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The Press and the Tet Offensive

Keith Gunter
History 407
1st Reader: Dr. Sil
2nd Reader: Dr. Rector
The Tet Offensive was a military setback for the National Liberation Front, yet it was a considerable psychological and political victory for them. One of the major aspects of this victory is the fact that Tet turned the United States media against its own government. It widened the credibility gap and emboldened critics of the war. In the long run of the Viet Cong's victory is how Tet managed to change United States policy toward the Vietnam War. The assertions I have made thus far are shown in Newsweek's coverage before and after Tet. The purpose of my paper is to describe Newsweek's and U.S. News and World Report's coverage of Tet, show how each magazine's opinion of war policy changed after Tet, to show that these magazines felt betrayed by the government, and how this betrayal was responsible for a bias assessment of Tet. I also intend to compare what each magazine said about Tet to that of later authors in order to prove just how bias the magazines were.

It is necessary to understand the story of Tet before I start to talk about Newsweek's coverage of the event. The morning of January 31 about 80,000 North Vietnamese regulars attacked over 100 cities in South Vietnam. They attacked 35 of the 44 provincial capitals, 36 towns, and numerous villages and hamlets. These regulars had been covertly entering Saigon weeks before in preparation for Tet. The goal of Tet was not only to attack population centers, but also to send a message
to the United States that the North Vietnamese had only begun to fight. Another goal of Tet was to cause a popular uprising against the government of Vietnam. (1)

The Communist forces were encouraged to...

move forward aggressively to carry out decisive and repeated attacks in order to annihilate as many American, Satellite, and Puppet troops as possible in conjunction with political struggles and military proselyting activities... Display to the utmost your revolutionary heroism by surmounting all hardships and difficulties and making sacrifices as to be able to fight continually and aggressively. Be prepared to smash all enemy counter attacks and maintain your revolutionary standpoint under all circumstances. Be resolute in achieving continuous victories and secure the final victory at all costs. (2)

So one can imagine that the Viet Cong forces were in a state of frenzy during Tet.

From a military standpoint, Viet Cong suffered a major defeat at Tet, having lost half of their committed forces and a fourth of their regular force. They failed to achieve any kind of tactical advantage or strategic position. Yet, the psychological victory they achieved was worth more than any of these losses. The United States troops became demoralized because their superiors had previously told them that they were winning the war. (3)

The objective of the offensive was to end the stalemate by speeding up the revolutionary process. One of the big goals was to destroy the Saigon regime through a general uprising. By launching multiple military offensives to wear down the regime, the North Vietnamese hoped to achieve victory or a favorable negotiated settlement. (4)

Having given a brief summary of what Tet was about, I would
like to discuss how Newsweek felt about Vietnam and the United States policy toward Vietnam before the Tet Offensive. The October 23, 1967 issue of Newsweek talked about a press conference and the debate that occurred over how the war should be handled. The evidence suggests that Newsweek was in favor of the war because various articles make figures like Secretary of State Dean Rusk look like a champion who is defending Johnson's policies against the his cowardly critics. This is suggested in statements that say, "For Dean Rusk, the decision to counterattack in force afforded a welcome opportunity to lambaste his critics in public with the same kind of raw-hiding he has meted out to them in private, and he set about this task with rare fire." (5) Newsweek continued and said, "He told advocates of withdrawal from Vietnam that such a move would place the United States in 'mortal danger' and could lead to 'catastrophe for all mankind.'" (6) The reporting that emphasized these kinds of remarks suggests that Newsweek is going along with the "Domino Theory". The "Domino Theory" states that should one country fall to communism, then all others around it will do the same. I should not be too critical of Newsweek for buying into this theory, because most of the nation believed in it. (7)

Newsweek's tone changed considerably after the Tet offensive. I think that one of the most dramatic articles that is written about Tet is the one they have entitled "Hanoi Attacks". This article depicted how Tet dealt the Americans a major psychological blow, and what Tet accomplished for the
North Vietnamese.

