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## Finding Truth in the War Narrative

Ian Drew

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### **Finding Truth in the War Narrative**

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This paper explores military and media relations and dynamics beginning from the Vietnam War in the 1960s to the modern wars raging in the Middle East today with the intention of attempting to find truth within the complex narratives of wartime. Primarily, war narratives if taken from only a single source are incomplete, as there are multiple perspectives to consider while sifting through these stories. What is created is not simply an either/or narrative that we often believe, instead we get a narrative of both/and. Soldiers are both victims and perpetrators, Newsmen and women are both informers and misleaders. Multiple sources are considered here, including Hal Moore's *We Were Soldiers Once*, Sebastian Junger's film *Restrepo*, and Evan Wright's *Generation Kill*. Such narratives are interwoven with multiple perspectives from soldiers and media personnel alike and, in doing so, integrate these perspectives in a way that allows us to get close to what the truth may be. There is no one simple truth to war, but through analyzing the perspectives of each narrative it is possible for us to get close.

**FINDING TRUTH IN THE WAR NARRATIVE: AN  
INTEGRATION OF MEDIA**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

**by**

**Ian Drew**

**May 2015**

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## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

This project has been a long time coming. I've always found myself fascinated with war narratives and how we interpret stories of war. In a certain sense, we have all been touched by war in some ways. For many of us war is the culture we were raised in. How these narratives are shaped and how we perceive these narratives will ultimately determine how we remember these history-making events. I wanted to get at the core of these narratives, I wanted to see where they come from and how we continue to tell these stories of wartime while also finding the best way to do so. War and media is a messy relationship, one that is incredibly hard to navigate, but one that I ultimately found myself enthralled in.

There are really too many people to thank for the completion of this project. I want to give thanks to my wonderful friends and family for giving me guidance and picking me up while I was down, to Drs. Clayton and Matlock for being my patient and helpful advising committee, and to everyone else who has made my time at Regis the best four years of my life. I also want to thank my family members who have served in the military: Uncle Dan, Ben, Uncle Don, and my Grampa Drew. This project exists because of all of these people; as such I dedicate this thesis to all of them

## **I. Introduction: A Matter of Understanding**

I don't know what war is. I haven't the slightest idea what it feels like to lay down my life for my country, what it feels like to have men and women actively trying to kill me on a daily basis, what it means to be changed by a wave of violence so terrible one can hardly bear to talk about it. I simply cannot understand what these men and women of the armed forces have been through without having experienced it firsthand; everything I have learned about war has come from accounts of the media. How these conflicts are remembered, in the end, come directly from those who report on it, whether they are active combatants or the journalists that cover them. I don't know what war is, but I can get a sense through different channels of media. This thesis will argue that media has come to be in control of the war narrative and therein that control has affected the ways that these stories are told. All told, this will help guide through the question of where the truth lies in regards to the war narrative while illustrating that integration between media and military is the best way to shine a light on the truth of war. If we can provide a dual voice coming from civilian and military sources we may be able to see truths become evident. We can see this begin with the media taking control of the war narrative during the Vietnam War, with a sharp focus on how the reporters shaped the war. Furthermore we see how the Vietnam War is remembered due to the coverage it was



given. But what of the soldiers' voices? How has their relationship with the media changed over time? We can begin to derive the truths of war once we see their voices emerge and engage with the media that reports their narratives.

My generation arguably has been formed by war. For twelve years the United States has been involved in two foreign conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and for many of us this was the entirety of our formative years; these were years of seeing the death and destruction of war on the television. Those images, more than anything else at the time shaped for me what war really is. It seemed like an incessant bombardment of violence, wide shots of distant bombings, close ups of burnt out husks of cars caught in a crossfire; yet I cannot remember any footage of interviews with soldiers during prime time, at least not at the outset. Not only that, but no bodies from the carnage were shown. The true war seemed hidden behind newscasts and censorship hidden behind the screen of the television, where we could only see brief windows of the true conflict. All we can see are the scant few views of what combat left in its wake, minus the death. What any of these news reports truly amounted to were political bickering between talking heads that only looked at the big picture, and not the moment to moment costs paid by the people involved.

