

# [What evidence exists to demonstrate](https://assignbuster.com/what-evidence-exists-to-demonstrate/)

‘ Television brought the brutality of the war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not on the battlefields of Vietnam. ’ (Marshall McLuhan, 1975). What evidence exists to demonstrate that the American media coverage of the Vietnam War influenced its outcome? There are only two comprehensive inferences that can be drawn upon when assessing the impact and legacy of the reporting of the Vietnam War on America and its media; the impact was enormous and its legacy unending.

More than thirty years have passed since the American military withdrew from Vietnam, and in that time, the war has continued to permeate the cultural, and political landscape of America, impacting all subsequent war reporting and shaping the way in which the Government and the people of the country (and the rest of the world) view the media’s role within society. It was the first war where absolute freedom of the press was granted and where the technology was available to bring almost real – time media coverage to the citizens of America and the rest of the world.

The lasting effects of the media coverage of Vietnam can be seen in the reporting of every war since and unrestricted media access will most likely not be seen again in any future conflict. However, although its impact was such, is it fair to suggest that the way in which the media reported the war actually had an influence on its outcome? The debate over how much, if any, influence the media had over the war’s result has been a persistent one and is likely to continue for a long time.

Many academics, war veterans, military and government officials and citizens believe that the media played a near critical role in shaping the public’s attitudes towards the events in Vietnam and the course of the war itself. Others argue that Vietnam – media theory is a myth that deserves immediate debunking. In this essay I will examine any evidence that supports the media influence theory and look at the arguments of both sides in order to make a well-weighted conclusion.

Like most conflicts there are many misconceptions surrounding The Vietnam War – as journalist John Pilger notes in his book Heroes -‘ More than a third [of Americans] could not say which side America had supported and some believed that North Vietnam had been ‘ our allies’” (Pilger, J. , (2001), p. 178). The Vietnam conflict spanned of a period of over thirty years and was America’s ‘ most divisive and least successful foreign war’ (Hallin, D. , (1986), The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam, p. 105).

The political and cultural sense of unease after WW2 led to the ‘ Cold War ideology’ which left the world’s two super powers – the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States at stalemate – neither side wanting to go to direct war with each other but also not willing to succumb to the other’s political aims. America’s involvement in Vietnam dates back to the French Indochina War in 1946 – for nearly ten years the USA provided France with over $ 10 million in economic aid to help the country hold on to its South-East Asian colony.

The French eventually admitted defeat suing for peace at the 1954 Geneva Conference and Vietnam was temporarily partitioned with a communist government in the north and non-communist government in the south and a planned election in 1956 to unify the country. It was widely assumed that the Ho Chi Minh the leader in the North would win the election making the country a communist nation. America was the only nation to oppose this agreement.

Within a year there were claims of the government in the north – the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or simply North Vietnam as they were later called in the press – inflicting horrors on the people of the north advocating a need for American military aid and involvement, and by 1960 the US government had committed $350 million in economic aid and 3, 200 ‘ military advisors’ (increasing to 16, 000 by 1963) to support the South.

This was presented as a mission to liberate the people of the North from communist aggression however America’s motives prove to be more sinister as theorist Noam Chomsky comments ‘ It was feared that successful independent development [in Vietnam] under a radical nationalist leadership might “ cause the rot to spread”, gradually eroding US dominance in the region and ultimately causing Japan, the largest domino, to join in a closed system from which the US would be excluded… ’ (Chomsky, N, (1984) The Vietnam War in an Age of Orwell, Race and Class, p. 44. quoted by Pilger, J. , (2001). p. 182. ) This proved to be one of the many propaganda missions played out by the American government to convince the people of America of the just and honourable need to go to war in Vietnam – although notably during these crucial, early stages of the war, much of America’s military involvement and activities in Vietnam went unreported in the American media and it is argued that ‘[the] American press was simply not interested in Vietnam’ (Wyatt, C. , (1993), Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War, p. 67).

As mentioned above the American citizen’s exposure and thus interest in the war in Vietnam was limited and seemed to be distracted by more ‘ domestic’ issues during the early 1960s such as the Civil Rights movement. Also, reporting in Vietnam at the time was very restricted, with South Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem in strict control of the foreign press resulting in the deportation of two reporters in 1962 – ‘ Homer Bigart of the New York Times and Francois Sully, a stringer for Newsweek, both of whom had condemned the repressive measures of the regime [in the south] and derided its military capabilities. (Maitland, T. , & Weiss, S. , (1982) Raising the Stakes, p. 59). This only served to prove however, that the American media was not critical or in question of America’s policy in Vietnam or that American involvement was justified – their issues lay instead with the Diem Government and were over tactics not principles as Philip Knightley confirms in his classic study of war correspondents -‘… ot questioning the American intervention itself, but only its effectiveness. Most correspondents, despite what Washington thought about them, were just as interested in seeing the United States win the war as was the Pentagon. What the correspondents questioned was not American policy, but the tactics used to implement that policy. ’ (Knightley, P,. (1986) The First Casualty, From the Crimea to the Falklands: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker, p. 54). Television news was at the height of development during this time and it is easy to make the crude connection between the TV coverage of the war and its final outcome as Hallin notes that ‘ those who have argued that the media played a decisive role in the defeat of American aims in Vietnam almost invariably focus on television as the principal cause of what they see as a national failure of will’ (Hallin, D. (1986), p. 105). In 1963 the major news broadcasters CBS and NBC changed their evening news slots from fifteen to thirty minutes. This coincided with two major political events in the War – the 1963 Buddhist crisis and the overthrow of President Diem and so ‘ the first exclusive stories the expanded shows were able to broadcast had to do with Vietnam’ (ibid).

