

Tim Mai,

VIETNAM WAR: THE WAR BEING TELEVISED

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the United States has been increasingly involved in conflicts around the world, from World War I, and World War II, to the Cold War. When a war is launched, it is often the citizens who suffer the most, because the country pours a great deal of money into the war and many young soldiers lose their lives. Henceforward, whenever people talk about wars and conflicts between countries, the concern of morality also comes up. Unlike other wars, the Vietnam War was the first television war and it became a very controversial battle. Therefore, the popularization of television allowed more Americans to see the military abuses and cruelty of war, which remarkably undermines their support for the Vietnam War.

As the first war that was heavily covered by the media and watched by the general public on television, the morally debatable behaviors of troops and the brutal side of war led to a lot of public dissatisfaction, which had greatly diminished people's support for the war. In the spring of 1965, large numbers of American combat troops were committed to the Vietnam War before Vietnam became the subject of large-scale news coverage in the United States. Until then, the number of American journalists in Indochina had been small – fewer than two dozen as recently as 1964. By the height of the war in 1968, there were about 600 accredited journalists in Vietnam from all countries reporting for American wire services, broadcast television networks, major newspaper chains and news magazines¹. As the war worsened, the United States began to further attack North Vietnam and relied heavily on bombing. The scale of the air war gradually increased. The president adamantly opposed the Joint Chiefs' recommendation of a "knockout blow," but with every stage of the bombing failing to bear fruit, he expanded the targets and the number of strikes². "Sorties against North Vietnam increased from 25.000 in 1965 to 79.000 in 1966 and 108.00 in 1967; bomb tonnage increased from 53.000 to 136.000 to 226.000"³. At the same time, advances in video and audio recording have made news reporting easier and more accessible. From 1950 to 1966, as television became an everyday necessity, the share of Americans who owned a Television soared from 9 percent to 93 percent⁴. During the World War II,

¹ Ronald H. Spector. "The Vietnam War and the media". Britannica, last modified April 27, 2016. Accessed: May 25, 2022. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Vietnam-War-and-the-media-2051426>

² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), – 173 p.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jessie Kratz. "Vietnam: The First Television War". National Archives, last modified January 25, 2018. Accessed: May 25, 2022. URL: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/01/25/vietnam-the-first-television-war>

the crew stayed in non-combat areas to show the happier, more optimistic side of the war and the main focus of the media was high morale and support for the war effort. By contrast, watching the evening news from their living rooms, Americans often saw images of planes flying, bombs dropping, troops patrolling and sometimes fighting¹. In addition, the strong anti-war sentiment in the media influenced American policy makers. Americans can watch military abuses on television, such as the 1968 My Lai massacre, which sparked riots in cities and college campuses across the country. That anger, fueled by television coverage, eventually led to the U.S. decision to withdraw from Iraq in 1973 and end its involvement in the war². Americans, for the first time, regularly exposed to cruel and ugly realities of the war, and this sharp contrast aroused their anti-war thoughts.

In addition to seeing the brutal side of military, many people felt sympathy from the suffering of American soldiers on TV, which led to a public anti-war opinion. Television coverage of the Vietnam War helped divide a nation that prided itself on its ability to unite. For months, those who spoke out for our Vietnam policy were labeled either “hawks” or “doves.” Those who supported a policy of escalation that gradually expanded the war were called “hawks”. Those who questioned the wisdom of the war were called “doves”³. “It has always seemed to me that the so-called “doves” who have spoken out against the drift of our policy in recent years were taking a more tough minded, realistic view of our national interest than the “hawks” who have dreamed about exporting American freedom to the jungles in B-52’s”⁴. More than ever, Americans can relate to the soldiers because they can see it in their homes. This caused an outcry in public opinion against the war⁵. People who opposed the war saw the war on television and thought it was unnecessary and that thousands of “American boys” were not dying for a noble cause. In fact, they, many of them are parents of soldiers, believe the United States is involved in a war they should never have been involved in⁶. The audiences not only felt sadness and sympathy by seeing their own youth die in the war, but also from the soldiers’ frustration. The first thing to be mentioned is the frustration to both planners and soldiers of fighting in a war where nothing seems to work, “where the rules either don’t exist or obviously don’t apply, and where they are confronted by impotence and failure day after

¹ Michael Mandelbaum. “Vietnam: The Television War”. In *Daedalus*, – No. 4 ed. (n.p.: MIT, 1982), 111:157. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024822>

² Kratz. “Vietnam: The First,” National Archives.