It was not until my father sat me down on the anniversary of D-Day, during a year I can't fully remember, and watched *Band of Brothers* on the History Channel. That was the first time I even got a taste of what being in combat could look like, and it was coming from a Hollywood (albeit nonfiction) source. Granted, the story is still a *heroic*

look at war, yet the tale of Easy Company was unfurled before me in a bloody look at history. Soldiers you grew to care for were torn away from the viewer, but also from their dear brothers in arms. We sat and watched the transformation of these projections of real people from wide-eyed recruits on their first boat to Europe to grizzled, battle-weathered veterans who not only lost friends but also pieces of themselves along the way.

Not only that, but each episode was prefaced by an interview from a surviving member of Easy Company where the soldiers recounted their experiences sometimes through teary eyes and other times with hard-earned stoicism. These were men that walked through the gates of hell and lived to tell about it. It took such little effort to see it in their faces, cragged with age as they were, but even this was not the full story of what war was to these men. We saw their experience reenacted on the screen, their heroics, their triumphs, their downfalls, their mistakes, yet we could only get scarce bits and pieces of what happened within their own minds let alone what followed them post-war.

These were the heroes of the Greatest Generation, the personification of the Myth of the Good War. These mythical heroes, like General Patton, who I learned in school were the cream of the American crop, the best the country had to offer to the rest of the world. This is where I began to feel a divide between what I'd learned and what I was learning. Not every action these men made were heroic, and their battles were far from the romanticized tales we'd learned in school. That's not to say these men aren't heroes, but to me there was more to the story that wasn't present in what I'd learned; there was more to the story that Band of Brothers had only begun to touch upon for me.

That is when I began to learn more about Vietnam. It was a fascinating war of a disillusioned America who questioned the motives of those who declared the war and those brave few who fought it. This was the war that brought war to the living rooms of every household with a television in America with horrifying clarity. Reporters swarmed the country in force, covering as much of the war as they could, giving a terrifying face to the war against the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong guerillas. Tales of heroics were scarce; tales of horrors were in abundance. We began to see narratives emerging where a “loss of faith” replaced the patriotism that the myth of The Good War hoped to foster (Hynes 182). The new face of war was a soldier with a microphone in his face while the world erupted behind him, but how different was this war from World War II, really? Atrocities are a part of war that thus far in history have been inescapable. Yet what came back to the home-front was the ugly side of war that had not yet been witnessed, and the “ghoulish behavior” of troops during war was brought to light. But what made the atrocities in Vietnam have so much more relevance and venom for the audience back at home? Did war change, or was it the media involvement?

It is not that journalists weren’t involved in wars in the past; the history of the war correspondent can be traced all the way back to the Crimean War in 1856. It was the nature of the coverage that changed, and to say that change was stark would be an understatement. The journalists of the past did not gloss over details, though they were certainly known to drive literary drama at the forefront of their reporting. However, in Vietnam it became a case of reporting the cold hard facts of the war, making it seem almost mechanical in nature. Soldiers inspired by the Greatest Generation before them

were personified as killing machines who, to the public, were little more than baby-killers to spit on upon their return home. Any acts of heroism were buried beneath the grime of war, and, for the first time, the public got a true sense of what war could be.

This became my fascination. Through watching *Band of Brothers* with my father I knew that media had shaped my own viewpoints of war, but hadn't thought about just how much the media did so. It was true, though, everything I knew of the modern conflicts came from news reports and that same talking head debate that raged on every television. I knew from stories of my uncle's deployments in Kuwait that the media had caused my family to fear for his life although he was safe and sound. One thing has become clear to me; war is influenced by media and the media is influenced by war. In turn, it begins to affect everyone and through that we create our memories of wartime.

Through this exploration, I will not only show the media's evolution in the theater of war but also prove its importance to the continued growth of our culture and our future attitudes and memories in times of war.

