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Introduction

Defeat in Vietnam has left the United States deeply divided, and no issue has been more bitterly divisive than the role of the media. At one level, however, there has been remarkable consensus since the end of the war about precisely this issue. In the words of Richard Nixon,

> The Vietnam War was complicated by factors that had never before occured in America's conduct of a war. . . . [T]he American news media had come to dominate domestic opinion about its purpose and conduct. . . . In each night's TV news and each morning's paper the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed. Eventually this contributed to the impression that we were fighting in military and moral quicksand, rather than toward an important and worthwile objective. More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war. Whatever the intention behind such relentless and literal reporting of the war, the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home.[1]

And James Reston, writing on the day Communist forces completed their truimphant final drive on Saigon, concluded, "Maybe the historians will agree that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of the war to the people, before the Congress or the courts, and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam."[2]

Liberals and conservatives disagree about who was being "more honest with the American people" (as Reston put it in the same column) and about the implications of conflict between the media and government—whether it means more vigorous democracy or a decline of "unity and strength of purpose." But it has come to be widely accepted across the political spectrum that the relation between the media and the government during Vietnam was in fact one of conflict: the media contradicted the more positive view of the war officials sought to project, and for better or for worse it was the journalists' view that prevailed

with the public, whose disenchantment forced an end to American involvement. Often this view is coupled with its corollary, that television has decisively changed the political dynamics of war so that no "televised war" can long retain political support. These views are shared not only in the United States but abroad as well; it was the example of Vietnam, for instance, that motivated the British government to impose tight controls on news coverage of the Falklands crisis.[3] Back at home, the Reagan administration, with the example of Vietnam once again in mind, excluded the media from the opening phase of the invasion of Grenada.[4]

And the issue of the role of the media in modern American politics goes beyond Vietnam. Vietnam coincided with a number of other dramatic political events in which the role of the media was clearly central. First was the civil rights movement, played out largely on a media stage,[5] then the urban conflicts of the late 1960s, the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the rise of a host of new political movements, and finally Watergate. And the apparently growing prominence of the media coincided with what seemed to be a crisis in political institutions: public confidence in government declined dramatically during these years, public attachment to both political parties weakened, and the political system began a twenty-year period during which not a single president would serve two full terms of office.[6] These developments, along with Vietnam, have provoked a broader controversy about the relation of the media to the institutions of American government.

One of the opening shots in this controversy came in a 1975 study commissioned by the Trilateral Commission on the subject of the "governability" of democracies. The section on the United States, written by Samuel Huntington, argued that the American political system of the 1960s and 1970s suffered from an imbalance between its governing institutions—chiefly the presidency—and its oppositional institutions. Central among these oppositional institutions, which he saw as gaining enormously in power during the Vietnam era, Huntington named the media, with special emphasis on television. Huntington wrote:

> The most notable new source of national power in 1970, as compared to 1950, was the national media. . . . There is . . . considerable evidence to suggest that the development of television journalism contributed to the undermining of governmental authority. The advent of the half-hour nightly news broadcast in 1963 led to greatly increased popular dependence on television as a source of news. At the same time, the themes which were stressed, the focus on controversy and violence, and, conceivably, the values and outlook of the journalists, tended to arouse unfavorable attitudes toward established institutions and to promote a decline of confidence in government. . . . In the 1960s, the network organizations, as

> one analyst put it, became "a highly creditable, never-tiring political opposition, a maverick third party which never need face the sobering experience of governing."[7]

Huntington later argued that "crises" like those of the 1960s and 1970s resulted from a hostility to power and authority deeply entrenched in American political culture and expressed particularly strongly by the media.[8] Since the mid-1970s a large body of conservative commentary has expressed this view of the media's role in modern American politics in one form or another.[9]

The journalists and their mostly liberal defenders naturally reject the notion that the media are to blame for any breakdown in the "governability" of American society. "What television did in the sixties," David Brinkley said in a documentary at the end of that decade, "was to show the American people to the American people. . . . It did show them people places and things they had not seen before. Some they liked and some they didn't. It wasn't that television produced or created any of it."[10] This is the "mirror" or "messenger" analogy, which has come to dominate the self-conception of American journalism in the twentieth century, as journalists have come to see themselves as neutral professionals standing above the political fray.