"Hanoi Attacks" starts out by talking about how the confident Americans were taken off guard by a "well-coordinated guerrilla offensive" that even managed to "penetrate the very U.S. Embassy compound."(8) Statements like this seem to contradict what many authors today know about Tet. Many think that the offensive was not very well coordinated and that the attack against the United States Embassy was easily repulsed. For example, Marc Gilbert in his book entitled The Tet Offensive states that Tet, "failed to achieve the objective of a mass uprising and ultimately led to a weakening of Communist military strength in the South for several years."(9)

"Hanoi Attacks" discussed three major, immediate consequences of Tet. The first was, "It put a damper on talk of a bombing pause and a quick move to the negotiating table." This first consequence seems to be pure reporting, and it seemed to be a reasonable conclusion. The second consequence stated, "The VC offensive opened Westmoreland and the Administration to criticism for failing to head off attacks." When Newsweek talked about this consequence, it seems to be pointing out how narrow-minded the United States military and government are by thinking only about Tet's military impact. Newsweek suggested that the government and the military failed to see the devastating psychological impact that Tet had on all the folks at home. The finally, the magazine states that, "Shocking as the week's developments were, they were not likely to alter the fundamental American commitment to see the war through to
an honorable conclusion or change the Administration's basic policy." Newsweek seems to still be a little loyal toward the war effort, even though the magazine's articles seemed more skeptical. I think that Newsweek is walking a fine line between being overly critical, and not critical enough of the situation in Vietnam. (10)

Everett G. Martin writes in Newsweek an interesting article about the devastating effect that Tet had upon South Vietnam. He also seems to be critical toward any optimistic outlook about the impact of Tet. For example, he calls a statement made by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that the Vietnameses resentment of Tet will hurt the Viet Cong, as politically "wishful thinking." Martin also points out that the Saigon government and the Americans have failed to win the people over. For example, he states, "And one can only imagine the reaction of the citizens of the heavily populated cities of Saigon, Cholon, and Hue to being bombarded by their own planes in the desperate effort to kill the guerrillas in their midst." (11)

Kenneth Crawford wrote an article for Newsweek that compared Tet to Pear Harbor. He speculated that Tet could be a "costly coup" for the Viet Cong. But he also conceded that it now gives General Giap the initiative in the war. He states, "For the time being, anyway, General Giap can call the tune." He also asserts that the attacks were more telling in the United States than in Vietnam. Crawford's optimism is founded upon two entirely different situations that are not even remotely similar. His article only serves to bring uninformed citizens false hope
that Vietnam is not a situation where the enemy is war itself.

(12) Newsweek really started being negative toward the war in a March 18 article that talked about how the U.S. troops are on equal terms with the Viet Cong no matter how many more are sent. It is no coincidence that this grim prediction comes after Tet. This article is further proof that Newsweek is growing even more pessimistic after the Tet offensive. I find it ironic that Tet was really a military victory for the United States due to the large amount of casualties inflicted upon the Viet Cong, and yet articles like this one make it sound like the United States troops were pounded. Newsweek states, "U.S. commanders have sought to maintain four-to-one combat superiority. But in the aftermath of the Communist Tet offensive, that advantage has virtually vanished. Today, for the first time in the war, the U.S. and its allies face their enemy on a one-to-one basis." Statements like these make Tet look like the reason for a grim situation that I think has been blown way out of proportion. The only major damage that Tet caused to the U.S. troops was the psychological damage that occurs after any kind of surprise attack, and of course the loss of life. (13)

The article that I just mentioned extensively describes the siege of Khe Sanh and how it is a major setback to the United States. The only problem in this idea is that Khe Sanh was never a major objective of the Viet Cong. In fact it was merely a diversion for U.S. troops so they would be less prepared for
Tet. Yet Khe Sanh served as a major point in the case against any kind of optimism for the U.S. military position in Vietnam and was given far too much significance in my opinion. (14)

