

Who is Affecting Whom?: A Reevaluation of the Impact of Media Coverage During the Vietnam
War

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The Vietnam War was a mess on the domestic front. People were rioting. The government had to completely alter its approach to war. The news media had a greater influence on the country than ever before. All these things intertwined, and each made life harder for the other. Americans have a history of fighting for what they believe in. This country is also known for distrusting those who do not disclose all information. When that passion and that paranoia come together, powerful things happen. The Vietnam War is no exception. The factor that threw a wrench into the domestic view of the United States at war was television. The Vietnam War was the first war covered by television news networks. The United States government was present in Vietnam from 1955 until 1975. The timing of the war paired up with the rise of television in the United States. For the first time, war was not a distant, romanticized concept. People back home could see the injured innocents and the extent of the violence. It is hard to remain numb to the atrocities of war when those atrocities are in your living room. No wonder people were angry, no wonder they did not want the war to continue.

There were no restrictions or censors because television news reporting in the war had no precedent. This backfired for the administration as journalists and photographers travelled to Vietnam to talk to soldiers and capture the violence. World War I and II were much easier to dismiss. The men fighting were an ocean away and the boisterous nationalism kept people from wondering how bad things were. The people could no longer avoid what war looked like. People got angry and started protesting. The news outlets began to report on these protests and demonstrations. There were only three broadcasts as options, so the likelihood of watching news about the war was high. But it was not only the citizens of the United States watching the broadcasts. Government officials were also sitting in their living rooms listening to what Walter Cronkite had to say. They began to speculate about the domestic response, and this speculation

affected many of the decisions. While there is a lot of scholarship on how the television media coverage of the Vietnam War impacted public opinion, the true impact of the press was on the government and its decisions.¹

I

Historiographical Context

The subject of media coverage of the Vietnam War has been a studied subject for decades. Scholars have debated over whether the press lost the war for the United States. There is research on the impact of news on public opinion and policy makers. Scholars have studied celebrity reactions and the words of military strategists.² William M. Hammond is one of the leading voices on the news media and the Vietnam War. His book is well regarded by the community and argues that the American press was the institution that lost the Vietnam War.³ Within the research where the press and news media are blamed for the loss, there is always a strong connection made with the antiwar movement. It is a natural domino effect. The television news networks showed what was happening on the lines in Vietnam. The people saw the footage and were appalled. Without support from the public, the probability of winning the war plummeted. To add to the conversation on this topic, my research has indicated that the press caused paranoia within the administration. It was this paranoia that caused decisions to be second guessed. The press had a greater impact on the government of the United States than the antiwar movement.

¹ When discussing the news media and press, I will be specifically referring to television news media and press throughout the paper.

² William Hoynes, review of *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*, by Melvin Small, *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1996): 121.

³ Melvin Small, review of *Reporting Vietnam*, by William M. Hammond, *American Historical Review* 150, no. 5 (2000): 1774.

The Media and the Public

In the second half of the 20th century, television was all the rage. Any information that was needed about the world outside came promptly through the television set in the living room. The Vietnam War was not any different. The average Americans got most of their information on the war from news networks on television.⁴ This was not the case with earlier wars. When the information on war was only available through print, it was much easier to dissociate from the atrocities. When the deaths are a number on a page, it is easier to accept the information and brush it to the side. Even during the second World War, the government chose to censor radio broadcasts to keep private information from falling into the wrong hands. Because of this, the United States could control what the public knew about the war.⁵ The actual images and videos were not so accessible through print or radio. War was now in the living rooms of the United States. “Because it is a visual medium, television shows the raw horror of war in a way print cannot”.⁶ Because there was no censorship on the media, the press showed images that made the violence of war a reality to those who could not have imagined it before. ABC News Vice President James Hagerly spoke of how this new medium affected the public. He believed the coverage done was “exposing the false glory of war” and catalyzed a realization by the people that this treatment and violence should not be brushed to the side.⁷ It is not the citizens’ fault for having a television that showed the news. The coverage of the war itself was very abrasive and

⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (1982): 158.

⁵ Michael S. Sweeney, “Squarely in the Lap of the Director of Censorship: The Origins and Scope of World War II Censorship.” In *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 7.

⁶ Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 109.

