

## **Paper Soldiers: The American Press in Vietnam**

by  
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From the earliest days of the Vietnam War to the present, one of the most controversial aspects of America's involvement has been the role of the American press. In the early 1960s, United States military and government figures—with a number of editors and publishers in agreement—criticized many American reporters as being inexperienced, ill-informed, and antagonistic.<sup>1</sup> As American military involvement grew, so did the press corps covering it. Also increased was the importance military and civilian officials in Saigon and Washington attached to the public relations aspect of the war, as evidenced by the development of a fairly sophisticated information administration in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Controversy and confrontation between reporters and officials, with charges of distortion, bias, and lack of credibility hurled back and forth, continued throughout the war.

As Americans have, over the last decade, sorted through the aftermath of the war searching for explanations of the results, the role of the press has been a major issue. Vietnam has been called the first "television war," the "best reported but least understood" war in American history. Indeed, for many people, the press, seemingly so pervasive and so controversial, came to be seen as a decisive player in the war's outcome, with two images dominating discussion. The first of these images, especially prominent in the later years of the war and immediately afterward, casts the press as a challenger of the lies of government officials—a hero that, at least in part, helped to bring the war to an end. The second of these images, more widespread in recent years, portrays the press as having sapped, through its own distortions, misrepresentations, and weaknesses, America's will to pursue a "noble cause" to victory.

How valid are these two images? Is it even possible to speak of a single "role" for the press during the war? This study of the coverage in six American newspapers of three major Vietnam War engagements suggests some preliminary answers to these questions.

As early as 1967, Theodore Draper, a consistent critic of the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy, noted that, "One of the saving and most hopeful elements on the American scene throughout the Vietnamese war has been the relative independence and integrity of an important part of the American press."<sup>4</sup> Paul Kattenburg, a member of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, called U.S. involvement in the war "an exercise in illusion" in which the deception by officials "was bound sooner or later to catch up with them. It did, when the American public, well-nudged in that direction by the much more realistic media, ceased altogether to believe in the pronouncements of their leaders about the Indochina war."<sup>5</sup> Walter Cronkite concluded the CBS News special

on the fall of Saigon in 1975 by declaring that "Our big lesson from Vietnam is the necessity for candor. We . . . cannot ever again allow ourselves to be misinformed, manipulated, and misled into disastrous foreign adventure."<sup>6</sup> Television critic Cleveland Amory felt that when Cronkite finally spoke out on Vietnam in 1968, "he not only brought down a presidency, but also, to all intents and purposes, ended a war."<sup>7</sup>

The second image of the press has both challenged this positive assessment of the press' role and reinforced the assumption of its independence and influence. This image has taken an extreme form in the view of such observers as former *Newsweek* Far Eastern correspondent Robert Elegant. "The South Vietnamese were, first and last, decisively defeated in Washington, New York, London, and Paris," Elegant argued. "Those media defeats made inevitable their subsequent defeat on the battlefield," for "the pen and the camera proved decisively mightier than the bayonet and ultra-modern weapons."<sup>8</sup>

A much more restrained form of this idea is supported by Peter Braestrup's *Big Story*. This exhaustive study of the responses of the three television networks, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the Associated Press, and United Press International to the 1968 Tet Offensive concluded that the news media was overwhelmed by the action and, in the critical first hours and days of the offensive, conveyed a picture of American and South Vietnamese troops with their backs literally against the wall. By doing so, and by failing to cover as dramatically the American-South Vietnamese counteroffensive, these news organizations, says Braestrup, left an impression of defeat in the minds of critical segments of the American public and government.<sup>9</sup> This basic view has been adopted by many as a major lesson of the Vietnam experience. As Richard Neustadt said in considering the United States' ability to fight limited wars after Vietnam, a major concern for future administrations will be "how to keep television coverage under control."<sup>10</sup>

Military figures have also come to believe that the press contributed to America's defeat in Vietnam. General William Westmoreland gave many Vietnam reporters credit for bravery and for alerting him to problems in his command, but his overall assessment of the media was negative. "Reflecting the view of the war held by many in the United States and often contributing to it, the general tone of press and television comment was critical," Westmoreland said.<sup>11</sup> As a result, "the strategists in Hanoi indirectly manipulated our open society, and hence our political system."<sup>12</sup> Nor was this attitude confined to Westmoreland. Of those responding to Douglas Kinnard's survey of general officers who served in Vietnam, 89 per cent rated the press' performance negatively, including 38 per cent who said flatly that the press was "disruptive of United States efforts in Vietnam."<sup>13</sup>

