

of getting blown away. If you were out there with them, doing what they had to do, not trying to win promotions and decorations, then they'd do it all. . . . There are people in the Army now who say that the troops that went over to Vietnam were a bunch of bums. But the people who are doing the crying are the people who are at fault. It was bad leadership that made some of these troops into substandard performers. Men just won't go out and fight and die for somebody who doesn't care about them, never sees them, never shares their risks while they're out doing the bleeding. If the troops didn't perform like the generals wanted them to, it was because the generals weren't doing their job. It's that simple.

In addition to the problems associated with the excessive emphasis on promotions, a bureaucratic decision was in force to give as many career officers as possible "command time" by rotating men in and out of these command assignments on a six month basis. This fostered a "getting your ticket punched" mentality among certain career officers. A policy of six month assignments may have made the personnel records of many servicemen look better, but it didn't do much for the overall war effort. The theory behind this policy was that command time in a hostile environment was important to the career development of a professional officer. From the standpoint of winning the war, however, achieving military success was made more difficult when a senior officer was transferred to another assignment just when he was "getting the hang of his job." In fact, the very idea of requiring soldiers to serve only a one year tour of duty in Vietnam did not make a lot of sense from a military standpoint (although I will be the first to admit that, from a personal perspective, that was just fine with me). When many of us finally had developed the knowledge and expertise to be effective intelligence officers in Vietnam, it was just about time to go home. That was not a good way to run a war.

8

Reporting on the War

My own experience in the Delta had made me very skeptical about the news reporting on the war. This confirmed my initial impression formed in early 1966, while presenting the petition drive to Vice President Humphrey, that the mainstream press had turned against the war effort.

In *Roots of Radicalism*, two of the leading analysts of the American media's coverage of politics, Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter, refer to the "media breakthrough" of the New Left which they assert took place in late 1965, right around the time of the College Republicans' national petition campaign. Being in the middle of the battle, I would concur with their assessment:

Many liberal journalists either initially shared the sentiments of the antiwar demonstrators or had been converted by their arguments. But between the reformist sentiments of the antiwar protestors and the increasingly militant New Left elements, a widening gulf was

forming. The press coverage of the period seemed not to distinguish between the two. In this first period of "United front" antiwar activity, favorable articles on SDS and the movement appeared in radical journals like *The Nation*, liberal magazines like *The New Republic*, and even major mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. At the same time, Movement celebrities began to appear on national television programs. This development culminated in controversial appearances by radicals like (Tom) Hayden and (Stokeley) Carmichael on "The Dick Cavett Show."

Often, what American journalists were writing seemed to reflect little more than a superficial analysis of the conflict. From what I read, it appeared that a lot of reporters had preconceived opinions which shaped their coverage. For a few reporters, our side could do no wrong; according to their stories, we clearly were winning the war. More typically, however, journalists were vehement opponents of the war; their coverage reflected their hostility toward American policy in Vietnam.

One of the few exceptions to what had become by then my general rule that most American reporters in Vietnam wrote stories to conform to their ideological biases was Peter Kann of the *Wall Street Journal*. Kann was a hardworking journalist who did his best to report objectively on a war laden with ambiguities. He was particularly knowledgeable about the Viet Cong infrastructure and the political side of the war.

Kann came to Chau Doc while I was there to look into reports that hundreds of Cambodians, who supposedly had been operating their own private army in Cambodia, had turned themselves in to the Americans. In addition to turning in their weapons, they were seeking status as "chieu hois." At the time there was a major effort underway to encourage "chieu hois," who were Viet Cong guerrillas and other military opponents of the government, to come over to our side without fear of retribution. In fact, there were substantial rewards handed out to "chieu hois" for defecting. Admiral Zumwalt, then the American commander of our naval forces in Vietnam and a man who understood the value of public

relations, tried to turn this into a major PR victory for our side. Zumwalt had become well known for sending out what he called "Z grams" as a method of garnering press attention, and he alerted the media to this success story unfolding in Chau Doc.

There was only a slight problem with the story. These weren't legitimate chieu hois. I had talked to a few of the men through a Cambodian interpreter, and their stories conflicted as to where they had been based and what battle action they had seen. Most of the weapons they brought in with them were vintage World War II, of little or no use to anyone but collectors. With the assistance of my Vietnamese interpreter who uncovered some additional information, I finally pieced together most of the story and quickly contacted the Cambodian desk officer of Strategic Research & Analysis (SRA) in Saigon to tell him that these Cambodians weren't "chieu hois" who had defected from Cambodia but were Cambodians who lived in Vietnam and were trying to use this ruse to avoid the draft while picking up a little extra money for themselves.

Peter Kann was the only reporter who bothered to come to the scene of the story and check it out for himself. He figured out quickly what the truth was and was on his way. I imagine that the PR guys working for Zumwalt did some fancy footwork in order to make the Chau Doc "chieu hois" story, which they had promoted so heavily, fade away.

While I was stationed at SRA, the My Lai incident surfaced in a story by Seymour Hersch, who had been reporting on the war for the Dispatch News Service—an independent, leftist news organ.

A young OCS lieutenant named William Calley had overseen and participated in a massacre of innocent women and children in a small Vietnamese village known as My Lai. The mainstream media suddenly had the type of story that could truly embarrass the American war effort, and maximum publicity was given this tragic incident.

