

The Press and the TET Offensive

A flawed institution under stress

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The Tet offensive of 1968 must surely be regarded as one of history's chameleon campaigns. When the North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops assaulted targets throughout the Republic of Vietnam at the end of January 1968, they expected to trigger an uprising of the South Vietnamese people against their government. Despite some spectacular early successes, the attacks failed. The South Vietnamese did not embrace the cause; thousands of sappers, assault troops, and cadres met their deaths before overwhelming allied counterattacks; and the insurgent infrastructure was so decimated at the end of the fighting that no large enemy offensives could be mounted for four years.

Nonetheless, the Tet offensive was a turning point in the war, and the North Vietnamese were successful in altering the course of the war far beyond the accomplishments of their army. The American people were shocked that the Vietcong/ North Vietnamese Army (VC/NV A) possessed the strength to make the widespread strikes. In the public clamor that followed, President Lyndon Johnson announced a bombing halt and withdrew from the 1968 Presidential race. The policy of Vietnamization was launched, and many Americans concluded that the war was too costly to pursue.

It has always been clear that the press played a vital role in this dramatic shift of opinion. It has been evident that dissatisfaction with the war among media opinion-makers helped form an American public attitude of discouragement. Nonetheless, much of the assessment of the media's role in the war has heretofore been impressionistic and conjectural.

The publication of *Big Story* now replaces impressions with fact, conjectures with cold analysis. The book presents the findings of a truly staggering study of the role of the press in this crucial military event.

Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, 2 vols. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977), xxxviii and 740 pages, index, and 706 pages of appendices, tables, and story and photo indices.

Correspondent Peter Braestrup, who reported for the *Washington Post* during Tet, prepared the study and interpreted the findings. A former Marine infantry officer in Korea and an experienced war reporter (Algeria and Vietnam), Braestrup brought to the study both firsthand experience and a personal dedication to truth. He amassed detailed content and photo analysis of both print and TV reporting, a review of public opinion findings, and his own investigation. Braestrup read every word published on the Vietnam fighting by three media groupings: the Associated Press and United Press International, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and *Time* and *Newsweek*. In addition he viewed tapes of every telecast aired during the offensive by the three networks.

Media misconceptions

The sheer volume of press and TV reports on Tet is intimidating, and, of course, almost every conceivable interpretation of events can be found in them. Nonetheless, Braestrup's analysis points to the emergence of several themes that came to dominate the coverage. The sober examination of these themes with hindsight reveals important misconceptions.

Misconception: There had been no warning of a coming offensive. Actually, the press ignored cautions expressed by General Earle Wheeler and General William C. Westmoreland in December and January.

Misconception: The offensive was a victory for Hanoi. The press corps, it is now clear, was stunned by the initial Tet attacks, many of which occurred in Saigon. When the allies met some initial reverses, the press reacted by emphasizing the enemy's successes. As the weeks wore on and military intelligence clearly indicated defeat for the insurgents, the press still interpreted the offensive as a "psychological victory" for the Vietcong/ North Vietnamese Army, who "held the initiative," "decide who lives and who dies... which planes land and which ones don't," who were unconcerned with losses, and could "take and hold any area they chose." There was little objective analysis of the many enemy failures or of the severe toll that allied counterblows exacted from the enemy.

Misconception: The North Vietnamese military initiative bared the unreliability and inefficiency of our own allies, the South Vietnamese. Government of Vietnam (GVN) troops were described as "lolling in the sun," failing to carry their load, and complacent. The press reported that the offensive shattered GVN control over the countryside and conclusively undermined the loyalty of the people.

A more truthful assessment: the GVN "muddled through" the crisis, Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) performance was initially inhibited by the fact that half the Vietnamese troops were on Tet leave when the enemy struck, and many ARVN units gave a good account of themselves in the subsequent fighting. Press pronouncements that the offensive eroded loyalty to the GVN were ill informed.

Misconception: The characteristic American response was to destroy city districts and villages with overwhelming, indiscriminate firepower. This misconception was fueled by the ill-advised comment of an Air Force officer at Ben Tre that "we had to destroy the town to save it" and by television clips focusing on urban damage.

The unavailability of weapons well adapted to street fighting (the 106mm recoilless rifle, for instance) forced some difficult decisions by tactical commanders. Press reports, however, suggested that destruction was typical. Some reports from Saigon indicated the city was a giant scarred battleground; from the air, however, reporters could see that 95 percent of the city was relatively unharmed.