This conception of the press has become an axiom for much of today's American military. As Drew Middleton wrote, "The armed forces emerged from the Vietnam War psychologically scarred. They were embittered by their failure to defeat the Vietnamese because of what they

considered political manipulation in Washington and, above all, by the media's treatment."<sup>14</sup> Writing about press restrictions during the 1983 Grenada invasion, Middleton noted that "The majors and commanders of the Vietnam War who believed the media had worked against the American command there had become influential generals and admirals determined not to expose the Grenada operation to what they continue to view as a hostile adversary."<sup>15</sup>

These images of a powerful and antagonistic press have not gone unchallenged. Michael Mandelbaum, Lawrence Lichty, George Bailey, and Michael Arlen, among others, have questioned the effect of television on public opinion.<sup>16</sup> Mandelbaum stated, "The United States lost the war in Vietnam because the American public was not willing to pay the cost of winning or avoid losing."<sup>17</sup> As Ted Koppel put it, "People don't need television to tell them a boy has gone to Southeast Asia and not come back."<sup>18</sup>

Others have expressed skepticism of these portrayals of the press. Peter Arnett, former AP correspondent in Vietnam, has questioned the consistency of Braestrup's investigation and conclusions in *Big Story*.<sup>19</sup> John Mueller's study of public opinion during the Korean and Vietnam wars points out that American opinion was moving significantly against the war well before the sudden shift supposedly caused by Tet coverage.<sup>20</sup> And Daniel Hallin's recent work has challenged what he calls "the myth of the adversary press."<sup>21</sup>

The most extreme indictments of the press have come under attack as well. Morley Safer responded sharply to Robert Elegant's charges. The strategy, Safer said, was to "meataxe the critics of a policy by questioning their patriotism, by accusing them of being in the thrall of *petit bourgeois* ambition, generate enough smoke, and hope that no one examines the piece closely enough to notice that there are no facts, only scapegoats."<sup>22</sup> Charles Mohr, former *Time* and *New York Times* Vietnam correspondent, responded in much the same way. "I believe the performance of the news media during the Tet offensive—and indeed, throughout the entire course of the Vietnam War—is open to legitimate criticism," he explained. "It is also worthy of some praise. But let the criticism be legitimate. Some of the criticism of Vietnam War correspondents, it appears, has not been based on careful re-examination of the journalistic product."<sup>23</sup>

Safer and Mohr are correct. Most of the discussion of the press and Vietnam, even the most thoughtful, has not been based on detailed, systematic analysis of "what the journalists *actually* said and wrote."<sup>24</sup> The only such examinations have been a series of articles by Lawrence Lichty and George Bailey dealing with television news and documentary reporting,<sup>25</sup> Braestrup's *Big Story*, and Dan Hallin's *The "Uncensored War,"* which looks at *New York Times* coverage from 1961 to 1965 and at random samples of network television evening news broadcasts from 1965 to 1973. All of these studies have limitations. For example, Braestrup's work deals with only one, albeit important, incident in a long war. More importantly, these studies look only at national media,

neglecting the regional and local outlets from which much of the country received at least a portion of its news of the war.

The present study attempts to add to this short list of intensive analyses and to avoid some of their problems. First, the author selected a sample of national, regional, and local newspapers, representing a variety of market and circulation sizes, locations, and political orientations. The papers were the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, and the *Lexington (Ky.) Herald*. (See Appendix).