## II. The P.R. Nightmare

When we think back on the Vietnam War we think about the venomous three-pronged relationship between the media, the military, and the U.S. government, one usually defined by mistrust and censorship placed into direct conflict with the reporter's incessant search for the truth. From the World Wars to Korea, the media was usually held to be a source of patriotism, a call to action by the American people to support their soldiers abroad. Though heavily censored, as keeping with military policy, these correspondents towed the line, providing the image to the public that was conducive to the myths of the Good War. In Vietnam, we saw that this began to change. Here we saw correspondents become the untethered loose cannons of the battlefield whose opinions shaped foreign policy and eventually the outcome of the war. Here, the war correspondent became one untethered by military policy, and one that systemically set off a chain reaction in the portrayal of warfare that drastically changed how we represent military conflict.

We cannot, however, simply dive in to the untethering of the war correspondent without giving ample historical background in which to frame the discussion. At the outset of the American military presence in South Vietnam, reporters were given the instruction to "keep the line being given out in Washington" namely, that the American advisers "*were* only advisers" with no active participation in hostilities between North and South Vietnam (Knightley 375). In fact, most newspapers at the time focused on the venom towards Communism held by the American people in the 50s and 60s. Leo

Cherne, of Look Magazine wrote in 1955, “the South Vietnamese are too weary to resist the Reds without us (Knightley 375).” This was the classic reporting of the WWII era in the form of propaganda meant to incite the populous against a common enemy-- the “red menace” that so permeated American culture. We can deduce, then, the media was relatively *in favor* of supporting efforts to stave off the Communist menace that the American public perceived. In fact, as Melvin Small writes in his book *Covering Dissent: the Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement*, “the media [does] not look favorably upon movements that oppose official policy (Small 13).” Small comes to the finding that despite reporters leaning liberally, the editors of papers such as the *Times* tend to be more conservative when it comes to publishing controversial stories. In his book, Small mentions *Times* Editor A. M. Rosenthal, who would at times reject stories that would conflict with his own views on the war at hand. Beyond this, when the first bombing campaign came to North Vietnam in 1965, protests or anti-war activities were scarcely touched by news media. By not having a place on the “news agenda,” the American public could deduce that it was not a national issue worth considering, and it was not until they became a staple of American reporting that people’s opinions began to sway. Certainly, activities such as these would have kept the perception among the American people that we were doing the *right* thing by conducting war against the Communist agitators, especially when it came to painting anti-war demonstrators in the early days as “disruptive or dangerous” as most Americans were lead to believe (Small 20).”

However, once the first American advisers are killed in South Vietnam in July of 1959 the reporting shifted to encompass the true violence occurring in Vietnam. Time

magazine published the story, a bloody affair where two American officers were killed by Communist infiltrators in a residential compound. As the magazine writes, “Communist infiltrators have stepped up their campaign of terrorism, assassinating an average of one South Vietnamese a day... but not since 1957 had the Communists dared to attack any Americans (Reporting Vietnam 1).”

These first attacks of guerilla warfare perpetrated against American advisors and troops foreshadowed the alien-nature of this war. We were fighting an enemy in Vietnam that “fled” within “minutes [of] Vietnamese troops” arriving on the scene, hit and run attacks that would reflect the brutal nature of the war (Reporting Vietnam). This was not in keeping with the myth of the purely “Good vs. Evil” war in Europe and Japan. Instead the public was slowly being shown that war was messy and complicated. The Vietnam War had no front, no lines to cross, it had blurred boundaries that made reporting a complicated matter where the newsmen and women were caught between reporting what was right and what would get them views and front page status.