⁷ Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 147.

bold. There was no sugar coating what was happening in Vietnam. The press showed the physical impact of the administration's decisions. This fed into the paranoia in Washington.

The power of journalism was on full display during the Vietnam War. "The Western press appears either unaware of the direct connection between cause and effect, or strangely reluctant to proclaim that the pen and the camera proved decisively mightier than the bayonet and ultra-modern weapon."⁸ With the news media being the only source of information, the influence on the public was inevitable. On top of being bombarded with television news constantly, there were only three networks to watch. The choices were ABC, NBC, or CBS. There were only so many opinions to hear and use to develop one's own personal opinion. There has been a copious amount of research done on the relationship between the news media and the antiwar movement. The news media merely reflected public opinion as opposed to `shaping it. The public was going to have their opinions no matter what, and the news simply reflected this.⁹ This concept is very similar from a political perspective as well. Many controversies were popping up among the people and among the government. The television news media was not creating these controversies out of thin air, but it was reporting them.¹⁰ The media and the public could not help but interact. The public was constantly seeing the images and stories that the news media presented. The news media was confronted with a strong domestic response to the war. While the news introduced the public to the atrocities of war, it was not the sole catalyst behind the antiwar movement.

⁸ Robert Elegant, "Media Coverage Was a Significant Cause of the U.S. Defeat in Vietnam," in *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998), 241.

⁹ Mitchell K. Hall, "The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no.5 (2004): 15.

¹⁰ 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): 565.

Atrocities of War

As men were fighting for their lives and innocent people were in danger, the media was there to capture it. What reporters captured was one-dimensional and rarely came with a backstory. The more devastation and suffering they showed, the better.¹¹ Reporters could not always depend on the intensity of the coverage. There was a shift that led to an increase of atrocities shown. “Only about 22% of all film reports from Southeast Asia in the period before the Tet offensive showed actual combat.”¹² Not only did the number of reports covering combat grow, but the civilian casualties coverage also grew. There is nothing that made war more human than showing innocent people living in terror. These atrocities flowed into living rooms across the United States as the number of times film of civilian casualties show in sample broadcasts significantly increased from 1971 to 1972.¹³ News coverage made the war more personal than before. “One thing that made the pre-Tet ‘living-room war’ seem so pale in comparison to other accounts was the fact that the people killed almost never had names.”¹⁴ Now there was film showing faces and giving explicit details of the horrors happening overseas. This type of coverage may seem too intense or insensitive. But for the soldiers who were fighting the battles, for the journalists who were dodging bullets on the lines, for the generals who were making the tough calls, this coverage did not show how bad things were. Some writers even argued that “the media showed and said too little of the dark sides of the war.”¹⁵ Without being able to control what the public was seeing, the government watched as the press showed every terrible act.

¹¹ Huebner, *American Press Coverage*, 150.

¹² Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 129.

¹³ *Ibid*, 177.

¹⁴ Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 175-176.

¹⁵ Andrew J. Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965-68,” *Journalism History* 31, no. 3 (2005): 150.

The entire landscape of media coverage of the Vietnam War changed with the Tet Offensive. Typically, during the Vietnam War, a cease-fire would be called during Tet, a Vietnamese celebration. In 1968, the Communists ignored the cease-fire and attacked many South Vietnamese towns.¹⁶ The Allies were very confused by the actions of the Tet Offensive. The United States specifically underestimated the possibility of an offensive of this size. The military was unprepared for the attacks.¹⁷ Eddie Adams was a photographer covering the war. He was on a road in Saigon when he captured an event that changed how everyone in the United States viewed the war. His photograph which has now become famous is of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner. “‘The shooting occurred so quickly that I got the picture through reaction,’ Adams said. ‘As Loan’s hand holding the pistol came up, so did my camera.’” Adams took the photo right as the bullet entered the prisoner’s skull.¹⁸ This image is difficult to look at and is hard to ignore. Once people in the United States saw this picture, everything changed. In a majority of the scholarship on the media and the Vietnam War, the vocabulary of ‘pre-Tet’ and ‘post-Tet’ is often used. Many images from the Tet Offensive forced people to face the atrocities of the war. May 1968 was the bloodiest month of the war for the United States military.¹⁹ The people of the United States were now questioning the purpose behind the government’s decisions. It was only a matter of time before those questions reached the ears of the administration.