Second, this study examined the coverage in these six papers of one battle from each of the three phases of American combat involvement. The first engagement, during the American build-up, was the Ia Drang Valley campaign in October and November 1965. This series of firefights in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam—the first major encounter between American troops and North Vietnamese regulars—began the night of October 19th, when the 33rd North Vietnamese Regiment initiated a siege of the Plei Me Special Forces camp, and came to a climax November 14th through the 17th, in two vicious ambushes sprung by the North Vietnamese against the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). Both sides suffered the heaviest casualties of the war up to that time.<sup>26</sup>

The second engagement, Dak To, came near the height of American combat strength, in the fall of 1967. Dak To began November 3rd, when a company of the 4th Infantry Division tangled with a North Vietnamese unit in a brief but intense firefight. Over the next several days, the fighting settled into a pattern of American and South Vietnamese attempts to dislodge the North Vietnamese from positions around Dak To. On Sunday, November 19th, a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade began its assault on the last of the North Vietnamese redoubts on Hill 875, and for the next three days the battalion was cut off from resupply or reinforcement by a relentless stream of mortar and small arms fire. Help finally reached the stricken unit on Tuesday the 21st, and the Americans took the hill on the following Thursday, Thanksgiving Day.<sup>27</sup>

The third engagement was Lam Son 719, the 1971 South Vietnamese assault against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, and also the first major test of Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" program during the American withdrawal from Vietnam. On February 8th the cream of the South Vietnamese military, totalling some 22,000 Marine, paratroop, and armored units, crossed the Laotian border headed for Sepone, a town sitting astride the junction of several major branches of the Trail some 25 miles inside Laos.<sup>28</sup>

The ARVN force met little resistance at first but, on February 18th, the North Vietnamese struck with some 40,000 men, including armored units, stalling the South Vietnamese some seven miles from Sepone. Only by leap-frogging the North Vietnamese were the ARVN troops able to continue their progress toward Sepone, arriving on March 4th to find the town abandoned. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese continued to push the South Vietnamese back, and only massive American air support saved the ARVN units. Even with this assistance, the South Vietnamese

were sent reeling back across the border by the last week in March, having suffered casualties of at least 25, and possibly as high as 50, per cent.<sup>29</sup>

The study examined coverage of these three battles by focusing on three main issues prevalent in the literature on the press and Vietnam produced by critics and supporters of the media alike. These issues are: (1) the incidence of distorted, uneven, and inconsistent reporting of events; (2) the degree to which the press failed or succeeded in analyzing and placing events, especially combat, in perspective; and (3) the press' supposed independence from and skepticism of government information.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most persistent criticisms of the press' performance in Vietnam is that coverage often was distorted and uneven, and that a key cause of such coverage was the way in which the news stories themselves were organized. Of the over 1,800 individual articles examined in this study, more than half were generated by wire services, predominantly AP and UPI. Obviously, the six papers had much source material in common. Indeed, the principal product of the wire services in Vietnam—the daily wrap-up—was the chief source of combat news for all but a handful of American papers. Yet, as close examination reveals, the amount and nature of the wire material used, the way in which it was organized, and its placement varied widely from paper to paper. This significantly affected the clarity of an individual paper's coverage and, consequently, the picture of the war conveyed to its readers.

During Ia Drang, the dependence on wire summaries was especially heavy; such stories made up at least half of the total stories on the campaign in each of the newspapers studied except for the *New York Times*. Coverage of Ia Drang made evident the fact that wire wrap-ups were often, as Braestrup charged, "too long, too disorganized, too jerky from many shifts in sphere of action and topics."<sup>31</sup> For example, 20 of the *Lexington Herald's* 39 stories dealing with Ia Drang were wire summaries, and the November 2nd wrap-up was typical. The story shifted from the action around Ia Drang to the bombing of the Boi Loi Forest northwest of Saigon, back to Ia Drang, to action around Qui Nhon, and back again to Ia Drang, all in nine paragraphs.<sup>32</sup>

Discovering this problem in a small city newspaper, faced with limited space and a local orientation, is not too surprising. Finding choppy and unorganized stories in a major daily, though, is less expected. Nonetheless, the *Chicago Tribune* suffered from just such coverage. Of the *Tribune's* 49 Ia Drang stories, 30 were wire summaries, and its use of these summaries resembled that of the *Herald*. The *Tribune's* October 24th wrap-up led with the action around Ia Drang, moved to a discussion of the continued American build-up in Vietnam, turned to fighting just northwest of Saigon, and then came back to Ia Drang.<sup>33</sup>