The current South Vietnamese government at the time would allow none of the brutal stories, instead opting to censor the American correspondents. As Philip Knightley writes in his book *The First Casualty*, the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam sought to censor foreign correspondents in any way they could. Reporters were deemed “spies and Communists” while agents attempted to intimidate reporters into conforming to governmental standards. This complied with American Military policy at the time, using the “US newsman” as a medium for relations with the South Vietnamese with the

hope that the correspondents would adhere to “Vietnamese press guidance (Hammond et. al. 11).” In essence, the military wanted journalists to act as mediators for the reporting on Vietnamese hostilities, keeping Diem supportive of American involvement while hopefully keeping the news reports favorable about the American presence. This, according to military brass at the time, became the beating heart of the controversy, with journalists wanting to cover as much of the war as possible in contention with the Vietnamese government’s wishes to contain that coverage. However, this did not mean that the coverage of the war automatically became a negative commentary, far from it. In fact, the press about American involvement was still optimistic about the conflict, and would continue to be so until the infamous Tet Offensive in 1968.

The journalists, though, had no trouble getting access to the boots on the ground. “We were right with the soldiers,” Walter Cronkite writes, “we talked to them; they talked to us, G.I.s and officers alike. The military did not make any attempt to monitor the interviews we got with the [soldiers in Vietnam] (Reporting America at War 2003).” Despite the military’s attempts to keep the media reined in from the higher levels of the conflict, at the ground level the correspondents had near unlimited access. Anything the soldiers would say to the reporters was free game to report on. While the military had hoped to steer the press away from the grip of Diem and towards progress made by allied forces, they could not hope to control the individuals that had spread out across the American deployment. Although journalists such as Cronkite seemed to genuinely want to convey the plight of the soldiers overseas, others chose to focus their efforts on the higher elements of South Vietnamese and American militaries.



David Halberstam, a Pulitzer-winning reporter for the New York Times, went to great lengths to expose the secrets being covered up by the military brass in Vietnam, despite a period of great optimism that the war effort was going well. Halberstam found himself in Vietnam in September of 1962, where the State Department insisted that “the U.S. and its South Vietnamese allies were winning their war against a communist insurgency, [however] Halberstam found another story when he followed the troops into the field (Achievement.org).” Like Cronkite, Halberstam found the real stories with the boots on the ground where he learned that the North was actually being *favored* in the rural areas in lieu of the US-backed Saigon. These stories were immediately shot down by the press as untruthful and misleading. Accusations began to echo out from foreign correspondents regarding deception from military officials about the true extent of the involvement in Vietnam, stoking the flames of the journalistic fervor in Vietnam, thus beginning the push for not only more comprehensive coverage, but also for more criticisms. Nevertheless, the military held that “it is not... in our interest... to have stories indicating that the Americans are leading and directing combat missions against the Viet Cong,” asserting that the newsman stationed in Vietnam created “thoughtless criticism” to incite harmful relations against the Diem regime (Hammond 15). However, the public would soon learn that this was not the case. Halberstam reported on a battle with Viet Cong forces during a stint in Saigon that dealt a significant blow to military credibility. In his story, he quotes a Lieutenant-Colonel stating that the South Vietnamese soldiers were “cowardly” and explained “how well the Viet Cong had fought” off the US-backed troops (Knightley 378).” The South Vietnamese, when coupled with their volatile

government, were not the fighting force that the United States had expected, even with their training and arms provisions. This led many Saigon-based correspondents to level complaints at the despotic Diem, claiming that his misappropriation of force was causing the South Vietnamese to further lose ground that was already unsteady.

This conflict came to a head with the coup d'état against Ngo Binh Diem in November 1963. Halberstam, at that point being labeled a sensationalist by the military, reported an unflinching account of the coup where he pulled few punches against the Diem establishment. "These [colonels and generals]," Halberstam writes, "felt that the Government was provoking a major crisis and that its refusal to meet some of the Buddhist demands was arrogant and self-defeating." What Halberstam highlighted here, was that even the South Vietnamese felt that the Diem government was corrupt but their views were silenced by the censorship implemented by the regime. As more stories were smuggled out of Vietnam, these reports on the coup were the beginning of a long trend of hard-hitting reports that would fundamentally shape the public opinion of the Vietnam War. It was up to these reporters, like Halberstam, in Vietnam to get to the truth of the matter explained to the larger numbers beyond themselves. In this case, the reporting on the power struggle from within our allies in the war was the most important objective in providing understanding back to their audience in the States. It was the reporter's duty to find the corruption in this growing time of war and to report the truths that the foreign government sought to keep hidden.

