

Television Coverage of the Vietnam War and the Vietnam Veteran

By Erin McLaughlin

Introduction

Growing up as the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, I've always been proud to say that my father is a war hero. When I was younger, I enjoyed bragging to classmates and teachers about my father's honors because I believed that all Americans respect Vietnam veterans as much as I do. As I grew older, however, I noticed in movies and on television that the Vietnam veteran is not portrayed as a brave soldier; rather, he is a violent psychopath who continuously experiences flashbacks of the war. What was coverage of the war like, and did it affect the image of the Vietnam veteran? Many Vietnam veterans feel that uncensored and overly negative television coverage helped turn the American public against the war and against the veterans themselves.

The horrors of war entered the living rooms of Americans for the first time during the Vietnam War. For almost a decade in between school, work, and dinners, the American public could watch villages being destroyed, Vietnamese children burning to death, and American body bags being sent home. Though initial coverage generally supported U.S. involvement in the war, television news dramatically changed its frame of the war after the Tet Offensive. Images of the U.S. led massacre at My Lai dominated the television, yet the daily atrocities committed by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong rarely made the evening news. Moreover, the anti-war movement at home gained increasing media attention while the U.S. soldier was forgotten in Vietnam. Coverage of the war and its resulting impact on public opinion has been debated for decades by many intelligent media scholars and journalists, yet they are not the most qualified individuals to do so: the veterans are. Journalists based in Saigon daily reported facts about battles, casualties, and the morale of the troops, yet only a soldier could grasp the true reality of war. Veterans understand what really occurred in the jungles of Vietnam, and only they can compare the truth to what was portrayed on television. Furthermore, their homecoming stories most accurately reveal how the American public has cruelly mistreated the Vietnam veteran. Therefore, after having researched the power of television and its coverage of the war, I interviewed four Vietnam veterans in order to understand how they interpreted the coverage and how they feel it contributed to the image of the Vietnam Veteran.

Section 1: Television Power and the Vietnam War

Why Television?

By the mid-1960's, television was considered to be the most important source of news for the American public, and, possibly, the most powerful influence on public opinion itself. Throughout the Korean War, the television audience remained small. In 1950, only 9 percent of homes owned a television. By 1966, this figure rose to 93 percent (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p. 18). As televisions became more popular in the home, more Americans began to get their news from television than from any other source. A series of surveys conducted by the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office from 1964 until 1972 demonstrates the growing power of

television. With multiple answers allowed, respondents were asked from which medium they "got most of their news". In 1964, 58 percent said television; 56 percent, newspapers; 26 percent, radio; and 8 percent, magazines. By 1972, 64 percent said television while the number of respondents who primarily relied on newspapers dropped to 50 percent (Hallin, 1986, p.106). Thus, as the Vietnam War dragged on, more and more Americans turned to television as their primary source for news.

While a large audience is crucial in influencing public opinion, credibility is a much more significant factor. The Roper surveys mentioned above also asked respondents which medium they would trust if the media gave conflicting accounts of a story. In 1972, 48 percent said television while only 21 percent said newspapers (Hallin, 1986, p.106). Television is "consistently evaluated as more attention-grabbing, interesting, personally relevant, emotionally involving, and surprising"(Neuman, Just, Crigler, 1992, p.56) because of two elements: visuals and personality. The visual element of television allows viewers to feel as if they are part of the action. When news programs aired images of battles and death, Americans at home felt as if they too were in the jungles of Vietnam. Additionally, intense visuals helped explain the complex nature of war to Americans who could not understand the military's technical language. Anchors and reporters quickly became trusted, household names because the public turned to them every night for the day's information; Walter Cronkite was even referred to as the "most trusted man in America" throughout the war (Hallin, 1986, p.106). This trust allowed the opinions and biases of television news personalities to have some influence on the way in which many Americans viewed the war. Thus, Americans increasingly depended on television for images and accurate accounts of the Vietnam War; what they were watching, however, were edited, thirty-minute versions of an extremely complex war.

Early Coverage

The television news industry is a business with a profit motive before it is a public service; consequently, producers and reporters attempt to make the news more entertaining by airing stories that involve conflict, human impact, or morality. Television news did not find material that was dramatic enough until the number of American troops was raised to 175, 000 in July 1965 (Hallin, 1986, p.115). Combat, interviews with American soldiers, and helicopter scenes all provided the television news industry with the drama that it required. The networks set up permanent bureaus in Saigon and sent hundred of correspondents there throughout the war. From 1965 through the Tet Offensive in 1968, 86 percent of the CBS and NBC nightly news programs covered the war, focusing mostly on ground and air combat (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p.4). This coverage was generally very supportive of U.S involvement in the war and of the soldier himself until 1967. The media labeled the conflict as a "good guys shooting Reds" story so that it could fit into the ongoing saga of the Cold War (Wyatt, 1995, p.81). As part of the human impact frame, network correspondents relied on American soldiers for their most important sources. During this early part of the war, the soldier was portrayed as a hero. One example is a striking story reported by TV correspondent Dean Brelis. As he was having his leg amputated, Marine colonel Michael Yunck said:

