

# The power of photography in the vietnam war history essay

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



Photographs crystallize a moment, and form a communal memory. Photographs allow freedom of interpretation, vision being the only requirement. For this reason, photographs are highly contestable pieces of visual culture. This essay will examine the cleavage between the intent of the creator and the audience imbibing the image. This essay will evaluate the power of photography in the Vietnam War via two iconic photographs, that of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in 1963 and the extra-judicial execution of a Vietcong prisoner in 1968. Each of these pictures captured implicit American involvement in the Vietnam War. They are iconic and have been archived as symbols of war's horrors, their underlying theme being innocence persecuted. Another outcome of the Vietnam War was concretization of the media as an institution that had a grip on public perception. By splicing together these two pictures, I seek to underscore American mistakes that tarnished its image in Southeast Asia.

Black and white photography was in its prime in the early to mid twentieth century. Photography allows easy consumption due to its mass proliferation capabilities. The mobility of the portable camera as well as the wire services allowed the flourishing of the ubiquitous photo-story, stories told via photographs. The period of the Vietnam War represents a time that the media was unfettered and given free liberty in a war zone. With the confluence of opportunity, the technology and an impassioned press, a few photographs of the Vietnam War have reached iconic status. With photographs archived, their strong emotional identification and recognition by everyone in a public culture allows photographs to survive through the generations.

Self-immolation is an extreme form of political protest that represents the epitome of human frustration and anxiety. Durc's act culminated in a fiery end to announce to the world the plight of a community. Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in South Vietnam was supported by America. The minority Catholic regime was oppressive in its treatment of the Buddhist majority at Hue on Vesak day, 1963. Increased antigovernment rallies with threats of suicide were ignored by the press. This led to the self-immolation of Durc. This was an orchestrated theatre, on the set of a public street and designed to capture a global, western audience. Evidence of this could be seen in the monks telephoning photographer Malcolm Browne to be present what a monk called 'special event'. At the site, the monks were prepared with a banner that read 'A BUDDHIST PRIEST BURNS FOR BUDDHIST DEMANDS', as well as repeatedly announcing that 'A Buddhist Priest becomes a martyr' in English. President Kennedy was shocked, saying 'no news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world'. The Buddhists of Vietnam had reached its target audience, America's attention. The Diem regime would be removed by an American backed coup in November 1963.

Yet, the power of photography goes further. The intensity of the flames were carefully staged, the monks realized that by mixing equal parts of diesel and gasoline, a more intense and longer lasting flame would be produced, intensifying the smoke and ensured the grisly spectacle have enough time to be captured on film. The same photograph was wielded as a tool for North Vietnamese propaganda to label the South as puppets of American imperialism. This highlights the differential cognitive and affect a photograph

can have, dichotomizing intent and effect. It is one of the first instances that aided the growth of the media as an institution and may have been a precursor to the American government that the media was a force to be reckoned with.

The foremost aim of photojournalism is to capture a moment that has an underlying narrative. The visual power of Durc's immolation is raw and emotionally distressing. He is in the classic lotus position, calmly in the inferno. Durc's solitary self-sacrifice in the raging fire shows his great love for his people. Durc's shares a commonality with members of the sangha, his shaven head and saffron robes are a keen affirmation. The viewer knows that this act was premeditated due to his posture; a man unprepared would undoubtedly be more frantic. The shock effect of the picture is very strong. Buddhism is a peaceful religion; this act of self-harm telling the world about the sufferings of the Vietnamese Buddhist majority forces the viewer's raw emotions to the fore. Malcolm Browne's intent was merely to bring to cover the news. This is evidenced in his interview, where he insisted he merely was concentrating on doing his job, to send the horrifying photograph back to his agency.

The valorization of photography can be attributed to photography's evocative nature. Governments of both sides recognized the political power of Browne's photograph. For the Americans, the picture allowed them to see that the Diem regime was one that may not have been able to sustain their interests, as the Diem regime had lost its grip on power. With the situation worsening in Vietnam, Kennedy weighed the possibility of getting ' rid of

Diem'. The North promptly labeled the South as a puppet regime; the people were revolting due to American imperialism. In Browne's photograph, the open space around Durc, surrounded by his contemporaries signal that the order is now dictated by the monks. Chaos is thus inferred, and may reflect the chaos in Diem's regime and was likely to be the main catalyst in the change in regime.

The form of photography presents an inaudible narrative that persuades institutions such as the government to respond and seek to change and control the situation. The intent versus effect dichotomy of Browne's photograph is apparent in that the Durc's self-immolation led to copycat self-immolations protesting the Vietnam War, even in America. Browne's picture wasn't designed to rouse copycats to take extremist measures in the cause of egalitarianism and welfare of individuals in South Vietnam. For example, individuals belonging to Christianity and Catholicism also used self-immolation in America's domestic anti-war demonstrations. The perpetuation of these acts, among members of different faiths, shows how humanity can transcend faiths and seek solidarity via poignant images such as Durc's.

