet was mostly negative as the portrayal of the events indicated a defeat for the US, who was caught off guard by such a surprise attack.³⁸ By having the scenes of Tet displayed on their TVs at home, many Americans saw that the US was not making any significant progress in fighting in Vietnam. As a result of the television coverage of the Tet Offensive, the American public was faced with the choice of supporting the current war effort, which was achieving minimal visible progress or advocating in increasing numbers for the US to withdraw from Vietnam and move on.



³⁸ Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," 158.

Figure 3. *Two U.S. military policemen aid a wounded fellow MP during fighting in the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon, Jan. 31, 1968, at the beginning of the Tet Offensive.*

Photograph by Hong Seong-Chan, January 31, 1968. The Associated Press.



Figure 4. *A Man and a Woman Watching a Film Footage of the Vietnam War on a Television in their Living Room.* Photograph by Warren K. Leffler, February 13, 1968.

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog. LC-DIG-ds-01311.

Nixon and the American Withdrawal from Vietnam: January 1969-January 1973

With public opinion about the Vietnam War eroding as the war raged on, the reports of the war continued to show intense fighting in Vietnam that most of the American public had grown accustomed to seeing. The diminishing support for the War also was a factor in the election of Richard Nixon to the Presidency, as Nixon pledged to change the US course of action in Vietnam. Once in office, Nixon pushed the war in a new direction, Nixon could “start fresh without being imprisoned by the formulas of the past.”³⁹ Nixon sought to take the war in a new direction by enacting the “Vietnamization” of the war, which resulted in a gradual

³⁹ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 137.

reduction of US troops designed to have the ARVN fight their own battles.⁴⁰ Despite the efforts to end the war, the reporting on Vietnam remained critical. Television reports continued to come from the frontlines in Vietnam, showing the same images of death and destruction. As a result, the Nixon Administration “repeatedly accused journalists of focusing on the problems,” and sought to blame television networks “for distorted, even disloyal reporting.”⁴¹ The continual usage of television coverage during the Nixon years only reaffirmed the beliefs of many Americans who had grown to oppose US involvement in the Vietnam War and urged for an end to the American role in the conflict.

Nixon’s task of getting the US out of Vietnam became increasingly difficult as while the US troops were coming home, the war was still being fought and, in some cases, being escalated, prompting more critiques of the war to the American public via television reports. One such example was during the CBS Evening News broadcast on March 27, 1970, when Richard Threlkeld followed a patrol of American soldiers on a routine sweep through the jungles of South Vietnam near the Cambodian border. Threlkeld describes soldiers who “didn’t want to come to Vietnam” but were fighting in the war anyway.⁴² The segment also depicts the images of the Vietnam War that Americans had become accustomed to seeing on their TV screens for many years, including the usage of helicopters, wounded American soldiers, and scenes of ambushes by an unseen enemy hiding in the jungle. Like most of the American public, some soldiers were weary and tired of fighting a war in which US forces were achieving minimal progress. The limited battlefield gains are most notably present in the casualty statistics that are reported by Threlkeld at the end of the segment that “one American was

⁴⁰ Thackrah, “Vietnam War,” 263.

⁴¹ Chester Pach, “‘Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press’: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973,” *Diplomatic History* 34 no. 3 (2010), 555, www.jstor.org/stable/24915901.

⁴² “Vietnam War, 1970: CBS camera rolls as platoon comes under fire” YouTube video. Posted by “CBS Evening News,” Apr. 30, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89_3DgW_7mg.

wounded with an engagement with an unknown size enemy force, enemy casualties are unknown.”⁴³ With the public's optimism already low, the TV reports from Vietnam now emphasized a lack of direction and purpose of the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. As a result, the television reporting showed to the American public that by this point in the Vietnam War, “the morale, discipline, and battle worthiness of the US Armed Forces,” were effectively “lower and worse than at any time in this century and possible in the history of the United States.”⁴⁴ The television reports from Vietnam, despite a new course undertaken by the Nixon Administration, repeated more of the same images of war that had been present for many years prior, along with the same feelings of a growing uneasiness among the American populous towards the Vietnam War persisting.