"I said hell, they can't be right around in there. So I didn't call bombs and napalm on these people. But that's where they were. I'm sure that's where they were. God damn it. I hate to put napalm on these women and children. I just didn't do it. I said, they can't be there." (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p.13-14)

Thus, the anti-communism frame significantly contributed to the positive coverage that vilified the war, not the soldier (Bonior, Champlin, and Kolly, 1984, p.13).

The Turning Point

By the fall of 1967, 90 percent of the evening news was devoted to the war and roughly 50 million people watched television news each night (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p.4-5). Up until this time, the war had strong support from the media, the public, and Congress. The military continuously reported that the U.S was making encouraging progress. Gradually, however, support for the war began to decrease. Because no military censorship was established, journalists could follow the military into combat and report their observations without formal censorship. Thus, as journalists saw more grisly combat, they presented the public with more graphic images. Also, for the first time, interviewed soldiers expressed their frustration with the progress of the war.

Support began to decrease in the fall of 1967, but the major turning point in television's coverage of the war occurred during the Tet Offensive in late January 1968. Though North Vietnamese soldiers swept through more than one hundred Southern Vietnamese cities, Tet was actually a U.S victory because the North suffered enormous casualties. Television, however, portrayed the attack as a brutal defeat for the U.S; the media, not the military, confirmed the growing perception that the U.S was unable to win the war. The percent of television stories in which journalists editorialized news jumped from 5.9 percent before Tet to 20 percent in the two months after (Hallin, 1986, p.170). The most significant statement came from the "most trusted man in America", Walter Cronkite. In a CBS special, Cronkite concluded, "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 to say that we are mired in a bloody stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory conclusion" (Hallin, 1986, p.170). After the Tet Offensive and Cronkite's statement, coverage of American involvement in the war became predominantly negative. Before Tet, journalists described 62 percent of their stories as victories for the United States, 28 percent as defeats, and 2 percent as inconclusive. After Tet, 44 percent of the battles were deemed victories, 32 percent defeats, and 24 percent inconclusive (Hallin, 1986, p. 161-162). Combat scenes were also more graphic. Films of civilian casualties increased from a pre-Tet average of 0.85 times per week to an average of 3.9 times per week. Films of military casualties also jumped from 2.4 to 6.8 times per week (Hallin, 1986, p.171). The most negative change in coverage was the portrayal of the U.S troops. Before the Tet Offensive, there were four television stories devoted entirely to the positive morale of the troops and zero negative stories. After Tet, two and a half stories mentioned positive morale while the number of negative morale stories increased to fourteen and a half (Hallin, 1986, p.180). Most of these negative references included increasing drug use, racial conflict, and disobedience among the U.S soldiers.

Television coverage of the massacre at My Lai was perhaps the most damaging image for the U.S soldier's reputation. Though initial reports stated that the operation killed 100 enemy soldiers in March 1968, it was revealed a year later that First Lt. William Calley and his taskforce had killed up to 350 South Vietnamese civilians (Hammond, 1998, p.192). The massacre and Lt. Calley's trial became one of the war's leading stories. Moreover, it introduced the subject of American war crimes into television's remaining coverage of the war.

Withdrawal from Vietnam

The intensely negative coverage of the war influenced both politicians and the public. Americans depended on television to see and understand the war, but the death and destruction they saw

appeared as irrational killing when prospects for the war became increasingly negative. Therefore, the majority of Americans withdrew their support for the war after the Tet Offensive. War coverage declined from 90 percent of all newscasts to 61 percent from Richard Nixon's election through February 1969 (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p.7). Though the media had been covering the anti-war movement before 1968, it now overshadowed the war itself. Draft-card burning and demonstrations provided television with fresher conflict, human impact, and moral issues. With the massive loss of public support for the war, politicians initiated withdrawal policies. Television no longer focused on combat, but on the political process. From 1965 to 1969, the percentage of combat stories had been 48 percent; from 1970 until the end of U.S involvement, only 13 percent of news stores involved soldiers in combat (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly, 1984, p.8). Thus, Bonior, Champlin, and Kolly (1984, p.16) best sum up the damage done to the Vietnam veteran's image: In the rush to declare the Vietnam War over through stories on Vietnamization and the Paris Peace Talks, in the rush to judgment without second thought on Tet, in the rush to avoid controversy at any cost, the U.S public was left with one climactic image of their soldiers in Vietnam-losing the Tet Offensive while massacring civilians at My Lai. (Continued in part II)

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