This begs the question, though, of whether the reporters should keep to their imposed role of public relations ambassador or report the war as they see fit. There are of course, massive political benefits to maintaining good relations between the United States and foreign governments, especially when assisting in wartime, but does that outweigh the reporter's duty of sending the facts back to the home front where people have a right to know these facts? Halberstam, of course, did not only report on the mistakes and missteps of US involvement, but also praised some of the work done by US advisers and the South Vietnamese. According to Hammond et al, "Halberstam was also optimistic... reinforced official contentions that US assistance was paying off (Hammond 20)." By keeping a balanced act of reporting, correspondents like Halberstam were able to keep the peace while also reporting when things go wrong and why, significantly adding to his credibility. Certainly, it would be impossible for all stories coming out of a war zone to be positive, as the US government quickly learned during the coup of Diem in 1963 in an event they refer to as "The Buddhist Crisis." An infamous picture emerges from the coup in 1963, that of monk Thich Quang Duc lighting himself ablaze in a protest suicide. This is a striking photo, a horrifying image of what happens on a warfront that was brought to the Associated Press by Malcolm Brown.

The implications of this photo, along with the way the South Vietnamese military sought to handle the Buddhist outcry against the Diem regime, created a public relations nightmare for the US government. "Unhappy in the extreme to have American-armed and trained South Vietnamese soldiers brutally repressing... demonstrators," caused a massive hit to public opinion on United States involvement in Vietnam (Hammond et. al

41). All the while, journalists were forced to smuggle the copy of their stories to Hong Kong and Singapore in order to get them printed back in the United States without fear of Vietnamese censorship. These reports and photographs forced the Kennedy administration to “reassess its relationship with Diem,” and the United States began to witness the incredible power journalism can wield over public opinion. However, this does not take into account the manipulation of these powerful, horrible moments just for the sake of fulfilling the agenda of the media through those reports. This agenda, as we will see, revolves around a reporter’s search for high ratings, front page postings, and a spotlight on their careers. As Peter Arnett writes about his experience in a Vietnam market, “I could have prevented [an] immolation by... kicking the gasoline away. As a human being I wanted to. As a reporter I couldn’t... My role as a reporter would have been destroyed along with my credibility.” Had Arnett helped the man, the photo opportunity would have been ruined, and he would not have gained as much fame for providing the truths of the monk suicides back to the States. That attitude breeds a complicated set of scenarios. Would the monk be grateful to have his life saved, or would he feel slighted that his statement could not be made? Is Arnett’s fame-seeking photography a projection of the monk’s protest or is it simply self-serving? Those sets of questions make the truth in reporting Vietnam murky at best and hypocritical at worst.

With the fall of Diem came a period of violent volatility in South Vietnam, with Congress and the President hesitant to ramp up involvement against Communist forces given the inherent volatility of the region. The war’s approval ratings begin to plummet leading up to Tet in 1968, falling from 57% of people *wanting* to continue our

involvement in Vietnam to 43%. This was only complicated by the media's uncovering of the journal of Captain Edward Shank, an air force pilot who was placed on airstrike runs by the South Vietnamese. In his journal, he details his opinion that the South Vietnamese are losing the war, a fact that could be remedied by the supply of better warplanes and weapons. However, in general journalistic coverage of the war was still marginally favorable in the mid-1960s and in turn, the people believed that the war was turning in our favor and given the assurances of the media and General Westmoreland; the war would end within a few years. That was, of course, until the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Leading up to the Vietnamese holiday Tet, hostilities had begun to deescalate, and an informal truce was in place due to the holiness of the holiday to the Vietnamese people. Communist forces used this to their advantage, using the movement of South Vietnamese forces who were on leave to cover their own advances and prepare for their surprise assault on city targets, Saigon and the Hue Citadel among them. On January 31, 1968 the North Vietnamese launched their first wave of assaults that battered both South Vietnamese and American forces, with all sides sustaining heavy losses.<sup>1</sup> While both the U.S. and the North Vietnamese eventually claimed victory after prolonged months of heavy combat, the media wasn't quite convinced. Coverage during the Tet Offensive was both continuous and bloody, where the general rules of censorship were laid to the side in order to portray to the American people the true brutality of the Offensive. In the documentary *The Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite*, the "voice of the nation" walks the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/tet>