This very article continues to berate the United States policy in Vietnam and really starts to get critical toward the end. This is apparent when it says, "From the spring of 1965, when U.S. troops were ordered into combat for the first time, the war has been progressively 'Americanized' to the point where today the Saigon government and its army sometimes seem almost like supernumeries." Newsweek has clearly shifted their opinion of the war at this point. It is unfortunate that it took an incident like Tet before Newsweek changed their mind. (15)

In another article, Newsweek continues to point out failures in United States policy that relate to Tet. My favorite quote in this article begins, "The Tet offensive-those three brutal weeks that may have been only the first part of the Communists winter-spring campaign has exposed the utter inadequacy of the Administration's war policy." Newsweek seems to become very critical of the United States government at this point. It is interesting how Newsweek's views on United States policy in Vietnam changed from 1967 to 1968. They seem to be on the offensive themselves in this article. (16)

Newsweek really paints a dismal picture of events in Vietnam in the article I just mentioned. I say this because it has many justified arguments that make the situation seem very hopeless. Once again, Tet can be given a great deal of credit for these arguments. It shows just how unpopular the war is
at this time, and how bold Newsweek has become in its criticisms. I think that the magazine had crossed the line with their boldness when they stated, "And those who just went along-as most people usually do." They are referring to how people went along with what Johnson told them in this quote, and they seem to be implying that they knew all along that Johnson was lying to the American people. The benefit of hindsight can make people arrogant, and I suppose Newsweek is no exception. I think that Newsweek is very aware of the fact that the average person won't remember what they read a few issues back. Consequently, the magazine can get away with acting like they knew all along.(17)

My final article is yet more proof that Newsweek has blown Tet out of proportion from a military standpoint. The magazine still may be reacting out of their feelings of betrayal in this article. This is apparent when Newsweek states, "Suddenly they realized the war was not being won, that our generals had lost the initiative, that the South Vietnamese would not fight seriously, that the attempt to win over the South Vietnamese peasants by 'pacification' had collapsed, that our own troops were on the defensive."(18) This quote shows an ignorance of the military situation after Tet and it belittles the valor of the ARVIN forces which managed to repel the invaders in almost every attack. The only truth in this quote is the obvious assertion that "pacification" had collapsed, and the fact that our troops were on the defensive. Both of these assertions are natural results of a large offensive. (19)

Newsweek seems to lean toward the government's side before
Tet and lean toward the anti-war movement after Tet. The fact that *Newsweek* was misled by the government caused them to be less objective in their reports, which at times strayed from the truth. Yet *Newsweek* was not alone in their bias reaction to Tet as the next part of my paper will demonstrate.

*U.S. News and World Report* was another magazine that overreacted to the Tet Offensive. They were on the side of the government and the war effort when they wrote a May 1967 article entitled "People of the Week" in which they honored General William C. Westmoreland the commander of United States forces in Vietnam. Upon his arrival in Vietnam, he was portrayed as a hero who had come to champion democracy. The article does not seem to be critical of the fact that the general was asking for more troops, spending, and sacrifice. The article seems to commiserate with the general stating that he is not able to fight the war the way he wants to due to orders from Washington that he must follow. The article even considered the general as a candidate for presidency. (20)

Now that I have given an example of an article in *U.S. News and World Report* written before Tet, I will give an example after the offensive. This highly critical article entitled "Why a Half Million Americans Can't Win the War" on March 25 1968 really creates a dismal vision of the military situation in Vietnam. The author's main point has to do with the the fact the Saigon government is so weak that is a liability to the United States forces. I find it interesting that in the previous article about General Westmoreland, the United States
troops were the champions defending the weak Saigon government. Yet now this article is almost blaming them for our supposedly vulnerable position. It is clear to me that Tet has influenced this change in attitude toward the military in South Vietnam. The article talks about how ineffective the United States' defensive strategy was at this point in the war, yet our search and destroy plans before proved equally ineffective. I believe that this has also been tainted by Tet's impact upon this magazine. (21)