In a nationally televised speech on January 23, 1973, President Nixon proudly stated that the US had completed its objectives by “finally achieving a peace with honor” in Vietnam.⁴⁵ In ending the war, Nixon privately believed that despite years of the American people receiving “distorted television reports,” in the end history will recognize that “through the worst gauntlet of opprobrium and malicious defamation in American history, the President [Nixon] has brought us to a successful end in Indochina.”⁴⁶ However, in contrast to Nixon’s elated views of bringing the Vietnam War to a successful end, many Americans viewed the end of the war in Vietnam as something not worthy of celebration. NBC News provided coverage of President Nixon’s speech on January 24, 1973, where Garrick Utley argued that while leaders in Hanoi and Washington had agreed to stop the fighting, the war “for some

⁴³ “Vietnam War: 1970.”

⁴⁴ Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 490.

⁴⁵ Karnow, *The Vietnam War*, 669.

⁴⁶ Pach, “Our Worst Enemy,” 565.

Americans had ended long ago.”⁴⁷ This remark offers the viewers a reminder that the war ended for those Americans who fought and lost their lives in Vietnam, especially when the grave of James T. Davis, who was described as being one of the first American casualties in Vietnam is displayed. Utley hopes that Americans can move on from the very divisive war that left the population “confused, frustrated and angry,” with many Americans still trying to grasp the effect of the Vietnam War on their own lives. The broadcast ends with Utley offering the viewers a take on the conflict that the achievement of peace is that “not that something wonderful has happened, but something terrible has ended.”⁴⁸ With peace achieved in Vietnam, Americans could move on from Vietnam, and begin the process of healing the many metaphorical wounds that had scared and divided the country as a result of the war.

David Brinkley also offered a take on the peace talks and made comparisons to the end of World War II, which, unlike the Vietnam War, produced mass celebrations and a feeling of accomplishment and victory. While Brinkley admits that “no one can be truly sure of the private thoughts and feelings of the American people,” he contemplates that World War II had almost unanimous support and mass mobilization among the people to support the war effort.⁴⁹ Vietnam differed significantly as the war had divided the country with the support for the war effort eroded as the fighting intensified. Furthermore, the segment reminds the viewers that the Vietnam experience differed as there was “no clear objective,” and upon the announcement of a peace deal, “many were not really sure it was over,” which Brinkley claims is why there was no “dancing in the streets.”⁵⁰ Instead of celebrations, the end American

⁴⁷ “VIETNAM / CEASE-FIRE” *NBC Nightly News*. NBC. Jan. 24, 1973.
<https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/466877>.

⁴⁸ “VIETNAM / CEASE-FIRE.”

⁴⁹ “Journal (War’s End)” *NBC Nightly News*. NBC. Feb. 15, 1973.
<https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/468680>.

⁵⁰ “Journal (War’s End).”

involvement in Vietnam was almost like a relief for Americans. The public who had to experience the war in their homes through TV news reports could now move on. With the conclusion of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, many Americans then turned their attention and their television sets to coverage of the growing Watergate scandal, with now no interest in the ongoing fighting between the North and South in Vietnam.⁵¹

Conclusion

With the scenes of the Vietnam War unfolding on televisions across America, the Vietnam War is characterized as being the “The Living Room War.”⁵² Unlike any conflict before it, the American people learned about the war and watched it unfold daily through their television sets. With the first significant mentions of war in Vietnam coming through television interviews, television helped to transform the war like it never had before by displaying moving pictures from the battlefields of Vietnam in the homes of millions of Americans night after night. As a result, scenes of intense battles like those in the Ia Drang Valley and during the Tet Offensive became ingrained in Americans' minds. They ultimately resulted in a public that was increasingly opposed to fighting a war in Vietnam. The scenes of war accompanied the commentary of trusted news reporters. These reporters saw it as their duty to report the truth to the American people and capture the mood of the country in their analysis. The result of regular exposure to war through TV did not just help to bring an eventual American withdrawal from Vietnam, but also forever changed how the media report war itself, and eventually remembered by the public.

⁵¹ Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 526.

⁵² Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," 162.

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