³ McGovern George, Field Frank L. and Anderson David. “Correspondence,” in *Master File Complete* (n.p.: New Public, 1967), 157: 28. URL: <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=76924978-1d25-4a4b-b6b5-51c89f075c99%40redis>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kratz. “Vietnam: The First,” National Archives.

⁶ Ibid.

day”¹. Even after more bombing and more troops were sent to the war, the Vietnamese were surprisingly resistant. B-52s blew up the narrow road from Muga Pass to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but to the surprise of the Americans, the trucks were back on the road within days. “Caucasians cannot really imagine what ant labor can do,” one American remarked with a mixture of frustration and admiration². Some American officials convince themselves that progress has been made, but there is no denying the fact that the war continues. Lyndon Johnson thus faced a painful dilemma. Unable to end the war by military means and unwilling to make the concessions necessary to secure a negotiated settlement...³ Ultimately, the empathy and anger gained from television fueled anti-war sentiment and indirectly contributed to America’s defeat in Vietnam.

The huge cost of the war and the distorted news coverage of the war made the American people lose hope for the American army and oppose the war. The role of the media in the Vietnam War has always been the focus of controversy. Some argue that the media played a big role in America’s failure. They argued that the media’s tendency to report negatively helped undermine support for the US war and that its uncensored coverage provided valuable information to Vietnam’s enemies⁴. Even the state tried to promote the war but “the result was considerable ambiguity in purpose and method, growing civil-military tension, and a steady escalation that brought increasing costs and uncertain gain”⁵. Although a lot of money has been poured into the war by the government and the people were suffering, they were truly agitated when they saw no progress of the war on the television every day. Throughout the course of the war, it is clear that the importance of the embassy attack was exaggerated and that the Tet offensive was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese. The new effect of television coverage of the Lunar New Year events, however, was to persuade the American public to have its first real concerns about the war and to create a public movement to actively voice its dissent⁶. The inaccuracy and subjectivity of news coverage of Tet, as well as the subsequent failure of the Internet to correct erroneous reports in the early stages of the offensive, has caused widespread public criticism⁷.

¹ Ellsberg Daniel. “Vietnam War Crimes: The My Lai Mentality”, in MasterFile Complete (n.p., 1971), 16S:19. URL: <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=ed371aac-09d8-4976-a355-c1d6676de1bd%40redis>

² Herring, *America’s Longest*, – 173 p.

³ Ibid. – 172 p.

⁴ Spector. “The Vietnam,” *britannica*.

⁵ Herring. *America’s Longest*, – 173 p.

⁶ Michael C. Mitchell. “Television and the Vietnam War”. In *Naval War College Review*, – No. 3 ed. (n.p.: U. S. Naval War College Press, 1984), 37:44. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44636560>

⁷ Ibid.

In retrospect, there is no doubt that the Vietnam War was one of the most violent conflicts in the history of the Cold War. Not only did the attack have a huge negative impact on the American people and disgust with the war, but it also created painful memories for many soldiers that cannot be erased. The improvement of technology and the popularization of television were originally a blessing, but when they faced the cruelty of war, they only brought sadness and made people see the scars of the whole world more clearly. The social media and television, which used to broadcast funny shows and cartoons every day, was replaced by bombing and dead bodies. The Vietnam War, also known as the first televised war, brought back sad memories in generations, and for the first time made people really think about the meaning and morality of war.

References:

1. Daniel Ellsberg. "Vietnam War Crimes: The My Lai Mentality". In MasterFile Complete,– Vol. 165.– N.p., 1971.– P. 19–20. URL: <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=ed371aac-09d8-4976-a355-c1d6676de1bd%40redis>
2. George McGovern, Field Frank L. and Anderson David. "Correspondence." In Master File Complete,– Vol. 157.– N.p.: New Public, 1967.– P. 28–30. URL: <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=76924978-1d25-4a4b-b6b5-51c89f075c99%40redis>
3. Herring George C. America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975. Boston: Mc Graw-Hill, 2002.
4. Kratz Jessie. "Vietnam: The First Television War." National Archives. Last modified January 25, 2018. Accessed: May 25, 2022. URL: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/01/25/vietnam-the-first-television-war>
5. Mandelbaum Micheal. "Vietnam: The Television War." In Daedalus,– No. 4 ed.,– Vol. 111.– N.p.: MIT, 1982.– P. 157–69. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024822>
6. Mitchell Michael C. "Television and the Vietnam War". In Naval War College Review,– No. 3 ed.,– Vol. 37.– N.p.: U.S. Naval War College Press, 1984.– P. 42–52. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44636560>
7. Spector Ronald H. "The Vietnam War and the media". britannica. Last modified April 27, 2016. Accessed: May 25, 2022. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Vietnam-War-and-the-media-2051426>