audience through the carnage of the Tet Offensive with the reports of the journalists who filmed the stories and the footage captured by them. Cameras are aimed squarely on the corpses of fallen NVA and Viet Cong troops, and more footage shows American forces firing on unseen enemies in the brush and far off buildings. These are striking images that the journalists, who are unnamed in the feature, stand in front of giving their own personal commentary on the combat while fallen men lay bleeding behind them. They are adorned in flak jackets, and their faces wince at the sound of a far off explosion. More striking is their willingness to interrupt the combat to interview soldiers in the midst of a growing firefight. One such interview finds a soldier in an alleyway, adorned in a bandolier of large bullets, and the reporter's first question is even interrupted by a nearby explosion and gunfire. The reporter ducks his head, while the soldier hardly flinches; instead he recalls with a certain fondness his preference for fighting in the field since the soldiers can "call in an airstrike or something." Immediately after the interview we are shown a hospital in a rough transition to showing brutal images of wounded women and children in Saigon. When such images are brought up immediately after interviewing a battle-hardened veteran, what is the public to think? This creates an association in the minds of the public of associating soldiers with the pain they inflict.

I see the reporting on the attack on Saigon during the Tet Offensive as the first of many moments to come when both media and public opinion began to slip out of the American government's hands. Now, a lot of Americans believe that the Tet Offensive was a complete loss for the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, but this is a myth that has been created by the media. The BBC reports on January 31, 1968 that "4,959 Viet Cong

[had] been killed... while 232 American... troops [had] been killed” in combat during the brunt of the NVA offensive into South Vietnam. By all rights, numbers such as these would suggest that the Viet Cong had been steamrolled by the American forces during the offensive, yet we believe the opposite had occurred. By all accounts, Tet had been a “desperation move by North Vietnam, beset by a relentless American killing machine” that the North Vietnamese had hoped would push the Americans into negotiations for de-escalation (Merry). Where had the myth of such a great American loss originated? In my research, I found that it all boiled down to the media’s reporting on the Tet Offensive, especially from that of trusted anchor Walter Cronkite. Cronkite, the “voice of America,” delivered a damning three minute monologue on the Tet Offensive in order to close out his newscast. In light of the pessimism of the war, in light of the voracity of the NVA invasion, this was especially harmful to the government in their conducting of the war and only served to increase anti-war protests, therein driving the government to search for de-escalation tactics. His monologue read thusly:

*“..For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer's almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us, and that applies to invasion of the North, the use of nuclear weapons, or the mere commitment of one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred thousand more American troops to the battle. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster.*

*To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way*

*out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could (Walter Cronkite, CBS News 1968)."*

In this reflection, he brings to voice the pessimism of the American people, and with that he brings about the demise of public opinion for the war. If the most trusted voice in all of America could not stand with the war, then how could the American people? Now, there is some debate over whether or not Cronkite truly had the influence that we believe, but there is no doubt that the media coverage at this time *did* sway public opinion against the war.

However, a Gallup poll right before the Tet Offensive highlighted that "half of all Americans had no idea what the war in Vietnam was about (Knightley 441)." Knightley writes in his book *The First Casualty*, that clearly the job of the journalist to inform the American public had utterly failed despite the media coverage. In fact, given the intense coverage of the war, how could this have even happened? The media is intended to provide the American people with the explanations for conflict, or the reasons *why* a story has occurred. If this fails, the purpose of the media falls apart, and we're left with an organization that merely regurgitates opinions and editorials without providing a context for argument. I would argue that this lack of context came from the media's unwavering focus on the violence committed by the armed forces during the war. Without providing that context, it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint any clear truth within the conflict. You cannot clearly see through the violence without the proper framing from the media. With the now widespread use of television, too, American audiences were not "exposed to what the war meant to the people... whose land it was