American and ARVN commanders did have to use heavy weaponry in urban areas, but the response was not characteristic of the counteroffensive.

Misconception: The sapper raid on the American embassy, the fighting in Hue, and the siege of Khe Sanh typified the war. In fact, these engagements were not typical, but exceptional. Scores of press reports, however, identified these battles as microcosms of the war because they were visible, tangible, and conventional. The reassertion of government control throughout South Vietnam by American and GVN troops was virtually ignored.

Misconception: Khe Sanh was to be America's Dien Bien Phu. The comparison between these two battles was a powerful media theme, always with dramatic forebodings of disaster. Braestrup demolishes the comparison with a cold historical examination of the two battles. The similarities existed mainly in the minds of reporters, who badgered officials in Vietnam and the United States with the "parallels." General Westmoreland was completely confident of American victory with good reason (our superiority in airlift and firepower), but Washington decision-makers-e.g., President Johnson, General Taylor, and Walt Rostow--were intimidated by the spectre of defeat by Giap.

The effects of these errors of fact and interpretation in the United States were pronounced. The impact appeared less in opinion polls than in the minds of Washington policy-makers. Because the press had ignored earlier cautions expressed by military leaders, the public was "jolted into gloom and foreboding," and a "credibility gap" emerged. In Congress and the bureaucracy, criticism became vocal, reflecting the "disaster" themes portrayed in the press and on TV. The embattled President announced the bombing halt and withdrew from the Presidential campaign.

A flawed institution

How could the press err so greatly in its Tet coverage with such impact on the nation? There is no simple answer to the question. Braestrup dismisses the idea that newsmen as a group were ideologically opposed to the war. Rather, the Tet coverage represents the institutional defects or flaws in the gathering, interpretation, and dissemination of news in Vietnam and the United States at the time of the offensive.

Flaw: The press corps lacked military experience and the ability to grasp and present matters of strategy and tactics. Press reports contained some remarkable errors in this regard, like the time the fall of the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei left a gaping hole in U.S. lines, or Harry Reasoner's report that North Vietnamese trucks (having traveled at night through the A Shau valley) were "unloading at communist-held entrances in the wall" of the Hue Citadel. The press's lack of knowledge and maturity resulted in a lack of discrimination in the presentation of hastily gathered or incomplete facts and contributed to the disaster theme.

The views of experienced military commentators like Joseph Kraft and Hanson Baldwin and the analyses of Douglas Pike were virtually ignored. The press reflected American ignorance of Vietnamese language and culture, had no expertise in the area of pacification, and almost no sources on the South Vietnamese government or army.

Flaw: The press was impressionable. General Bruce Palmer succinctly summed up the problem when he stated that the foe "took the battle down around the Caravelle Hotel and, so, from the standpoint of the average reporter over there, it was the acorn that fell on the chicken's head and it said 'The sky is falling.'"

Flaw: There was no willingness to admit error or correct erroneous reporting after the fact. The classic example was the Associated Press's continued assertion that sappers had entered the U.S. Embassy building in Saigon more than twelve hours after it was clear the attack had been repulsed on the grounds.

Flaw: By the time of Vietnam, it had become professionally acceptable in some media to allow reporters to "explain" news, not merely report it. This interpretative reporting has generally improved the quality of American news, but Braestrup judges that in Vietnam the press corps lacked the competence to provide accurate analysis.

Flaw: In their commentary on events in Vietnam, reporters "projected" to the American public their own opinions and fears based on incomplete data and their own inclinations. This tendency is best described by the author in comparing the television clips on Khe Sanh and a comprehensive photo essay by Life photographer David Douglas Duncan.

One looks at the pictures by Duncan and remembers Khe Sanh. One views most of the film footage, especially those nervous standups, and remembers one's own fears, those of a civilian suddenly thrust into an isolated, unfamiliar battleground amid strangers and unpredictable dangers. The Khe Sanh garrison comes through on TV film as an assemblage of apprehensive, unorganized, even hapless, individuals--like the exhausted reporters--not as a group of trained soldiers, organized into fighting units (Vol. 1, p. 384)

The problem was that the reporters often had very little to go on, and events were confusing. But facing the need to give impact to their products, reporters--usually by inference--projected their own concerns even if facts were cloudy.

