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Press vs vets: Press costs US the Vietnam War?

By James E. Thomas

The nature of the media coverage of the Vietnam War caused many veterans to suffer unjust treatment at the hands of American citizens upon their return home from war. However, according to some Vietnam vets the press cost the US more than just respect for its soldiers, it may have cost us the war.

“The North Vietnamese did not win that war. The U.S. Press won that war for the North Vietnamese.” said Bill Buice, a veteran of the Vietnam War, WWII, and the Korean War who flew with the 602 Fighter Squadron “Commando”.

“North Vietnam was on the ropes.” said Buice. “The communist movement was absolutely defeated; at some cost. And the Press turned that cost, and ignoring the losses of the communists, turned that cost in to a loss.” he recalled while reflecting on the Tet Offensive and how the media had portrayed it.

In 1968, approximately 70,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces began the Tet Offensive, which was a series of coordinated strikes against over 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam. Though the American forces were originally caught by surprise with the suddenness of the attack and lost several cities to enemy forces, U.S. troops managed to regroup and inflict heavy casualties upon enemy troops before beating them back.

North Vietnamese forces had been defeated during the Tet Offensive, but the Press chose to focus on stories like the attack by Viet Cong on the U.S. embassy and similar events, swaying

public opinion so that American's believed it had been a communist defeat, and following the Tet Offensive coverage of U.S. victories dropped from 62% to 44% (Rohn, 2014, p. 1).

During the 1960's, approximately 93% of American homes had a television, and 58% of American's got most of their news by watching T.V. (Rohn, 2014, p. 1). It's no wonder then that the Associated Press had so much power and influence over how American's saw the Vietnam War.

This was the first time many Americans got to see the true, gritty, and brutal reality of war on television. For most it was shocking, and members of the Associated Press were no exception.

Celebrated journalist Dan Rather describes how he "never truly got over" seeing the Vietnam War first hand (Arnett, Rather, Sherry, 2017).

"Real mud, real blood; real screams of the wounded, moans of the dying. When I saw the first wounded American that I'd ever seen in combat I'm not ashamed to say that I first threw up then I wept." Rather said (Arnett et al., 2017).

He wasn't the only journalist to feel this way, it was quite normal for someone not trained to deal with the horrors of war. Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist and former White House photographer David Hume Kennerly had similar feelings of overwhelming fear the first time he saw a dead body while in Vietnam.

"There was a dead person on the side of the road... I had this feeling of great fear. It's one of those 'we're not in Kansas anymore' moments," said Kennerly (Evans, Kennerly, Ut, 2017).

It was this perspective of the war that the press focused on, choosing to showcase the harsh conditions that they saw around them during their coverage of the war.

Kennerly himself says “I like people to see what I see,” but also admits “it’s only one person’s point-of-view.” (Evans et al., 2017)

Many journalists in the field were openly against the war so their own perspectives were bound to bleed in to their reporting and influence the opinion of the American public. This was the case for Kennerly who admits “There was never a day that I thought the war was a good idea.” (Evans et al., 2017)

Unfortunately, this phenomenon became a problem many members of the Armed Forces have with the media, is that they only show the point-of-view of the person photographing or reporting on the events. Everyone had their own viewpoint on the Vietnam War, but when the opinions of the individual influence the media coverage that can help shape the mindset of the American public.

Journalists like Peter Arnett and photojournalists like David Ut chose to focus on the effects the war had on individual soldiers and the local Vietnamese; what Arnett calls “hometown reporting”. Perhaps it was this style of reporting that led Presidential Assistant Jack Valenti to say that Arnett’s coverage was “more damaging to the US cause than a whole battalion of Viet Cong.” (Arnett et al., 2017)

The media’s choice to focus on the tragedies and losses of the war broke the moral of the troops in the field and the American public back home.

“You can’t go to war, you can’t sustain a war, much less have any hope of winning a war without a measure of communicable trust between the leadership and public.” said Rather.

With the Associated Press showing a constant stream of American defeats, beginning with the Tet Offensive and ending with the withdraw of American forces support for the war was hard to find (CBS News, 2017).

The lack of support for the war was apparent with the widespread war protests that occurred. Veterans like Bill Clark, who worked with Special Force's Mobile Strike Force Command, had to deal with protestors and was never able to really make sense of how they acted.

"I remember not being able to get on an airplane in uniform because people would make such a big stink about it because they didn't want to sit next to a "rotten baby killer" you know." Clark commented.

"I think that it [war protesting] was more wide-spread then, and I think the press was really behind it back in the 60's."

Clark's feelings about why the U.S. lost the Vietnam War were very similar to Mr. Buice's thoughts on the matter, though he did admit that the Armed Forces "should have used unconventional forces more, but I think the Press had a lot to do with it [losing the Vietnam War]."

So perhaps the press should hold some of the blame for the loss of Vietnam and the backlash against the troops by the American public. The perspective that journalists and photojournalists of the time had, as well as their influence in the media helped to shaped and sway public opinion so that before the war was over it had already been lost in the eyes of the American public and the government.

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