The *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *Nashville Tennessean* also depended heavily on the wire summaries, and their coverage also was quite poorly organized. These two papers had another problem as well, for the war—at least as indicated by their treatments of the Ia Drang

story—seemed to be a lower priority story for them than for the other papers surveyed. For example, November 18th was the climactic day of the Ia Drang campaign. Units of the 1st Cavalry Division, ambushed by the North Vietnamese, had endured the heaviest fighting and the highest casualties of the war. The *Minneapolis Tribune*, however, gave the day's action only 17 column-inches of an AP summary on its second page; the *Tennessean's* story, also a wire summary, ran only 22 column-inches and was buried on page 18. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, on the other hand, put the story on the front page, devoting some 43 column-inches of a UPI wrap-up to the bloody fighting.<sup>34</sup>

But dependence on wire service copy, even upon the war wrap-ups, did not necessarily doom a paper to incoherent reporting. Of the *Post-Dispatch's* 55 stories dealing with Ia Drang, 31 were wire summaries. Seventeen of these, however, were labeled "combined wire," indicating that the paper's editor had reworked the wire material extensively, producing stories that, with only a few exceptions, were very clear. Typical of the quality of day-to-day coverage provided to St. Louis readers was the *Post-Dispatch's* November 2nd story, which devoted the first five of its 15 paragraphs to the sweep being carried out by the 1st Cavalry in the Ia Drang area. The story then told of a Vietcong attack near Qui Nhon, the rescue of an American pilot in the South China Sea, and finally of B-52 strikes in the Boi Loi Forest.<sup>35</sup>

The link between dependence on the daily wire summaries and the clarity of organization in a paper's reporting was not as pronounced during Dak To, and the stories of all the papers were generally focused and well-ordered. Brevity and paucity of detail, however, were still problems, especially for the *Tennessean* and the *Minneapolis Tribune*. From November 5th through November 12th, the *Tribune* simply failed to relate a number of important developments and details. On November 8th, for example, the wire summary in the *Post-Dispatch* reported fighting between the 4th Infantry Division and the North Vietnamese around an NVA base area and added that the 173rd Airborne Brigade was also engaged in action nearby. The *New York Times*, in a story generated by its own staff, noted, in addition to these details, that 3,500 to 4,000 American reinforcements had been moved into the Dak To area. But the Minneapolis paper, in a UPI daily wrap-up, indicated only that "The Highlands fighting yesterday marked the second day of bitter battles where American commanders believe North Vietnamese regulars are planning a major dry-season offensive."<sup>36</sup>

Even when Dak To entered its final and most violent stage, the *Tribune's* and the *Tennessean's* coverage remained very limited. On November 15th two C-130 transport planes were destroyed, a third damaged, and a huge stock of fuel and ammunition set on fire during a sustained mortar attack on the main Dak To camp. The *Times* devoted two stories—one from UPI, the other its own—on November 15th and 16th to the shelling. The attack story comprised the bulk of two *Chicago Tribune* war summaries on the 15th and 16th, the whole of a 54 column-inch article in the November 15th *Post-Dispatch*, as well as the entirety

of the *Herald's* war report on the 16th. Over the two days, the *Minneapolis Tribune* covered the story in a total of five paragraphs, while the *Tennessean* took seven, all buried in wire summaries.<sup>37</sup>

The same occurred as the final action of the Dak To campaign, the assault on Hill 875, began on November 19th. The *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *Tennessean* did not report the attack until the 21st, a day later than the rest of the papers, and neither made much effort to catch up on two days of heavy fighting. The *Tribune* gave just six short paragraphs of a UPI story to its initial article on Hill 875, and the *Tennessean* printed only three paragraphs of an AP wrap-up.<sup>38</sup>

The organization of individual stories continued to improve in the years between Dak To and Lam Son 719. By the time of Lam Son in early 1971, the jumpy, disorganized stories seen in some of the reporting earlier in the war had, for the most part, been replaced by articles that were clearly focused and well-structured. Better organization and editing obviously accounted for some of this, but the fact that Lam Son overshadowed all other action also helped. The newspapers were less compelled to compress a number of incidents into one summary article, and were better able to focus on the one major operation, as was evidenced by the sharp decline in dependence on the war wrap-ups that had been the backbone of earlier coverage.