Two particular journalistic tendencies obscured this defect. One was the tendency to quote the opinions of "officials" or "observers." "Observers" seems to have referred to media people themselves, and many of the "observations" communicated to the American public were little more than Caravelle Hotel speculation. Braestrup remarked of this tendency: "... the reader is left in the dark as to the relative importance, knowledge, or authority of the 'officials' or 'certain officers' quoted. None is identified as 'senior,' 'junior'--or' drinking companions.'"

A second tendency was the skill with which reporters chose their words to give impact. Ordinary events could be given undue emphasis with a well-chosen phrase or comparison. Marines fought "foot by blood-soaked foot." Saigon was in "rubble" and appeared "like the flattened German city of Dresden." Hue was described as "Monte Cassino" and "Iwo Jima" both. NVA troops were "suicidal" or "diehard." Standoff attacks were "devastating." Pacification was "torn to shreds." Events were "ominous." Even without explicit commentary, the choice of such words and phrases contributed to the dominant media theme that Tet was a "disaster" for the United States.

Flaw: Stateside editors and gatekeepers manipulated the inputs from their Vietnam reporters to support preconceptions or to emphasize the dramatic. Thus, journalism managers far from the scene altered the tone of the news.

Flaw: The press corps in Vietnam was ill fitted for the immensity of the task. At the time of Tet, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, had 179 American media representatives on its press roster, Perhaps only sixty, however, were active newsmen; the others were TV crews, relatives of reporters, stringers, free-lancers, and representatives of obscure publications. On the shoulders of these sixty, then, fell the necessity to report and interpret the most complex campaign in American history. They often lacked military experience, they were generally ignorant of the Vietnamese language and culture, and they deployed in and out of Vietnam on short tours, which gave them insufficient time to develop real expertise. Because of the competitive nature of news organizations, these sixty were not spread throughout Vietnam. Rather, they clustered in certain areas--Saigon, Da Nang, Hue, and Khe Sanh--duplicating each other's coverage and failing to report diverse stories from different areas. To get their stories into print, they had to ensure that they had "impact" and "significance." In addition, they had to beat deadlines and work on stories chosen by stateside editors. TV reporters had their own special pressures dictated by the need for visual drama, a quick story, and the economics of cable and satellite transmission. Some TV men recorded commentary to match film they never even saw.

SUMMING up the impact of the press, Braestrup argues that the Tet reporting was an extreme case of crisis-journalism. The result was a "portrait of defeat" for the allies because "the special circumstances of Tet impacted to a rare degree on modern American journalism's special susceptibilities and limitations." Braestrup's final chapter is a discussion of how the susceptibilities and limitations are unchanged, with a warning that a similar crisis could repeat the errors of Tet.

For that reason *Big Story* should be read, taught, and used at the Defense Information School and at all courses and schools for commanders. Significant portions could be developed into case studies and gamed, to avoid plowing through 792 pages of text. It seems in retrospect that more awareness of the press's limitations and techniques might have enabled military spokesmen to counter the misinterpretations. Careful reading of the book suggests ways that the military might have helped the press in its work, with the result of better reporting.

I suspect that a number of readers of this essay are now saying "Dammit! We knew the press was giving us the shaft even then, but no one would believe us because we were military!" This opinion, once widespread among military professionals, is a variant of another theme: that the politicians, press, and peace advocates stabbed us in the back in Vietnam.

This reminds me of an earthy analysis of military critics by one of my old commanders. "Whenever I hear someone say 'those guys are really screwed up,'" he would comment, "I can always expect to discount whatever he has to say. He's up to his own ass in alligators, can't solve his own problems, and he expects to be able to set someone else straight!"

Any thoughtful military reader of *Big Story* must sympathize with the problems imposed on the press by its organization and institutional procedures. The problems of the media should stimulate in military professionals the parallel need of the armed forces to examine internal flaws that impede mission performance. Who can criticize the press for short rotations and ignorance of Vietnamese culture when the same flaws characterized our military effort? What writer of officer efficiency reports can carp about the abuse of words by reporters? What military officer has not formed opinions and advocated programs based on incomplete facts, or facts interpreted to support a predetermined solution? The professional value of *Big Story*, then, is not limited to information officers. Rather, the book, in a fearless analysis of the limitations of one key American institution, the media, should evoke a like concern for our own military institution by professional officers.

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<http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/aureview/1978/nov-dec/bishop.html>