If all you learned about our young infantry officers in Vietnam was what the major media told you in the wake of the My Lai massacre, you wouldn't have a very high opinion of our young soldiers. But for every Lieutenant Calley, there were dozens of men like Captain Pete Scott who molded a group of Vietnamese

and ethnic Cambodians into an effective fighting force in a Viet Cong-infested area of the Delta known as Nui Co To, or the Seven Mountains.

Pete was loyal to the people who worked for him and respectful of the Vietnamese culture, and his men responded in kind. Captain Scott was a good officer and a fine human being, but you never read any stories about young officers like him in the *New York Times*. His wasn't a story mainstream journalists wanted to report. The only national magazine that I remember at the time that had anything good to say about our soldiers in Vietnam was the *Reader's Digest*. There was a particularly fine article on how American soldiers were trying to help Vietnamese kids in need, written by a young journalist named Ken Tomlinson (now editor in chief of the *Digest*), who had been one of our college Republican leaders from Virginia back in the Goldwater days.

Most Americans who got their news from the mainstream media publications like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the national television networks saw the Calley incident portrayed not as an aberration of American behavior in Vietnam, but as an example of how our young soldiers were treating the Vietnamese people. This false depiction of the "typical" American soldier as a murderer of innocent women and children not only had a negative impact at home in terms of public support for our soldiers, it also helped fuel an animosity toward our soldiers that led some opponents of the war to greet returning veterans by hurling epithets at them such as "Welcome home, baby killer."

In 1970, after returning from Vietnam, I was involved with the White House Fellowship program (more on this later). Time-Life hosted a reception and dinner for us in New York. Our host for the evening was Richard Clurman who was then publisher of the magazine group. Clurman had invited some prominent figures from the media including Mike Wallace of CBS, Sander Vanocur of NBC, and Warren Phillips, publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*. The evening was billed as an off-the-record exchange of views on government between the White House Fellows and leaders of the media.

At the reception, the waiters not only poured strong drinks but were quick to provide refills. I became concerned that some of the

White House Fellows might be a little too "open" in their comments as the evening wore on. Since the Fellows were special assistants to cabinet officers and high level White House officials, they had access to a lot of sensitive information. With people having a few drinks in them and put in a friendly mood to have a frank exchange of views with the media, one of our group might say something inadvertently that could hurt the administration and create problems for the Fellowship program itself.

After dinner, we retired to the board room where place cards had been set up for the approximately forty people. Each of us with the Fellowship program was seated next to a representative of the media. Richard Clurman of *Time* started the "dialogue" by launching into a discussion of the Nixon administration. In light of my concern that something said "off the record" by one of our people might create some problems for the program, I got the "bright idea" of changing the topic of discussion from the Nixon administration to the media's coverage of the war in Vietnam. That was easy enough to arrange since it was such an appropriate topic of conversation in light of the makeup of the assembled group. So instead of discussing the inner workings of the Nixon administration, we spent the rest of the evening listening to some leading members of the journalistic establishment give us their views on media responsibility in reporting on the war.

By that time, our media hosts were also "well-lubricated." As a result, they were much more frank in voicing their real sentiments on the war than they might have been otherwise.

One nationally-known network personality, Sander Vanocur, lamented that he had once said something positive about American efforts to oppose Communism in Vietnam. He then proceeded to denounce everything associated with our war effort. As we listened to him rant on and on about all the terrible things we were doing in Vietnam, the NBC newsman made it clear that he thought we were the "bad guys" in the war. The opinions he voiced that evening didn't sound all that different from those I had heard expressed many times by various leftist critics of the war I had debated over the years. It was a shock to me, however, to hear a well-respected national media figure spew forth a grab bag of

simplistic, leftist clichés about the war. The vehemence of his denunciation of our policy was in vivid contrast to the public image he had fostered as an objective journalist. Most of the other members of the media present that evening voiced similar opposition to Nixon's war policy, although perhaps not with the passion displayed by Vanocur.

Warren Phillips at least made the case that the press had an obligation to maintain objectivity in reporting on the war. And, to his credit, CBS's Mike Wallace praised General Creighton Abrams' leadership of our troops in Vietnam. However, the only journalist present who actually defended the American effort to defeat Communism in South Vietnam was Dan Seligman, a young reporter with *Fortune* magazine.

It was already obvious to those of us who closely followed the coverage of the war that the mainstream media had turned against American policy in Vietnam. What I didn't realize until that evening was how intense their opposition had become and how closely aligned their views were to those on the Left who blamed America for the war.

Robert Elegant later spelled all this out in an article in *Encounter*. In "How the Media Lost the War," he revealed how prominent American journalists had let their opposition to the war influence their reporting on what was happening in Vietnam. In that piece Elegant, who covered the war for the *Los Angeles Times*, made the case for the proposition that media bias played a significant part in our ultimate defeat in Indochina.

9

Ensuring Defeat

By the end of my tour of duty in Vietnam, I was filled with conflicting feelings about the war, our military leaders, and the civilian policy makers who had gotten us into this war of "gradualism."

As for our military leadership in Vietnam, my year there had exposed me to a mixed bag of career military officers. But I still have fond recollections of outstanding leaders like Colonel Lee who represented for me the professional military at its best.

I had the same feeling about the late General Creighton Abrams, who was the commander of American military forces during the year I was in Vietnam. Although I never personally worked for him, our office briefed General Abrams on a study I had done on the political strategy of the North Vietnamese revolutionary theorist, Truong Chinh. As the briefing officer told me afterwards, the General displayed a depth of knowledge about our North Vietnamese foes which was unusual for senior American officers. Too often, it had seemed to me, we Americans hadn't paid enough attention to the objectives of our enemy and how they planned