Executions were not the only things caught on film. The various news networks had a plethora of material to use that showed how violent things were in Vietnam. Seeing these images made people think about the reality of war. Is this actually what happens? Are these heinous acts

¹⁶ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 184.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁸ Shana Alexander, “What is the Truth of the Picture? ,” *Life*, March 1, 1968, 18.

¹⁹ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, 67.

common? The violence kept flooding onto their screens. “AP reporter Malcolm Browne photographed a Buddhist monk as the man splashed himself with gasoline and set himself ablaze to protest Diem’s policies.”²⁰ It is difficult to ignore the passion so prevalent when reviewing the images that news networks produced. Journalists and photographers saw all the heartbreaking acts firsthand. When these journalists returned and talked about what they saw, the mood was humbling. A reporter saw an old woman digging through rubble for bones after surviving the building collapse herself.²¹ Some of the images and videos used seem like insensitive invasions of privacy. In some cases, journalists were taking advantage of innocent people’s humanity and heartache. There were instances where some even had to step in when the fight for a photograph crossed lines. “I remember trying to smash the camera of a TV team who tried to film the bodies at Calamette hospital when they came in.”²² The picture was not always worth it. The atrocities affected the people at home, but the atrocities were also people’s lives. Seeing a picture of an execution deromanticizes the idea of war and brings its realities to heart.

Journalists on the Lines

The government reacted to the lack of control over the media. There were many times when President Richard Nixon was unhappy with the press. He often blamed the complexities of his decisions on the press.²³ Nixon’s general paranoia was on full display in his interactions with the news media. While there was a plethora of statements that he made, Nixon did not shy away from action. During the war “Nixon ordered a news blackout, and the five o’clock follies became

²⁰ William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 10.

²¹ Fawcett, Denby, Ann Bryan Mariano, Kate Webb, Anne Morrissy Merick, Jurate Kazickas, Edith Lederer, Tad Bartimus, Tracy Wood, and Laura Palmer. *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 2002), 43.

²² Webb, *War Torn*, 71.

²³ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, ix.

a total joke, with enraged journalists, including myself, confronting the U.S. military spokesmen whose orders were to say nothing.”²⁴ When in Vietnam, reporters received a lot of information from daily briefings with the Army. These briefings were called ‘five o’clock follies.’²⁵ Briefings were rarely taken seriously as information was scarce and vague. Information was often withheld from journalists so their only resources were what they could discover. Because of the lack of official information, some of the reports were misinformed. Despite this, their voices were still loud and heard by much of the public. After the Tet Offensive, the television news everyone was watching took a more critical view.²⁶ News networks gave more attention to the Vietnam War as voices like Walter Cronkite became more prevalent. Cronkite left such an impact on television coverage that he has become synonymous with television coverage of the war.²⁷ Having one main voice to trust bonded people in multiple ways. The people heard what Walter Cronkite wanted them to hear. There was now a commonality amongst Americans as they all had the same source. Often times the people trusted Cronkite more than the government and its decisions.

When reading and watching media reports on the Vietnam War, it is easy to reduce a journalist to only their byline. Since these writers were following troops and seeing battles firsthand, they experienced a lot of trauma. Soldiers guided reporters through the intense experiences of war. Because reporters were going on mental and emotional journeys, the readers would find themselves experiencing the same things through reporters’ eyes. The exposure of a journalist to war was more intense than people realize.²⁸ There was a connection between

²⁴ Lederer, *War Torn*, 167.

²⁵ Brian S. Brooks, “Remembering Vietnam and the ‘Five O’clock Follies,’” *Gateway Journalism Review* 48, no. 354 (2019): 7.

²⁶ Rodger Streitmatter, *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 191.

²⁷ Streitmatter, *Mightier than the Sword*, 197.

²⁸ Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 190.

soldiers and reporters that the government officials in Washington D.C. did not have. As the reporters felt the emotions of the soldiers, there was a shift. The new and fresh journalists working in Vietnam had a different attitude than the journalists before them. These men and women were more connected to the feelings and hopes of the young people in the United States who were unhappy with what was happening.²⁹ A main reason why the American news media was able to reflect the opinions of the public was that they were more in tune with those opinions. There was a consensus that these journalists supported the soldiers that were putting their lives on the line. This support did not always extend to those making the decisions.³⁰ The correlation between media coverage and the public's reaction is not as straightforward as it seems. There were journalists and news networks who criticized the war even before Cronkite became a trusted voice in the United States.³¹ Day in and day out there were writers listening to what the soldiers were experiencing and listening to the grievances of the American public. This listening led to a reflection on the hardships that impacted so many people. It was the firsthand experiences of the soldiers shared to the world that grabbed at people's hearts. How do you justify the actions of war when the people are seeing the reality of the hardships? The government was not connected to the pulse of its constituents.