The third article in U.S. News and World Report dated July 8, 1968 is entitled "Can Vietnam Fight it's Own War?" and is further proof of a post Tet bias assessment of the war. This article makes me think that this magazine has become rather impatient with the war and wants South Vietnam's forces to be able to fight for themselves so the United States can pull out of Vietnam entirely. I sense that this article is saying that the war can't be won, so the U.S. should prepare to pull out. The author feels that the blame should be placed upon the White House for the sorry condition of the the South Vietnamese Army. Clearly the magazine has made it's mind up that the U.S. need to pull out of Vietnam, and the way in which they write the article suggests that this is a common belief. (22)

The accounts I have given from Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report will now be compared to what more current authors have written to provide further evidence for my assertion that a bias did exist at that time. An excellent book written by William M. Hammond talks about the bias of the media and why
they reacted the way they did. According to this work, many other journals changed their mind about how well the war was going after Tet. These journals considered Tet to be a major turning point in the war and that peace was the only option left. One example would be the Christian Science Monitor which declared that the U.S. could suffer defeat in Vietnam. Another article in the Wall Street Journal was also very critical of the situation stating, "The South Vietnamese government, with all the vast aid of the U.S., has revealed its inability to provide security for large masses of people in countryside and city." (23)

Another clear example of a news bias right after Tet would be when Robert McNamara approved a report to Congress that said, "We cannot provide the South Vietnamese with the will to survive as an independent nation... or with the ability and self-discipline a people must have to govern themselves." Right after this report appeared the news media picked up on it. The Christian Science Monitor basically reduced the statement to saying that the victory was up to the South Vietnamese in the end. Newsweek called the report "McNamara's swan song" and underscored the secretary's statement that progress in South Vietnam had been uneven. (24)

Yet another example of mistaken reporting was during the Tet Offensive when the U.S. embassy was attacked. The reporters could not see more than the upper floors of the building at the time, yet they heard shooting coming from that general direction. Consequently, they took the word of the officers
at the scene and filed mistaken reports saying that the lower floors were occupied, when the only part that managed to be breached was the outer wall before the guerillas were killed. Even after the news media was shown the error of their reporting by the State Department in Washington and by General Westmoreland, they stood by their original error. In essence, they trusted the word of the military policemen at the scene over that of the commanding general of the United States army. This caused NBC News anchorman Chet Huntley to tell the American people that night that the enemy occupied the roof of and inside the embassy. This turned out to be absolutely wrong, and reflected more where the United States marines were located instead. (25)

To show the extent of coverage that this war had I turn to a book by Frances FitzGerald in his book entitled "Fire in the Lake" which gives an interesting account. By the beginning of 1966, about five hundred journalists were present in Vietnam. These included, "senior editors from New York, cub reporters from home-town papers, Ivy League graduates, crime reporters with two-syllable vocabularies, spaced-out young photographers, combat veterans of Korea and the Second World War -- everything, in fact, except a determined opponent of the war." At this time, the press generally accepted the leadership of the president, American policy, and the idea that the war could be won rather quickly. They also assumed that the Americans would take control of the war. For these reasons, it seems ironic that these journalists turned against the war effort
so quickly after the Tet Offensive. (26)

There is an interesting commentary about U.S. News in a book called *The Irony of Vietnam* which sheds some light on the magazine. *U.S. News* was considered to be a conservative journal and in the early 1960s its editor had vigorously criticized the growing defeatism in United States policy toward letting the Soviet Union and the Communists push the United States around. At the start of 1966 *U.S. News* pushed hard for victory in Vietnam and prodded the administration to do more when they said, "What the U.S. is doing in Vietnam is the most significant example of philanthropy...in our times...for if imperialism becomes dominant, the right of peoples everywhere to determine their own form of government will be forfeited." Statements like this contrast sharply with the attacks and blame that they place upon the U.S. government in the article given of examples of their work after the Tet Offensive. It is hard to have a lot of confidence in a magazine that shifts from prowar to anti-war so quickly when things don't always go as planned. (27)