Despite these improvements in style and organization, confusion and self-contradiction were still present in the coverage of Lam Son. The worst incidents were caused by the newspapers' failure to place events in context and to analyze developments in the light of new information. For example, the South Vietnamese crossed the border into Laos on February 8, 1971. By February 11th or 12th, all of the papers, using wire sources, reported that the South Vietnamese had reached and occupied Sepone 25 miles inside Laos.<sup>39</sup> On the 13th, a *Times* story noted that the ARVN force was instead only 15 miles or so inside Laos, although the rest of the papers did not report this change until the 15th or 16th. No paper, however, tried to explain this contradiction, either then or in early March, when the South Vietnamese actually entered the town. Where were the South Vietnamese? What kind of progress were they making? Could the readers of those papers believe any subsequent reports on the ARVN advance?

This lack of perspective, this "intentiveness on the moment,"<sup>41</sup> as I.F. Stone called it, was responsible for instances of poor reporting in Ia Drang as well. An article by UPI correspondent Eddie Adams in the October 23rd *Chicago Tribune*, and in the October 24th editions of the *Post-Dispatch*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, and *Tennessean*, is a good case in point. The story reported that the bodies of Vietcong machine gunners had been found chained to their weapons outside the Green Beret camp at Plei Me.<sup>42</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* carried the story on the 23rd with no qualification. The next day a UPI report in the *Tribune* and the *Post-Dispatch* noted that the story had not been confirmed and was being "double-checked."<sup>43</sup> Both papers used the story again within a few days, however, and neither made any reference to the earlier uncertainty surrounding it or to whether the story had ever been confirmed. The *Minneapolis Tribune* and the

*Tennessean* never reported any doubt of the report's accuracy. Was it true? Were Americans facing such a foe? Readers in Chicago, Nashville, St. Louis, and Minneapolis had no way of knowing.

This episodic quality also caused serious flaws in the reporting of Dak To. The November 17th headlines of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Tennessean* trumpeted success for the United States in the Dak To campaign. "B-52s Blast Retreating Reds," the *Tribune* proclaimed; "U.S. Guns Force Reds To Flee From Dak To," announced the *Tennessean*. The wire stories running under these headlines were just as celebratory. The *Tribune* stated that "Giant B-52 jets today bombed North Vietnamese troops retreating from their smashing defeat in the battle of the central highlands." The *Tennessean* reported that American firepower had "forced North Vietnamese troops to pull back from the Dak To battlefield into Laos," and also noted "the apparent failure of the North Vietnamese dry season offensive in the highlands."<sup>44</sup> The other papers were much more restrained. For example, the *Times* report of the 17th stated that "A tense and uneasy mood gripped the American camp here today as mortar rounds sporadically struck the adjoining airstrip and thousands of soldiers scoured the jungle in search of an elusive and powerful enemy."<sup>45</sup> But neither the *Chicago Tribune* nor the *Tennessean* tried to reconcile its stories to the vicious fighting of the next few days. If the North Vietnamese had in fact retreated into Laos, who was cutting the troopers of the 173rd Airborne to pieces on the slopes of Hill 875? The editors of the *Tribune* and the *Tennessean* did not offer an answer.

Emphasis on day-to-day reporting and the lack of contextual coverage also apparently affected the papers' willingness and ability to analyze the three engagements and to judge their significance for the larger war. By late October 1965, for example, all six papers were reporting heavy fighting in the central highlands. By the first week in November, all six had reported North Vietnamese regulars in the Ia Drang Valley. At the time, however, only the *Post-Dispatch* recognized the significance of a large North Vietnamese presence in the highlands. It pointed out that "this first true Communist divisional operation of the war" supported "the growing belief that Hanoi appears to be determined to slug it out in South Viet Nam."<sup>46</sup>

Nor did the paper limit its analysis to the news columns. It was, in fact, the only paper surveyed that questioned the ends, not merely the means, of American policy in Vietnam as early as 1965. In its November 12th editorial, the *Post-Dispatch* argued that the United States should not allow itself to be manipulated into "a war of 'anti-liberation,'" while a November 17th editorial worried that the increase in American forces and the concomitant rise in the level of fighting would, ironically, create more instability in South Vietnam.<sup>47</sup>