Yet journalists do not like to think—and probably are also too smart to think—of their own political role as purely passive. And simultaneously with the mirror analogy they hold another, older and more activist conception of the role of the "fourth estate": they see themselves as "adversaries" of government and political power, not in the sense of a "maverick third party" contending for a share of power or pursuing policies of its own, but as champions of truth and openness, checking the tendency of the powerful to conceal and dissemble. To quote Reston once again, "The watchdog role has always been there. All you have to do is go back and read Thomas Paine at the beginning of the Republic. This country had a press before we had a government. . . . In general the feeling of reporters is that people with power defend their power, by lies if necessary, and therefore you've got to question them."[11] This is the stuff of which the great tales of journalistic heroism are made. Here is how David Halberstam portrays his days reporting Vietnam for the *New York Times*:

> [T]he White House . . . was putting its word against a handful of reporters in Saigon. In the beginning it looked like an absurd mismatch. . . . It might have been different in other capitals where ambassadors and generals still had a certain cachet, but in Saigon the journalists very quickly came to the conclusion that the top people in the embassy were either fools or liars or both. . . . The reporters were young. . . . [T]hey came

> to the story remarkably clean, carrying no excess psychological or political baggage. What obsessed them was *the story*.[12]

Both the messenger and the watchdog analogies have this in common with the conservative view of an oppositional media: they portray the media as an autonomous institution standing *apart* from the institutions of state power. On the surface Vietnam seems the perfect illustration of the separation between media and state in modern American politics. There was in fact persistent conflict and ill feeling between the media and government over Vietnam. The major episodes are well known: in 1962 and 1963 the Kennedy administration made an effort to discredit that young Saigon press corps, which was often at odds with the generals and ambassadors running the war. In 1965, as American troops were committed to what was in effect the first televised war (there had been TV cameras in Korea, but TV news was in its infancy then), CBS enraged Lyndon Johnson by showing American marines setting fire to the thatched huts of the village of Cam Ne with Zippo lighters. In 1968, when the generals were claiming a major victory in the Tet offensive, Walter Cronkite returned from his own inspection of the war to conclude that it had become a "bloody stalemate." In 1971 a major constitutional confrontation erupted when first the *New York Times* and then a series of other papers defied the government to publish the classified history of the war known as the *Pentagon Papers*.

The media had extraordinary freedom to report the war in Vietnam without direct government control: it was the first war in which reporters were routinely accredited to accompany military forces yet not subject to censorship, and it was a war in which the journalists clearly did not think of themselves simply as "soldiers of the typewriter" whose mission was to serve the war effort. This was manifested in dramatic ways, as in the reporting of events like the burning of Cam Ne that would never have made the news in earlier wars. And it was manifested in more subtle but pervasive ways. For example, students asked to compare typical news reporting from Vietnam and World War II often observe that the reporters in Vietnam seem, as one put it, like they "aren't really sure what they're talking about." The impression arises from the fact that World War II stories were typically written without sourcing, as though the journalist could testify to it all personally—though usually with an oblique reference deep in the story to the military communiqué from which the information had actually come. A Vietnam story, by contrast, was typically peppered with attributions, often to unnamed sources not all of whom agreed with one another. This leaves an impression of much greater distance between the reporter and the "war effort,"

and seems to have the psychological effect of distancing the reader as well. It reflects the fact that reporters treated this war much more as a political issue, subject to the standards of "objective reporting," than previous American wars. Every administration of the Vietnam era had periodic crises in its ability to "manage" this more independent or adversarial news media, and over the years the volume of "negative" coverage increased so dramatically that there seems little doubt that news coverage did indeed contribute to the public war-weariness that eventually made Vietnam a political albatross and forced first Johnson and then Nixon to abandon the effort to win a military victory.