To serve as a comparison between the dismal accounts that the media gave of Tet and what actually happened one could look to George C. Herring's account of Tet in his book *America's Longest War* which gives good commentary about the effects of Tet. According to Herring, Tet did manage to catch the United States and South Vietnam off guard. American intelligence had picked up a few signs that the offensive was coming, yet they were so occupied with the battle at Khe Sanh that they viewed it as just a diversionary tactic. The U.S. did indeed
underestimate the enemy's ability to continue to make war even after heavy losses. (28)

Herring reminds us that even though the U.S. and South Vietnam forces were taken be surprise, they managed to recover quickly. The timing of the Tet battles were not very well executed because some of the attacks came prematurely giving warning of others. In most cases, the North Vietnamese were easily repelled, yet the city of Hue remained the exception. Hue took about three weeks to liberate and cost the United States and South Vietnamese five hundred men, not to mention the nearly five thousand civilians killed. Yet Hue was the exception and not the rule to these attacks upon the cities. The Vietcong were estimated to have lost as much as 40,000 troops, and they would never fully recover. This information supports my claim that the media made more out of Tet than they should have, and proves that they overreacted. (29)

A group of authors who wrote Can We Win In Vietnam have some good commentary about the effects that the press had on our country in Vietnam. These authors are Frank Armbruster, Raymond Gastil, Herman Kahn, William Pfaff, and Edmund Stillman. They warn us that the press have a way of distorting reality, and this was indeed the case in Vietnam. These authors warn about the power of the press to make fantasy seem like reality and state that more than one nation has fallen due to this. (30)

The book that the above authors have written was done in 1968. This book carries a unique pessimism toward the war that
one can detect in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. This is obvious when they are talking about the situation in Vietnam and state, "a situation in which the United States, by a series of incomparable blunders, has involved itself in the fortunes of an incompetent and unworthy elite, allowing the standard of national independence--and progress to be seized by the Communist-dominated Viet-Cong, which is the fortunate lagatee of our mistakes." It is angry words like these that support my postion that many who wrote about the war during that time felt betrayed and carried their own bias into their work. One should not judge them for their bias, one should merely trying to point out its exisstance and how it effected their work. (31)

Herring's book gives a better account of what really happened at Tet then the two magazines cited previously. He argues that to write an objective account of the Vietnam War would have been hard to do because of the powerful emotions that it generated for people on both sides of the conflict. When the Pentagon Papers were released in 1971, much hidden information about the war came to light. Herring also draws upon material recently opened from the presidential libraries the *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* had no access to during the time of Tet. The magazines previously cited, obviously had no access to these papers and consequently they missed out on the behind-the-scenes information that they provided. (32) Any material written before these papers were released will not only have lacked the objectivity that at least
two years after the Tet offensive could give, but also would not have had all the facts to make an accurate assessment of the situation. So one could say that most sources written after the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 that also made use of this information would give an assessment of Tet that would be of similar quality as Herring's.

To prove my above argument, one should compare what Peter Braestrup has said in his book entitled The Big Story to Herring's account of the situation. There is an excellent quote that Braestrup took from a February 12, 1968 article of Newsweek that attacks official claims that Tet was an enemy failure:

Westmoreland and his commanders were clearly caught short by the scope and intensity of the raids... And they insisted on reading the communists' objectives in strictly military-rather than political or psychological-terms. Thus, by this reasoning, the enemy's heavy casualties and failure to hold most of the urban objectives he seized spelled defeat. The other side of the coin was far bleaker...