Antiwar Movement

In American history, the Vietnam War is rarely discussed without the antiwar movement entering the conversation. While these atrocities and horrors were being broadcasted, the public

²⁹ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 222.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

³¹ Joseph W. Campbell, "Debunking the Cronkite Moment." In *Getting it Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 112.

found its voice and began to fight back and protest. The people involved in the antiwar movement were passionate and believed strongly in their cause. “Activists tended to be middle class and well educated, and college students made up a significant portion of the crowds.”³² With the Kent State and Jackson State killings in May of 1970, the prevalence of college students in this fight cannot be ignored. They wanted to fight, they wanted to be heard. Students were unhappy with how the government made decisions and thus used their democratic freedoms. Some of these students even created societies and wrote pamphlets and articles. One of their goals was to show the people in Vietnam that there were young people in the United States that were also fighting against the government.³³ Without the romanticization of war to blind them, young people were more aware of the atrocities of war. Their disgust with the government’s decisions was not solely based on the press.

In order to be heard, activists had to play the media game. All around them there was evidence of television changing their society. These activists were intelligent and realized that to step it up they needed to use the medium of television.³⁴ Many protests were obnoxious and out of hand. But a calm and peaceful protest would not have gotten anyone’s attention. The government had the advantage of being able to access the media whenever it wanted. Students and activists did not have this same privilege. They could not afford broadcast time so they needed their protests to be worthy of making it onto the news.³⁵ Once the protests were on the news, they had the public’s attention. “Public awareness of the movement came primarily through the media’s coverage of mass demonstrations.”³⁶ Some of this coverage was negative

³² Hall, *Antiwar Movement*, 14.

³³ Students for a Democratic Society, “The Antiwar Movement Should Seek Radical Change in America,” in *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998), 195.

³⁴ Streitmatter, *Mightier than the Sword*, 200.

³⁵ Mandelbaum, *Television War*, 164.

³⁶ Hall, *Antiwar Movement*, 14.

and some was positive. But either way, any press was good press to further the antiwar movement. Television had many different purposes during the Vietnam era. It exacerbated divisions within the government, impacted the morale of American troops, and welcomed the antiwar movement into the mainstream.³⁷ In doing this, the movement was able to grow. More people heard the arguments made and joined the push to let the government have a piece of their mind.

If these protests had an element of chaos, how did they have an impact? When people would look on their screens and see crowds of people questioning America's direction and values, they were likely to buy into the frustration. There were a lot of unknowns on the domestic side of the Vietnam War, and many Americans felt like they were left in the dark. It was not very difficult to doubt the government's steps.³⁸ It seemed like every decision that was made in Washington irked the activists. The military draft sparked a greater interest in antiwar activity.³⁹ The government was not very happy with the intensity of the antiwar movement. Most of these protests were about the specific choices of troop movement within Vietnam. The government's biggest critics were out in the streets with signs and megaphones. It was difficult for the president to make decisions when there were groups of people fighting against what he was doing. In one of Nixon's attempts to diminish the effects of the antiwar movement, he tried to appeal to the "Great Silent Majority." These were Americans who did not protest or fight against the antiwar movement but agreed with the government.⁴⁰ This effort was not as successful as Nixon had hoped. His frustration with the media and the antiwar movement only increased as he felt like those institutions were hindering his ability to be effective as a war

³⁷ Hallin, Uncensored War, 163.

³⁸ Hall, Antiwar Movement, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

⁴⁰ Pach, Worst Enemy, 557.

president. The television news media covered these protests and focused on the activists with vendettas against the government. Without clear support from the public, the government was not as confident in its decisions.