But this is only part of the story. The relation of the modern American news media to political authority is highly ambivalent. In one sense, American journalism has clearly moved toward what one sociologist calls "the ideal type of a differentiated . . . news media structurally free from inhibiting economic, political, solidary and cultural entanglements."[13] The newspaper of the early nineteenth century was directly a political institution, usually backed financially by a party or politician. That of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often a personal fiefdom in which the political connections and ambitions of the "press baron" routinely intruded into the news (think of *Citizen Kane* or *The Front Page*). The news organization of the late twentieth century is a corporate bureaucracy in which news operations are theoretically run by professional journalists without interference from nonjournalists, and submission to political pressures from the outside (though it happens from time to time) is considered a blot on the organization's honor.

Journalism has become "professionalized"; an ethic of political independence has come to dominate the journalist's self-image, and that ethic does, as conservatives have observed, contain a strong streak of hostility toward the holders of political power. This hostility arises in part from the nature of journalism as an occupation. Officials, in their efforts to control political appearances, necessarily challenge the autonomy of the media, and journalists naturally resist. As part of the professional socialization process, moreover, the journalist must renounce precisely the goal of political power which the politician pursues. And consistent with Huntington, the journalists' hostility to power probably also has deep roots in American political culture. The notion of journalistic professionalism arose during the Progressive era, with close ties to the Progressive movement. And one characteristic of Progressivism was a strong individualistic suspicion of the wielders of power in the great organizations, including "big government," that were coming to dominate American society.

But opposites interpenetrate, as Hegel showed us, and things that at one moment seem antagonistic at the next seem united in symbiotic harmony. Simultaneous with the rupturing of the media's old partisan ties and the development of professional autonomy, another major change in journalism was taking place. The relation between the media and political authority was becoming "rationalized" in the Weberian sense: it was becoming depersonalized and depoliticized, in the partisan sense of "political," and the media were becoming integrated into the process of government. A sort of historical trade-off took place: journalists gave up the right to speak with a political voice of their own, and in turn they were granted a regular right of access to the inner councils of government, a right they had never enjoyed in the era of partisan journalism. The press was recognized as a sort of "fourth branch of government," a part of the informal constitution of the political system; and it in turn accepted certain standards of "responsible" behavior. These standards involved not merely renouncing the right to make partisan criticisms of political authority, but also granting to political authorities certain positive rights of access to the news and accepting for the most part the language, agenda, and perspectives of the political "establishment." This ethic of "responsibility" became particularly powerful in foreign affairs reporting, as World War II confronted the United States with its first great foreign threat since the early-nineteenth century, and the nation emerged from that conflict as the hegemonic power in a nuclear world.

Structurally the American news media are both highly autonomous from direct political control and, through the routines of the news-gathering process, deeply intertwined in the actual operation of government. Culturally and ideologically, they combine the Progressive suspicion of power with a respect for order, institutions, and authority exercised within those institutions that is equally a part of twentieth-century American liberalism.[14] And the individualist suspicion of power has often been displaced in the case of foreign affairs by the nationalism of the Cold War.

The journalists who went to Southeast Asia in the early 1960s were in fact intensely committed to reporting "the story," despite the generals and ambassadors who were telling them to "get on the team." And this did matter: in 1963, when American policy in Vietnam began to fall apart, the media began to send back an image that conflicted sharply with the picture of progress officials were trying to paint. It would happen again many times before the war was over. But those reporters also went to Southeast Asia schooled in a set of journalistic practices which, among other things, ensured that the news would re-

flect, if not always the views of those at the very top of the American political hierarchy, at least the perspectives of American officialdom generally. And as for "psychological and political baggage," the reporters also went to Vietnam deeply committed to the "national security" consensus that had dominated American politics since the onset of the Cold War, and acted as "responsible" advocates of that consensus.