In Hue and elsewhere last week, the Vietcong showed that they could still be devastatingly effective—a lesson not lost on the people. (33)

The following week Newsweek continued to attack administration claims of enemy defeat by referring to their over optimistic claims:

Many Americans thought that Tet represented the sort of "victory" the United States could ill afford. For one thing, U.S. casualties—920 killed and 4,560 wounded—were a record high for the war. But even that fact, painful as it was, did not disturb the U.S. psyche as much as the puncturing of countless official claims, made over a period of years, that the United States was winning... (34)

Braestrup thinks that the reason Newsweek considered Tet such a success for the Viet Cong was because Newsweek focused so much on Tet's negative effects on the United States public
opinion and the imponderables of Vietnam. These include, "the possible impact of allied troop withdrawals to defend the cities, leaving rural areas open to 'communist encroachments,' and the alleged loss of 'battlefield initiative' by U.S. forces." (35) Braestrup seems to think that Newsweek is really reaching when it quotes an anonymous "U.S. intelligence expert": "Personally, (he said) I'm discouraged," as further proof. (36)

Braestrup is further critical of Newsweek when he talks about them being too concerned with the siege at Khe Sanh to notice that the "battlefield initiative" was either with the Americans, or shared by both sides. Newsweek only saw the damaged cities, but failed to notice the United States troops who were hard at work in the upper Delta. They also did not even mention the South Vietnamese forces who not only fought well during Tet, but were also recruiting, recuperating, and worried about more raids against the cities by the Viet Cong. (37)

Looking back on Tet, Braestrup surmises that no newsman was capable during February and March of 1968 to judge if the enemy's losses and tactical failures were a significant military setback. This kind of judgment needed a understanding of military matters, and an idea of what Hanoi was capable of. The press could not have known what Hanoi was capable of because even the United States intelligence agencies were arguing about this. They would have had to have the power to see into the future make such a judgment. Braestrup thinks that the newsmen should have only reported the facts and then just wait
to see what happens next. (38)

*Newsweek* had very little facts to support the dismal picture the described about the situation of the war after Tet. This did not stop them from attacking official claims that Tet was a military victory for the United States because they strayed from the facts. Braestrup said that the media turned to "psychoanalysis" of the South Vietnamese, and attempts to find out "who held the initiative." They sought to make their audiences understand why the Administration was "wrong" and why Hanoi had achieved a great success in South Vietnam. Braestrup concludes this chapter of this book very well when he states, "At best, this was overwrought instant analysis; at worst, it was vengeful exploitation of a crisis. Historically, it proved unfounded." (39)

Braestrup devotes an entire section of his book to the analysis that *Newsweek* gave on Tet during February-March of 1968 and how they gave extensive attention to enemy performance. He begins with pointing out some of the language they used that had its own unique bias to it. For example, the North Vietnamese regulars were constantly referred to as "tough" and the enemy activity was almost always considered "ominous" in their articles. The enemy was considered to not have any flaws and almost perfect. (40)

Braestrup continues his critical account of *Newsweek*’s reporting by listing facts about Tet that they could have included but chose not to. First, the Viet Cong’s lack of coordination in battle made them unable to reinforce the
positions they took over. Second, their plans to capture the Saigon radio station and South Vietnamese armor failed. Third, important strategic bridges were not destroyed. Fourth, local Viet Cong commanders did not commit their major units fast enough, thus losing their early momentum. (41) These points support what Herring has said about Tet and shows that Newsweek decided to leave out some important facts.

Newsweek had given the impression that the Viet Cong were "badly surprised" to find that the allies would use firepower against them in urban areas with large populations. This statement has been described as "debatable" by Braestrup. Newsweek was the only one to make the claim that "So confident were the communists ...that they placed an order at a renowned Chinese restaurant in Cholon for 400 meals to celebrate their victory." (42)

Newsweek had made it seem like Hanoi ordered the Tet offensive out of desperation, as having had problems in Vietnam, Newsweek then suggested that the foe still had "battlefield initiative" from Tet. The only place the Viet Cong still had initiative was at Khe Sanh, which was also short lived. Even so, Newsweek depicted the U.S. command as being forced "to shift its tactics from search-and-destroy missions to the defense of fixed positions." (43)