The rest of the papers were not as quick to recognize the full significance of Ia Drang, nor were they as probing in their analysis. Only on November 16th and after did the others report—the *Times* in a Neil Sheehan article, the others in wire stories—that in the Ia Drang Valley



the war had entered a new and more deadly phase.<sup>48</sup> While all five agreed on this point, they held different ideas on what that change meant. The *Times* had supported only hesitantly Johnson's increase in forces in July 1965, and by fall that hesitation had grown. Editorials in November called for a halt in the bombing of the North and for renewed efforts at negotiation, also criticizing those who called for a wider war.<sup>49</sup>

The *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *Tennessean* had also supported the American build-up and stated that Ia Drang represented a triumph of American arms, but each expressed some mild concern. Both papers carried a James Reston column which pointed out that the costs and aims of victory should be kept in balance,<sup>50</sup> and a *Tennessean* editorial hoped that North Vietnam might yet "come to its senses and listen to reason."<sup>51</sup> For the *Herald* and the *Chicago Tribune*, however, Ia Drang showed that the gloves were off, and they welcomed the increased fighting. "The Viet Cong must be crushed," stated the *Herald*. "'Negotiation' is a magic word to pacifists and those who openly or covertly support the Communist cause," the *Tribune* proclaimed.<sup>52</sup>

A similar pattern emerged in the coverage of Dak To. For a number of analysts, the almost automatic explanation for any increase in enemy activity in the central highlands was that another attempt was being made to cut the South in two.<sup>53</sup> All of the papers reported this theory, but the *Post-Dispatch*, the *Times*, and, to a lesser degree, the *Herald* presented alternatives, noting that the North Vietnamese might have been seeking "a propaganda and morale advantage" by inflicting heavy casualties on an isolated American unit, or that they were trying to lure American troops away from pacification duties along the coast.<sup>54</sup>

The *Chicago Tribune*, the *Tennessean* and the *Minneapolis Tribune* failed to present these possibilities, and they did even less to judge Dak To's significance after the battle. All three did little more than repeat General Westmoreland's claim that Dak To was "the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy."<sup>55</sup> The *Herald* did only slightly better. Its only attempt at after-action analysis was AP correspondent Peter Arnett's November 26th articles pointing out that, far from the "beginning of a great defeat for the enemy," Dak To showed that the North Vietnamese still held the initiative in the field.<sup>56</sup>

The *Post-Dispatch* and the *Times* presented a much broader range of interpretations. The *Times* generated its own analysis, while the *Post-Dispatch* drew on Peter Arnett and *Times* material in addition to utilizing its own Washington correspondent, Richard Dudman. In a series of articles, both papers repeated the possibility that the North Vietnamese action was not "an essentially foolish" attempt to "show they're not losing the war," but rather was an effort to achieve a propaganda victory by punishing American troops and/or pulling troops from pacification duty. The *Post-Dispatch* and the *Times*, still the only papers among the six that opposed American policy editorially, were also the only two to go beyond merely repeating official characterizations of Dak To's results. Both concluded that if Dak To were indeed an American victory, it was

an extremely costly one in which the North Vietnamese achieved at least part of their goals.<sup>57</sup>

By the time of Lam Son, most of the papers were doing a significantly better job in analyzing the operation's consequences. All six presented the Nixon administration's contention that a blow to the Ho Chi Minh Trail would reduce the enemy's capability at least temporarily and give Vietnamization time to work.<sup>58</sup> All of the papers also reported the official contentions of the invasion's success, and all except the *Chicago Tribune*—the only paper among the six still supporting American policy—presented alternative assessments that differed sharply with statements of South Vietnamese and American officials.

Richard Dudman wrote in the March 28th *Post-Dispatch* that heavy ARVN casualties made it increasingly doubtful "whether the South Vietnamese forces can 'hack it.'" Charles Bartlett reported in the April 11th *Minneapolis Tribune* that Nixon, at General Creighton Abrams' urging, scaled his intended 16,000-men per month withdrawal rate back to 14,300 per month because of the "setback in Laos." The AP's J.T. Wolkerstorfer pointed out in the March 22nd *Herald* that "at least half a dozen of South Vietnam's best battalions" had been decimated by the North Vietnamese. The *Times*' Gloria Emerson said in the March 28th editions of the *Times* and the *Tennessean* that "the morale of many soldiers in South Vietnam's finest military units, who fought the North Vietnamese in Laos, is shattered." But only once did the *Chicago Tribune* report any possibility that the operation was not proceeding as planned, quoting Senator Mike Mansfield, who said, "It appears that the withdrawal [from Laos] has been hastened. You can't arrive at a judgement until all the facts are in."<sup>59</sup>