However this did not signal the beginning of keen interest in Vietnam from the American media and America’s citizens – it would not be until 1965 that interest from the media would increase when President Johnson (influenced by the Gulf of Tonkin incident – a supposed attack by North Vietnam on a US aircraft carrier) took the ultimate decision to increase military intervention and ordered the deployment to South Vietnam of major U. S. round, air, and naval forces, beginning the full-scale phase of the Vietnam War. As US military involvement increased so did news coverage with international news corporations in Vietnam totalling to 419 by 1966 compared to the 40 there in 1964. Again, although interest was there, there was limited debate or discussion regarding the escalation of the American involvement and television coverage as described by Hallin was ‘ neither critical in tone nor graphic in its depiction of combat’ (ibid).

Knightley also comments on the broadcast media of this time as being safe in its approach to reporting the war, avoiding the stimulation of any debate regarding American foreign policy in Vietnam – ‘ American television executives showed little “ courage” in their approach to Vietnam and saw the conflict as “ an American war in Asia – and that’s the only story the American audience is interested in”, while they let other, equally important aspects of Vietnam go uncovered’ (Knightley, P. (1986), p. 456) – namely the growing resistance in South Vietnam to American occupation. The 1968 Tet Offence is seen by many as a turning point in the war both politically and socially. Many blame the media coverage of the Tet Offence for shifting the American public into an ‘ Anti-war stance’ and it is true to say that graphic footage was aired more so during this time than any other periods of the Vietnam War.

However as Wyatt points out ‘ Tet was less the occasion for a sudden shift in such opinion than it was a confirmation of characteristics and trends that had been around a long time’ (Wyatt, C. , (1993), p. 182) and although critics still continue to argue the concept that media coverage of the Tet Offence led to the ‘ loss of will’ amongst the general public they admit that no empirical data supports their conclusions (Braestrup, P. , (1977) Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington, p. 705. Vol. 1).

Another ‘ turning point’ in the alleged anti-war sentiment within the media also came in 1968 when beloved CBS anchorman (known as the ‘ most trusted man in America’) Walter Cronkite, influenced by the Tet decided to visit Vietnam for himself and conduct a special report in which he described the war as unwinnable and being held in a stalemate as both sides continued to use force suitable to bring the world closer to ‘ the brink of cosmic disaster’. President Johnson is reported to have said after Cronkite’s report was aired ‘ If I’ve lost Cronkite I’ve lost middle America’. (Hallin, D. Vietnam on Television, (Online article). However, Hallin challenges this and notes that although the media (and Cronkite) had ‘ certainly dramatized the collapse of consensus on the war… it did not create that collapse’ (ibid). He goes on further to dismiss the media influence theory – ‘ By the fall of 1967, polls were already showing a majority of Americans expressing the opinion that it had been a “ mistake” to get involved in Vietnam; and by the time of Cronkite’s broadcast, two successive secretaries of Defence had concluded that the war could not be won at reasonable cost.

Indeed, with the major changes in television’s portrayal of the war still to come, television was probably more a follower than a leader in the nation’s change of course in Vietnam’ (ibid). In conclusion, as mentioned earlier in the argument, it is easy for crude connections to be made when assessing the impact of the media and TV coverage in Vietnam – this was the first true ‘ televised war’.

Many will always consider the media to have been a hindrance to American aims in Vietnam and many theorists continue to argue that graphic accounts of war, distorted or genuine, weaken the public’s resolve at home insisting that the anti-war sentiment came about because television brought the horrors of war into peoples’ living rooms. However there will always be those who believe the media acted with integrity in Vietnam and fought relentlessly for the truth to be served to the people of America and for justice to be brought to the people of Vietnam.

I believe that the media did contribute to the climate within which policy makers brought the war to an end by the way in which some big stories were reported after 1968, and I feel this can be contributed to what is no know as ‘ war fatigue’, however does this make the media a direct influence on the outcome of the war? Or does it make for just another social / cultural factor? News president Reuven Frank commented that it was just another case of “ the messenger being blamed for the message’’ and I can sympathise with this view.

In whatever case the American media was not as opposed the American effort in Vietnam as officials and critics like to remember and when looking at the facts, even to say that America lost to Vietnam is somewhat questionable as Pilger states ‘[America] forced millions of people to abandon their homes and used chemicals in a manner which profoundly changed the environmental and genetic order, leaving a once bountiful land petrified. At least 1, 300, 000 people were killed and many more were maimed and otherwise ruined; 58, 022 of these were Americans and the rest were Vietnamese. President Reagan has called this a “ noble cause”’. Pilger, J (2001), p. 190). After digesting facts such as these it seems the debate over what caused the end of the war is not significant. Word Count: 2171 Bibliography \* Braestrup, P. , (1977) Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington. Boulder CO, Westview Press, Vol 1. \* Chomsky, N,. (1981) Radical Priorities, Montreal, Black Rose Books. \* Chomsky, N, ; Herman, E, S,. (1988) Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media, New York, Pantheon Books. \* Davis, N. , (2008) Flat Earth News, place Chatto ; Windus . Hallin, D,. (1986) The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam. New York, Oxford University press. \* Knightley, P,. (1986) The First Casualty, From the Crimea to the Falklands: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press. \* Landers, J,. (2004) The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam, Columbia, University of Missouri Press. \* Maitland, T. , ; Weiss, S. , (1982) Raising the Stakes, Boston, Boston Publishing Company. \* Pilger, J,. (2001) Heroes, London, Vintage. \* Schmitz, D F,. (2005) The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion.

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