The Journal of Contemporary History seems to agree with my assertion that the press painted a gloomy picture of Tet. This is shown when they were talking about the impact of Tet
on the media and said, "Gloomy parallels were all the rage on television back home, as commentators predicted that Khe Sanh would have to surrender, just as the French did at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, both instances of siege warfare, both commanded by the same North Vietnamese military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap." (40)

Kathleen Turner's book entitled Lyndon Johnson's Dual War helps to explain why a bias existed during Tet. She writes that the American people were shocked by the stories of Tet because the American correspondents were so stunned. Prior to Tet, reporters had to go out in the field to seek out skirmishes to cover. These reporters seldom were able to witness fighting. Tet changed this because the fighting suddenly became close to the Saigon-based news teams. This created an intense amount of coverage by media institutions not to mention the fact that it was a dramatic story. (41)

Many other factors added to the inability of reporters to grasp the wider context of Tet. First, would be a lack of familiarity with the Vietnamese language, culture, and countryside. Second, was the lack of mobility which damaged the reporter's motivation to see the wider context of the offensive. Turner took an observation about press during Tet from Peter Braestrup when he stated, "90 percent of the media accounts focused on Saigon, Khe Sanh, and Hue, where bureaus were established; reports on the rest of the war, which entailed 85 percent of the American troop deployments and 80 percent of American casualties, were based largely on government
information and the journalistic grapevine." (42)

The news reports of Tet described an opponent not only ready to continue the fight but also able to inflict major losses on both South Vietnamese and American troops, contrary to the image of an enemy whose spirit and military machine were almost broken by bombing raids and American strength. The reports also depicted the corruption of the South Vietnamese government and military with the scene of General Loan, the national police chief, shooting a prisoner in the head without any apparent reason. These reports described Khe Sanh and Hue as microcosms of the entire war. Turner quotes Braestrup again when he states, "the collective emanations of the major media were producing a kind of continuous black fog of their own, a vague conventional 'disaster image.'" (43)

After showing some of the factors that created a biased assessment of Tet it is now important to expand upon the theme that the media felt disillusioned after Tet. Walter Cronkite himself supports this theme during an interview printed in 1994 in American Heritage. When asked about his memorable broadcast in the aftermath of Tet and if he went into his trip to Vietnam before Tet skeptical he answered yes. He said that he thought that America's involvement in Vietnam from the beginning was correct. He thought that it was the right thing to help the South Vietnamese establish a democracy. He also stated that he was convinced that the United States was winning the war by the military. Cronkite talks about a conversation with the president of CBS News after Tet in which he stated, "You know,
this country is confused, we're all confused. How about my going out, having a look, and doing a first-person story? Just what does it look like to somebody who's shared this growing disillusionment over the years?" (44)

Now that we see that one of the most important newsmen also felt disillusioned it will be helpful to study the relation of the press to the government. Defining this relationship will help understand why the press felt disillusioned about Vietnam after Tet. The government policymakers during Vietnam were generally convinced that idea of global containment was true. This policy was accepted for more than two decades without much question. This included most intellectuals and experts as well. Global containment was the idea that communism had to be stopped from spreading to other countries. It included a monolithic view of communism which was the idea that all communism was the same brand that the Russians had. This Cold War mentality saw all communist countries as pawns of Russia. Johnson constantly insisted that he was not going to be the president that saw Vietnam go the way of China. These popular ideas of the time discouraged dissent from any skeptics in the government for many years. The press tended to share these worldviews with the government even after Tet seeing Vietnam as an exception to the rule. (45)

Yet the press had a powerful impact upon government policy. An article in the Naval War College Review entitled "Television and the Vietnam War" which has an important section about the effect of network news bias on Vietnam war policy. During the
Vietnam war, over half of the American people received their information about the war through television. The networks do indeed have an influence upon public opinion, and this was seen heavily in the Vietnam War. The director of CBS News in Washington has written, "When television covered it 'first' war in Vietnam it showed a terrible truth of war, the cynicism of many young people towards America, and the destruction of Lyndon Johnson's tenure of office." (46)