As the cases discussed above illustrate, there did seem to be a connection between a paper's editorial stand on the war and its willingness to present a wider spectrum of analysis. All six papers had access to wire service material offering analyses both supporting and differing with official statements. Yet, in all three engagements, it was the papers that opposed American policy editorially that, while presenting the official characterizations of combat, most consistently presented alternate viewpoints to those assessments and attempted to place the events in some broader context. Once again, although these papers shared wire material as a major source of coverage, the way in which that material was used and, consequently, the picture of the war presented to readers, varied greatly.

This does not mean, however, that the papers were as consistently independent of official information as both popular images of the papers assume. In fact, at critical junctures in all three battles, the papers surveyed here did not challenge official information, and these incidents suggest the significant degree of control that the government-military information system was able to exercise over the press.

A prime example is the handling of casualty figures. By late 1965, the American strategy of search-and-destroy and attrition, the goal of

which was to seek out the enemy and inflict heavy losses upon him, had emerged.<sup>60</sup> As a consequence, casualty figures, both Allied and enemy, became a significant measure of the war's progress, but the figures received a scrutiny that was inconsistent at best.

During Ia Drang, for example, the military did not release American casualty figures for individual actions, supplying the press only with the general descriptions of "light, moderate, and heavy." Despite the fact that this was the first major combat between American and North Vietnamese troops and by far the most intense action since the American escalation began, only the *Post-Dispatch* and the *Times* showed any skepticism about either American or enemy casualty figures, when their November 26th editions carried a sharp questioning of enemy casualty figures—Charles Mohr's "Misinformation" story. After citing several incidents of inflated casualty estimates, Mohr concluded: "So great is the pressure for body-count figures that soldiers . . . began to joke this week about Saigon's request for the 'WEG,' or 'wild-eyed guess.'"<sup>61</sup> Even these two papers, however, failed to follow through on these doubts. The day before running Mohr's "Misinformation" story, the *Times* carried the week's summary of casualties without any question, listing figures of 240 Americans and 2,262 enemy killed. The story was written by Charles Mohr.<sup>62</sup>

Having granted implicit validity to the official criteria of progress, the papers, including the *Times* and the *Post-Dispatch*, could do little in the end but accept the official claim of victory in both Ia Drang and Dak To. During Lam Son, this acceptance of government assessments and definitions produced perhaps the most striking example of official ability to manipulate information seen in any of the three battles. At this time the Nixon administration was able to change, almost without challenge, the previously stated objectives of the operation in an attempt to create a perception of victory to obscure a resounding defeat.

President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, in announcing the invasion on February 8th, had stated that "This is an operation limited in time and in space with the clear and unique objective of *disrupting* [author's emphasis] the supply and infiltration network of the Communist North Vietnamese in Laos." Two days later, the *Times* quoted "Administration analysts" who "in private conversations . . . tried to shy away from such expressions as 'choking off' the trail." Despite these words of caution, from the time when rumors of the invasion of Laos first began to circulate, all other reports stated that its goal was to "cut" or "smash" or "plug" the Ho Chi Minh Trail at least until the end of the dry season in May, and perhaps longer.<sup>63</sup> As the South Vietnamese forces moved into Laos with almost no resistance from the North Vietnamese, all six papers, including the *Times*, continued to describe Lam Son's aims in these grander terms.<sup>64</sup>

These descriptions were not the product of some reporter's fevered imagination or of some anonymous figure deep in the civilian or military bureaucracy. Rather, the sources of this characterization were the officials responsible for the operation's planning and execution, along with

their supporters. On February 8th, Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott, fresh from a briefing by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, said that the goal of the operation was to “pinch off the supply lines” and explained that “the South Vietnamese might have to stay there until May or June.” For the next nine days, during the South Vietnamese advance, many senior officials, including South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, and President Nixon himself, continued to speak of the operation’s goals in terms of “cutting” the Trail.<sup>65</sup>