In the early years of the Vietnam war, particularly before the Tet offensive and the subsequent shift in American policy from escalation to deescalation, most news coverage was highly supportive of American intervention in Vietnam, and despite occasional crises, Kennedy and Johnson were usually able to "manage" the news very effectively. Americans have been preoccupied since the end of the war with the question of "why we lost," and this has focused the nation's historical memory on the political divisions, including those between the media and the administration, which reached their peak between 1968 and 1972. But if one asks instead how the United States got *into* Vietnam, then attention must be paid to the enormous strength of the Cold War consensus in the early 1960s, shared by journalists and policymakers alike, and to the great power of the administration to control the agenda and the framing of foreign affairs reporting.

Eventually Vietnam, along with other events of the period, did push the media in the direction of greater separation from the state. The peculiar circumstances of that war, for one thing, removed an important remnant of direct government control over the media: military censorship in wartime. Because Vietnam was a limited war in which U.S. forces were formally "guests" of the South Vietnamese government, censorship was politically impractical; the reasons for this will be explored in greater detail below. So for the first time in the twentieth century the media were able to cover a war with nearly the freedom they have covering political news in the United States. Probably more important, as the war ground on (the main difference between Vietnam and Grenada or the Falklands is that the latter two were short and relatively costless), and as political divisions increased in the United States, journalists shifted along the continuum from a more cooperative or deferential to a more "adversarial" stance toward officials and their policies. Today journalists often portray the Vietnam/Watergate era as a time when the media "came of age," by which they mean both that the media became more autonomous in relation to government and the professional journalist more autonomous within the news organization. The decision to print the *Pentagon Papers* is often taken as the symbol of this change:

> It was, they all thought later . . . the first moment of the [*Washington*] *Post* as a big-time newspaper, a paper able to stand on its own and make its own decisions. . . . [N]ever during Watergate did [editor] Ben Bradlee have to call [publisher] Katherine Graham about whether or not they should print a particular story. If you had it, you went with it. It was the key moment for the paper, the coming of age.[15]

The change was real, important, and probably lasting. But it also needs to be kept in perspective. For all the drama of events like Cronkite's Tet broadcast and the battle over the *Pentagon Papers*, the basic structure of relations between the media and government were not radically different in later years of Vietnam. Early in the war, for example, the journalists relied primarily on two kinds of sources: government officials, particularly in the executive branch, and American soldiers in the field—the latter being particularly important in the case of television. They continued to rely on these same sources throughout the war; but later on these sources became much more divided, and many more of them were critical or unenthusiastic about American policy. The news "reflected" these divisions, to use the mirror analogy. But that wasn't all; the divisions also triggered a different mode of reporting.

The "profession" of journalism has not one but many different sets of standards and procedures, each applied in different kinds of political situations. It is in these varying models of journalism that the ambivalent relation between the media and political authority finds its practical resolution. In situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as "responsible" members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as a whole. In situations of political conflict, they become more detached or even adversarial, though they normally will stay well within the bounds of the debate going on within the political "establishment," and will continue to grant a privileged hearing particularly to senior officials of the executive branch. The normal routines of the "fourth branch of government"[16] produced a dramatic change in Vietnam coverage over the years, toward more critical or "negative" reporting. But they also limited that change. The Nixon administration retained a good deal of power to "manage" the news; the journalists continued to be patriots in the sense that they portrayed the Americans as the "good guys" in Vietnam. News coverage in the later years of the war was considerably less positive than in the early years, but not nearly so consistently negative as the conventional wisdom now seems to hold. If news coverage largely accounted—at least as an "intervening

variable"—for the growing public desire to get out of the war, it probably also accounts for the fact that the Nixon administration was able to maintain majority support for its Vietnam policies through four years of war and for the fact that the public came to see the war as a "mistake" or "tragedy," rather than the crime the more radical opposition believed it to be.