Even though the above argument may sound like it makes sense, there still is no complete agreement that televisions coverage of the war turned the public against the Administration's policy. One survey conducted by Newsweek even suggested that television coverage had instead motivated a majority of viewers to support the war effort. Also, Edward J. Epstein's survey of television producers and news editors for his 1973 book, News From Nowhere, stated that over two-thirds of people interviewed felt that network news had "little effect" upon American public opinion. So one can see that a consensus about this topic would be hard to find. (47)

Even if public opinion may not have been changed by the network news coverage, the politically minded policy makers are so sensitive to a potential change that they may change their war policy anyway. If the politicians perceive that television has the power to change public opinion even if they do not, then the truth of if television has this power would be a moot point. (48)

Before 1968, the television networks stood behind the oval
office. The media had bought into the president's position on intervention in Southeast Asia and the governments official reporting of the war. Even so, the shock of the Tet offensive in 1968 centered public attention on Vietnam and made it clear that the Administration had been giving a false account of the events in Vietnam. This article in the Naval War College Review supports my assertion that Peter Braestrup is an authority on this topic because they quote him twice while showing his opinion an abundance of respect. The first quote they used from him was when he observed that there were, "unmistakable reflections of strong media themes... in the Congressional rhetoric and in the discussion by the politically active and media-sensitive elites outside of Washington." (49) Tet seemed to have more effect upon the political leaders then the public on the whole. The article quotes Braestrup a second time stating that he found that "the press, politicians, and official Washington, through mutually reinforcing alarms, seem to have been more excited about the specific import of Tet than was the general public." (50) So one can see that the media had more influence upon the politicians then the general public.

An article by Danial C. Hallin in The Journal Of Politics printed in 1984 clarifies the way in which the media opposed the government during Vietnam. This article states that it is important to note that the increase in critical coverage of the war after the Tet offensive was not critical to the political system. Rather, it was directed at the administration and its policies. The political system was not a big issue
in Vietnam coverage which centered more on specific events, policies, and personalities. Times when the political system or popular beliefs, like the one that American foreign policy is concerned with democracy—did turn into an issue, coverage for the most part played a legitimating role. Also, coverage of the anti-war movement generally favored those who did not participate in it. Journalists tended to write that the United States policy had good motives even after the Tet offensive and the evacuation of Saigon. It seems that even after the war, the American public kept on believing in the system. (51)

In conclusion, a quote by Lyndon Johnson during a news conference in 1968 is interesting. When he was asked about how Tet may have changed his assessment of how well the United States had been doing in Vietnam, one part of his answer caught my eye that reads, "I do not believe when the American people know the facts, when the world knows the facts, and when the results are laid out for them to examine, I do not believe that they will achieve a psychological victory." (52) Today, even if the battles of Tet did not achieve a psychological victory in the military, politicians, or public of the United States, then it surely did within the press. In this case, perhaps victory within the press counted the most. Today, we can enjoy the benefits of having the facts of the Tet offensive. Perhaps if the press during Tet had these facts as well, then history may have taken another direction.
Endnotes


2. Gilbert, 21.

3. Gilbert, 22.


8. Newsweek, 36.


10. Newsweek, 36.

11. Newsweek, 63.


14. Newsweek, 34.

15. Newsweek, 35.


24. Hammond, 346.


27. Gelb, 172.


29. Herring, 8.


31. Armbruster, 179.

32. Herring, 7.


34. Braestrup, 141.

35. Braestrup, 141.

36. Braestrup, 141.

37. Braestrup, 141.

38. Braestrup, 142.


40. Braestrup, 173.

41. Braestrup, 175.

42. Braestrup, 176.

43. Braestrup, 176.


47. Turner, 218.


50. Mitchell, 47.


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