being fought for” but only the grand drama of the combat and violence of the conflict (Knightley 455). That focus was in error, as this does not provide a true war story. A war narrative has several facets beyond the violence. Yes, the violence plays a role in the telling, yet it is not meant to be the focal point but rather a factor for our understanding and consideration. This massive focus on violence, with little doubt, was one of the primary causes of the loss of support and confusion of the American people. Through being exposed on a regular basis to the carnage being inflicted in Vietnam, the average civilian could, for the first time, see war for what it truly was instead of the fictional heroism that the public had been given during The Good War from films starring John Wayne romanticizing World War II.

From the coverage of the Tet Offensive, we *see* this increase in coverage of war time atrocities and civilian casualties. The press opened widely here, reporting on whatever they deemed fit for home consumption and whatever could get them front page status at their respective news agency. Like the aforementioned Peter Arnett, reporters had a tendency to skew towards what they knew would get them accolades for their work once they returned to the States. This was much unlike previous reports coming from the World Wars, as those had been tightly controlled accounts of battles, statistics, and about how well soldiers were doing overseas against the enemy. Now that the reporters had been let loose, they had the freedom to pursue any fame-seeking benefits they could get out of the war, in effect creating their own version of what they deemed to be fit for home consumption, despite what messages they may be sending.

Those messages include the atrocities that occurred at the hands of soldiers in the Vietnam War, the most infamous of which was the My Lai Massacre. “The unthinkable [had become] real” and public opinion of the United States military fell into a freefall (Hammond). The story broke to the New York Times on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1968, eight months after the massacre on March 16<sup>th</sup> of the same year. Do Hoai, a villager joined by a group of others gave their story to the *Times* of a village that “had engaged in no hostile actions” towards the Americans despite their area being under heavy Viet Cong control (Kamm). The locals had come to a total of 567 civilians killed in the massacre, as the U.S. soldiers moved into the hamlet using grenades, M-16 rifles, and fire to gather and execute the residents. According to the New York Times, military officers such as Capt. James L. F. Bowdish (“attorney for” the accused) claimed that the estimates of the villagers went “far beyond any figures he had heard (Kamm).” This was a conflict in interests between the citizens and the military beyond any doubt, but it would appear that it is not simply the number killed that is important. Rather, what matters is that the break in the story happened and that atrocities such as these could reach the public eye and have their intended effect of pulling away the public from support of the war. Clearly reporting on those atrocities is the right thing to do, but more context on the soldiers’ perspective is necessary, as stated previously, in order to understand *why* the atrocities happen.

In the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, a similar story to Henry Kamm’s report in the *Times* ran in 1969, this time with eyewitness accounts from soldiers who were there. “I think that probably the officers did not really know if they were ordered to kill the villagers or not... a lot of guys feel that the [South Vietnamese] aren’t human beings...

we just treated them like animals,” said Michael Terry after his tour in South Vietnam (Hersh). Words like “Point-blank murder” were tossed around often and numerous, a soldier in the Cleveland article going as far as to compare “the group standing over the ditch-just like a Nazi-type,” a comparison that, so soon after WWII, carried with it a heavy connotation with evil and genocide (Hersh). It can be easily argued that such language was used to draw parallels to a fairly recent war in order to incite memories of the rage held towards the Nazis. Doing so would easily allow public opinion to slide even further against the war in Vietnam. In these articles, we are provided a mere glimpse of the horror of war and the suffering that comes in its wake. These are glimpses into the true life of a soldier, one hampered by paranoia, frustration at the loss of friends, and the constant threat of death thousands of miles from home. “It’s my belief,” an unnamed sergeant in the Cleveland article relays, “that the company was conditioned to do this... I think they were expecting [the Viet Cong] to use the people as hostages (Hersh).” This is the paranoia incited in war, when an enemy is undefined, when the front line is non-existent save for claims of territory and patrols by either side; this is a perspective that those at home will never experience aside from these sporadic articles of horrific atrocities committed overseas. These images are put in stark contrast to the romanticized visions of the WWII G.I., the soldier fighting for the greater moral good against an evil enemy. This is not an excuse for the actions taken by Lt. Calley and his company in the least; what that company inflicted onto those innocents was sadistic and abhorrent. But as Samuel Hynes tells us, war creates a strange environment where visions of right and wrong become elongated under extreme duress. The media’s coverage of My Lai was a