It is of course impossible for any single study to deal comprehensively with the media's coverage of Vietnam. The problem is not simply one of volume, though the output of even a single news organization over the years of American involvement in Vietnam is immense. It is also a problem of diversity. Coverage of Vietnam in a liberal "prestige paper" like the *New York Times* was very different from coverage in a conservative paper like the *Chicago Tribune* or the *San Diego Union*, or a small local paper, which perhaps took advantage of "hometowners" in its reportage of local boys "in action," prepared for the use of such papers by the Defense Department.[17] Or contrast a mass-circulation tabloid like the New York *Daily News*, which combined guts-and-glory war reporting ("Wagon-Train GI's Drive Off Red-men") with villificaton of the "Peaceniks."[18] No doubt coverage appeared very differently on network television than on the local TV or radio news—though virtually nothing of local broadcast journalism has been preserved. The diversity of the media may go a long way toward explaining the pattern of the divisions that eventually emerged, particularly the fact that vocal opposition tended to come from the more affluent and educated parts of the population (in contrast, for example, to the Civil War, with its working-class draft riots). Someone who followed the war in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* got a much more critical view than someone who followed it in the *Daily News* and *Reader's Digest*.

The most logical focus for a study of Vietnam coverage is television, since its coverage has most often been singled out as the factor that made Vietnam politically unique. But access to television's past is limited. No complete record of the network evening news exists until mid-1968, when the Vanderbilt Television News Archive was established. The networks did not systematically preserve tapes of evening news broadcasts. In 1963, CBS began saving some transcripts and "rundown" sheets (listing the day's stories), though this collection is incomplete. Aside from these transcripts, almost all of the history of TV news before 1968 would have been lost if there had not been such a great controversy over the reporting of Vietnam. But in August of 1965, shortly after the CBS report on the burning of Cam Ne, the Defense Department began filming evening news coverage. This material is incomplete in ways that will be specified later, but it contains most Vietnam coverage and,

combined with the CBS transcripts and the Vanderbilt collection, makes possible an analysis of coverage on all three networks from mid-1965.

So this study is divided into two parts. The first is an analysis of *New York Times* coverage from 1961 through mid-1965, based on the reading of all the *Times* coverage during that period (and a look occasionally at other papers). The second deals with a sample of network evening news from August 1965 through the cease-fire in January 1973, and is based in part on a quantitative content analysis of the broadcasts in this sample. Both parts also draw on a set of interviews with journalists (and with a more limited number of officials) involved in the war. Most of these are listed at the beginning of the bibliography, though some preferred not to be identified. The study could of course have dealt with earlier and later phases of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, but the volume of material is so huge for the roughly twelve years it does cover that it seemed best to keep it limited.

The four major chapters are arranged chronologically, but each also deals with a certain set of theoretical issues. Chapters 2 and 3, on *New York Times* coverage during the Kennedy administration and the 1964–65 escalation under Johnson, are concerned with the nature of the constraints that kept the news so tightly within official perspectives during those years. Chapter 3 deals with ideology—specifically the ideology of the Cold War; Chapter 4 with the routines of "objective journalism" and the ways in which those routines make it possible for officials to manage the news. These chapters also explore certain factors that caused news management to fail periodically, setting the scene for what would eventually be called the "credibility gap."

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with television coverage before and after the Tet offensive and the political changes of 1968. Far from showing the war literally, without political mediation, televison was particularly patriotic in its early coverage and then, like other media, changed as the political climate shifted at home and among American soldiers in the field. Chapter 4 is concerned with the special characteristics of television's reporting of the war, the different models of journalism applied in different political situations, and another facet of ideology, less articulate but just as important as the Cold War doctrine of containment—the image of war Americans came to hold during World War II and its Cold War aftermath. Chapter 5 is concerned with the causes and the limits of television's disillusionment and shift toward a more critical stance in the later part of the war.