The Media vs the Government

“In every American war . . . there has been recurring tension between military and political authorities, worried about public opinion as a resource of war, and reporters wishing to tell ‘what really happened’ or to expose what they saw as abuse or stupidity of one sort or another”.⁴¹ The Vietnam War was no different. The media and the government were at odds with each other for most of the war. Their agendas were far from parallel and neither side handled their relations with the other side well. After the Tet Offensive, the American media turned sour against U.S. policy.⁴² Since the media was the main source of information for most people in the United States, the government then assumed that the public would also turn sour against any policy decisions that were made. Paranoia caused political divisions and made it treacherous for the United States to move forward in the war.⁴³ Paranoia was a powerful factor in government decisions. Officials constantly needed to know what was going on. Both Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon watched the news networks and even the Pentagon recorded television coverage to know when to put their foot down.⁴⁴ In both administrations, the government was paying attention to what the public was hearing. The press was constantly in the back of decision makers’ minds.

⁴¹ Hallin, Uncensored War, 132.

⁴² Hall, Antiwar Movement, 15.

⁴³ Hallin, Uncensored War, 213.

⁴⁴ Huebner, American Press Coverage, 154.

When it comes to paranoia within the government, there is no better poster child than Richard Nixon. His tension with the media was unprecedented. Even after his presidency, his time in office is remembered as one where the tension between the media and the administration was off the charts.⁴⁵ His antagonism toward the media existed long before he became the President. Nixon came to power in a time when television media was on the rise. Some of his loss to John F. Kennedy can be attributed to television, so it is no surprise that Nixon held the belief that television shaped public opinion more than any print medium did.⁴⁶ He continued to butt heads with the media throughout his presidency. The lack of control over the media made him nervous. Nixon had to tread lightly as to not set off a bigger wave of the antiwar movement. This fight between the two institutions continued back and forth. The government administration would not provide all the information. The press would write on what they could. The government became annoyed that their reports were influencing the public. It was a vicious cycle. No matter what happened, Nixon always seemed to blame the press. He often accused journalists of reporting on the problems happening in Vietnam as opposed to the successes.⁴⁷ Nixon's frustration with the press caused him to believe that the press was having more of an effect on the general public than the government was.

As stated previously, Nixon's relationship with the media was very negative. He often blamed the press for the hardships he was facing in leading the United States in the war. Moreover, Nixon believed that "if its previous wars had been televised, the United States would not have persevered in fighting them."⁴⁸ The news media was a constant thorn in Nixon's side. As the first televised war, there was no precedent for dealing with television coverage. Once he

⁴⁵ Hallin, Uncensored War, 190.

⁴⁶ Pach, Worst Enemy, 556.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 555.

⁴⁸ Mandelbaum, Television War, 157.

realized he could not keep the networks from reporting stories, Nixon tried a different approach. He tried to make the networks focus on the more positive things that were happening. This would include the improved abilities of the South Vietnamese troops or the return of United States troops.⁴⁹ Maybe if the news networks would report on Nixon's successes, the public would show more favor towards his decisions. Nixon's entire life was consumed by this war and the policies surrounding it. This war was important to him so of course he was going to feel defensive when his choices were judged. Nixon's commitment to the war was so strong that his justifications for his actions were often abrasive and bold.⁵⁰ There was no timidity in Nixon's actions and that includes his response to the media and antiwar movement around him.

During the Vietnam era, the press had more of an influence on the shaping of policy in the United States than ever before. This level of influence has not reoccurred since.⁵¹ The connections the administration made were not unfounded. The press was reporting on atrocities that happened in Vietnam. These images and stories were appalling and readily available to most citizens within the United States. Concurrently, the antiwar movement was picking up members and activists who fought boldly against the decisions being made by the United States. This made the government nervous. Television affected the government's position on policymaking because the people making those policies had a fear that television was affecting public opinion.⁵² At the same time, the media had a more critical eye when reporting on the administration. Whenever decisions would backfire, the press was there to remind the administration that it had made a bad choice. The press was divided over the war. The

⁴⁹ Pach, *Worst Enemy*, 561.

⁵⁰ Sam Brown, "The Antiwar Movement Should Seek to Influence Mainstream America," in *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998), 199.

⁵¹ Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 18.

⁵² Michael C. Mitchell, "Television and the Vietnam War," *Naval War College Review* 37, no. 3 (1984): 48.

government was divided over the war. The people were divided over the war. All of these divisions contributed to a skeptical stance toward policymaking.⁵³ While it was not uncommon for the media and the administration to be at odds when the nation was at war, the Vietnam era took this tension to another level. Since the two sides were constantly against each other, the attacks on the administration by the press made the policymakers paranoid in their decision making.