However, on the very day that a vicious North Vietnamese counterattack began to send the elite of the South Vietnamese military reeling back across the border, Nixon began the shift to a more limited standard by which to judge Lam Son 719’s success. During a February 17th news conference, Nixon stated that the South Vietnamese did not want “to occupy any part of Laos. The South Vietnamese are not there to stay. They are there to *disrupt* [author’s emphasis] the enemy’s lines of communication, their supply lines, their infiltration routes, and then get out.”<sup>66</sup> After this, “disrupt” replaced “cut” as the goal of the invasion. Administration officials and supporters, including General Abrams and California Governor Ronald Reagan, applauded the ARVN’s great achievement in “disrupting” the flow of supplies.<sup>67</sup>

On March 30th, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright disclosed that, in a secret briefing on February 9th, Secretary Rogers and Director of the Joint Staff Lt. Gen. John Vogt had declared Lam Son’s most important objective to be the complete blocking of the Trail at least until the end of the dry season in May. Only afterward did five of the papers begin to question the change in objectives and the fact that the operation had ended at least five weeks sooner than planned. Yet the *Chicago Tribune* did not even report Senator Fulbright’s revelations, much less question the Administration’s claims of success.<sup>68</sup>

After studying over 1,800 articles and some 24 weeks worth of coverage, patterns emerge which challenge both popular images of the American press during the Vietnam War. First, at least as represented by these six papers during these three battles, the press was not as independent as is commonly believed. In all three engagements examined, the government and military were able to control to a very significant degree the flow of information from the source and the reporters’ access to combat areas, making the press dependent on official sources. In covering these three battles, the six papers relied mainly on official information and reported that information with only occasional qualification.

Nor was the press as monolithic as both images imply. There was a marked difference in the coverage presented by the papers on three distinct events. The clarity and breadth of coverage—as represented by the amount of coverage given, the organization of individual stories, and their placement within the papers—varied greatly. The papers also differed in their efforts to place events in some sort of context of the larger war and to offer analysis of the actions’ meanings.

Finally, there was at least a coincidental connection between a paper's coverage of the battles and its editorial stance on the war. For all three engagements, those papers most supportive of government policy were also those least likely to present challenges to official information, to provide analysis of the action, and to offer clear, extensive, and prominently placed coverage. The readers of these six papers not only received differing opinions of the war in their papers' editorial pages, but also significantly different pictures of the battles covered in their papers' news columns.

Narrowly focused though this study has been, its close examination of a sample of the "journalistic product" clearly casts doubt on the validity of the still-prominent dual images of an adversarial press. Indeed, such were the differences in coverage seen in these six papers, all drawing from the same basic pool of sources, that it is difficult to ascribe any one role—hero, villain, or other—to the press during the Vietnam War.

So where does this analysis lead? If these assumptions about the role of the press during the Vietnam War have been seriously questioned, what can be said about the part or parts the news media played?

The relatively few detailed analyses of actual coverage are valuable in that they force the reader to make judgements based on what the reporters produced and on what the news consumer read and saw. However, all of these studies, including this one, have a serious problem; they examine only the *end product* of the information process and this significantly restricts what can be credibly said about the press during the war. They have exposed the tip of the iceberg and have made some very limited guesses about what lies beneath the surface. There is a clear and compelling need to go beyond that surface, to reconstruct as fully and as accurately as possible, the *journalistic experience* in the Vietnam War. Only then will it be possible to dispel the myths and the rhetoric.

Appendix  
NEWSPAPER SAMPLE<sup>69</sup>  
(as of 1965)

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Market Size/ Circulation</b>	<b>Politics</b>	<b>Editorial Stand on the War<sup>70</sup> (November 1965)</b>
Chicago Tribune	3.67 million 836,702	Independent/ Republican	Supported escalation; said call for negotiations was an aid to Communists.
New York Times	7.81 million 652,135	Independent	Skeptical of escalation, called for negotiations.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	830,168 342,882	Independent	Opposed escalation; called Vietnam a war of "anti- liberation."
Minneapolis Tribune	494,944 224,120	Independent	Supported war as effort to stop threat to SE Asia.
Nashville Tennessean	175,146 136,381	Democratic	Supported war, but mildly concerned about escalation
Lexington Herald	66,013 50,954	Democratic	Supported escalation; called for "total victory."

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