There is truth in the cliché, truth lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Photography's availability for free interpretation cuts into the lives of the photographed and the viewer. A classic example is the photo of the extrajudicial killing of a Vietcong prisoner in broad daylight, taken by Eddie Adams on 1st February 1968, a day after the Tet offensive launched by North Vietnam. Here, the prisoner grimaces as he is shot, his mouth open, hands bound. In the background, a soldier, teeth bared, has a face of extreme

distaste for the prisoner. Indeed, Eddie Adams confirms this as the Vietcong prisoner had 'killed many Americans'. A dichotomy emerges between those who were there and those who are the viewers. One cannot tease an entire story prima facie. Though the Vietcong may have killed Americans, a viewer in America would not know of this and may pass the verdict of General Loan's killing as barbaric. A viewer would not know that the executioner was a man who built hospitals and cared for the wounded. Adams himself firmly believed that he had 'killed' the general with his photo, ruining Loan's reputation with evidence that haunts an individual for life. Photography is concerned with the production of truth, yet photography itself cannot present the whole truth, stumbling due to the inexpressible nature of this very medium.

Photographs seal an icon for an eternity and can haunt a subject long after an event has ended. Photographs are only 'half-truths', lies even without manipulation. Even when General Loan moved to America and set up a pizza parlor after the war, the outcome was that others remembered him and defaced the walls of his restaurant with 'we know who you are.' It seems a person who has been incensed by a picture and its relationship with the Vietnam War, cannot control his feelings, such that it makes him undertake the process of defacing private property. The photograph's power steers people to take sides on a situation on an emotive level. The inability of photography to expire can 'kill' a man by virtue of the harassment and questions that a person is made to repeatedly visit. A photograph captures a moment in time, in General Loan's case, photography even captures the

bullet leaving the prisoners head. Such a macabre picture never allows a person forget the incident and the culpability of the person in that scenario. Photography has interwoven both Adam and General Loan.

Photography is a prefabricated endeavor, captured in an instant by the fast hands of the photographer. Yet photography is an imprecise profession, especially in the arena of photojournalism, which unable to leave the photographer unscathed emotionally. Even as photojournalists are surgical in their shots, they are not automatons. In the process of documentation of knowledge for the consumption of the public as well as media agencies, photographers are changed. Adam's emotive laden eulogy to General Loan in 1998 sums it up, ' I'm sorry (for taking the photo). There are tears in my eyes.'

Photojournalism within the context of 1968 may be seen as a subculture of that bites the hand that feeds it. It is argued that the freedom of the press is vital for the protection of individual rights and is an indicator of a benevolent democracy. Photojournalism presentation of critical news could eat at the legitimacy of a nation's government. To contextualize the situation, 1968 was a tumultuous time. There was the domestic tension between with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 as well as problems in the Vietnam War. In light of the times, perhaps photojournalists may have been the answer to the oft-asked question, ' Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?' wielding photography as a tool for the moral compass of America.

The media is an institution that has to judiciously choose to reproduce pictures that can pierce the American moral consciousness. Unfortunately, this constant piercing may lead to bloodletting of the state's moral legitimacy. As former US President Nixon observed, the media appears to be more 'cynical', and has little conception that they should share responsibility for building an atmosphere of common purpose. Similar threads can be drawn to Durc's self immolation five years earlier; the general's bold action in broad daylight explicitly hints that the streets of Vietnam are one of anarchy.

The photographs consciously or unconsciously subject the viewer to the lack of control America has over South Vietnam. America's inaction and inability to prevent the prisoner from having a fair trial and the monk from his self-immolation shatter any moral rhetoric that is presented to counter the photograph. The execution of the prisoner eats at the American government's legitimacy in Vietnam. Also, the political impact of this is that the media has an increasingly important voice to play in shaping a country's foreign policy response. Perhaps this suggests that the media has devolved somewhat from the government in the 1960s that it was allowed free reign on the battlefield seems to eat away at the Gramscian belief of cultural hegemony. The American government as the ruling elite was unable to control the fallout of the media and lost significant political capital. With the domestic fallout as well as other tensions including the expose of My Lai Massacre, the position of the photographer is unenviable. He cannot forsake



the injustice done to the prisoner, and he is likely to loathe the portrayal of America state in a negative light that may further polarize the nation.

The ability to produce new forms of knowledge and transmit them faster with the process of technology released new effects of power. Foucault's theory that the functioning of power is implicit in the production of truth points to the symbiotic relationship power has in legitimizing truth and vice versa. The picture of General Loan shooting the prisoner versus the self-immolation of Durc forces us to look at the intention and effects of each photograph.

Browne's photograph brought the focus of the world to bear down on the Diem regime that was massacring many people. Adam's photograph brought the world's focus to bear down on General Loan. Herein lay the unfairness of the photographic lens. Comparing the two, we see an American taking a picture and America's implicit responsibility to the deaths of these two men.

In conclusion, photography can capture a cross-section in time and intensify the horror of war via a simple click. News agencies that receive these pictures are a very sensitive position. That the Vietnam War was reported by a media with a generally free access may be a reason why the American military was keen to prevent another ' Vietnam War' scenario from happening, such that in other wars such as the Gulf War unfolded in realms of the hyperreal. Photography is an exercise in subjectivity, with easy replication and can be archived forever. This ease of replication makes it available for mass consumption, intensifying emotions which can overwhelm logic. Photography hampered the war effort in Vietnam. Photography's intent

for others can differ vastly from the interpretations due to its inherent partisanship.