Domestic Reactions

If the government was so concerned about the public's reaction to the press, it may have been concerned about the wrong thing. A lot of the concern on U.S. policy came from a lack of disclosure. The debate over how much of the government's private information has existed for a long time. During the Vietnam War, there was a lot that was hidden, as the Pentagon Papers would reveal later.⁵⁴ The Pentagon Papers were a series of highly classified government documents. This history of the war was commissioned by the Secretary of Defense at the time, Robert McNamara.⁵⁵ These documents were accessible by Daniel Ellsberg, a government employee. After struggling with the decision to risk his life for the betterment of his country, Ellsberg released the documents which were published by the *New York Times* on June 13, 1971. He believed that if Congress was able to get their hands on the Pentagon Papers, it might prevent Nixon from making the wrong decisions.⁵⁶ After the war, the publication of the Pentagon Papers confirmed the doubts held by the public and damaged the government's credibility even more.⁵⁷

⁵³ Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 162.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵⁵ Robert Ellsberg, "My Father, the Pentagon Papers and Me," *American Magazine*, June 2021, 59.

⁵⁶ Ellsberg, *Pentagon Papers*, 59.

⁵⁷ Hall, *Antiwar Movement*, 16.

The secrecy of the government offended many people in the United States. Gallup polls were released left and right to gauge the public's opinion. One poll found that 2/3 of the American people believed that there was information about the war that the public should know, but which the president withheld.⁵⁸ The government's credibility was rarely stable in the public's eyes. During the war the skepticism increased with every reveal by the press. Lack of confidence was not only found in the entire government and its decisions, but also, "public opinion polls indicated a growing lack of confidence in the president's handling of the war."⁵⁹ War is difficult to handle well. However, since the public was seeing images of villages being destroyed and people they knew were fighting and not returning home, it more than likely did not feel like the war was being handled well. The actions taken by the press directly increased skepticism on the home front. No matter what step the government took, eyebrows were raised.

Government paranoia led to an overestimate of the press' impact. The press and television media encouraged the public to face the realities of war. As the realities were difficult to ignore, the activists began to rise up. The best way to spread their efforts and make their voices heard was to mobilize that public opinion and organize their movement. The press was central to this mobilization and organization as the activists had to cater towards what the press would cover. If they wanted their efforts to be shown on television, they had to be bold.⁶⁰ The press encouraging mobilization of public opinion does not automatically imply that the result was negative. Sometimes the demonstrations that occurred led to an increase in positive opinions of how Nixon was handling the war.⁶¹ No matter what evidence is found, there will always be

⁵⁸ Pach, *Worst Enemy*, 562.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁰ Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 127.

⁶¹ E.M. Schreiber, "Anti-war demonstrations and American public opinion on the war in Vietnam," *British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1976): 226.

people on both sides. The public's opinion of the government's decisions will never be black and white. War will never be black and white. In the end, it was a passionate group of middle class college students who shouted loud enough to make the president nervous. "Students could make it clear to Richard Nixon that *they* will write his history."⁶² With every shout and declaration, the administration became more aware of the animosity against it. No matter what step the United States government took, the press was there to announce to the country what happened.

Conclusion

This war was gruesome. The reports by news networks arrived in living rooms across the United States and brought a sense of humanity back into the idea of war. As the public realized what the war consisted of, there were many people who took the opportunity to respond. Once the responses began, they grew into the antiwar movement. The press affected the movement by shaping the methods they chose as opposed to the messages they preached. The administration panicked as the domestic reaction to the war was more negative and intense than what they had experienced before. The government, especially Richard Nixon, blamed the press for the reaction of the activists. More and more people were complaining about policymakers' decisions and it kept Nixon and his administration in a hot seat. Because of this, the press was a source of fear for the government. When the press revealed information that the administration had not disclosed, the people felt cheated. This caused a lot of animosity between the media and the U.S. government. It may seem like the press had an astronomical effect on the antiwar movement during the Vietnam era. But when the evidence is shown and the distractions are removed, the

⁶² Brown, Mainstream America, 202.

press impacted the United States government by causing paranoia more than the press impacted the activists fighting against the government.

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