damning blow to an already beleaguered Nixon administration. Even more stories would follow that of My Lai, stories that to the military were the “biggest collection of malicious innuendo [they] had ever seen,” stories with inflated body counts, stories of horrific treatment of prisoners by the South Vietnamese while American soldiers watched on, stories of the riots and protests on the home front that continue to tear the country apart to this day (Hammond 194). This style of reporting on Vietnam was a necessary evil to an extent, but with lasting effects on foreign policy that created a fiasco that the United States had hoped to avoid.

At this point in late 1968 and early 1969, the media “decided that the war was all but over,” correspondent participation in the conflict declined, and the media decided to refocus their efforts on covering negotiations for ceasefire in Paris (Knightley 438). With a story as big as the My Lai massacre, it seemed to the media that all else would pale in comparison, despite any continued civilian casualties. Once the story dries up, the media moves on to the next one leaving the public to feel as though things are resolving themselves. That war hadn’t ended though, and would continue for the United States until January 23, 1973 when Nixon announced the end of American involvement. The stories had begun to revolve around the gradual withdrawal of troops until then, reflecting the frustration at the slowness of that process. As time passed, journalists on the home front such as Michal Kerr wondered if “conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could [have won] it (Knightley 466).” Knightley relays the battle of Bien Hoa, a victory for the American forces as far as casualties were concerned, though the media noted that despite any American progress well-defended air bases could

still be attacked and vulnerable to North Vietnamese assault. The NVA, in the end, could only be beaten by “blasting Vietnamese villages into oblivion” and the media was so far disillusioned with the military prosecution that no positive media would come out of Vietnam until the war had fully come to a close. The reporter who submitted the Bien Hoa story, Nicholas Tomalin, even went on record to say that he was a “VC supporter” at the end of his report, reflecting the complete loss of trust the media had in United States foreign policy. For better or for worse, this change in support would begin to come about. It may have been right to shed truth on the war, but to push it to such extremes of altered support becomes questionable. We can refer back to the stories of non-lethal tactics that actively changed military operation, yet by the end of the war such articles would not make the papers. The media grew tired of reporting on Vietnam in the 1970s, most stories coming from the war were pushed onto sidebars like Ron Kovic – who I will put into more detail later. People grew weary of hearing the war stories, and turned their attention elsewhere. For people in the late 60s and early 70s, the Vietnam War was not what they believed war to be. It was gruesome, different, and full of atrocities that, to the public, were absent from World War II.

But how much different were these combat policies from World War II tactics? This is the distorted truth of the Vietnam War. It played out as all wars do: with violence and unimaginable suffering. Nearly all nations involved in “The Good War” had targeted civilian targets in one way or the other. Entire cities were leveled by airplanes in Europe, and entire cities were destroyed in nuclear fire in the South Pacific. Arguably, despite anomalies such as My Lai, many of the policies remained relatively the same as World

War II. It was the coverage, however, that changed. War became intensely political, and fought against a relatively unknown enemy whom even the government could not clearly identify. The myth of The Good War would become tainted by the coming accounts of Vietnam veterans post-war. Combat was not the romanticized, “best time of my life” tales of their fathers’. Combat was horrifying, and combat was demystifying. Journalists in the hundreds now got a taste of that experience, and relayed it as such, with the added dimension of their own personal politics as Walter Cronkite and Nicholas Tomlin have shown us. This was new territory for the nation, one that was unglamorous and wrought with controversy. Still today we see the Vietnam War as being mired in myth and entrenched animosity towards the government. The truths in those war stories are muddled and lost because of the ways the war had been painted by the military and the government. Combat troops coming home from Vietnam were never spat on as baby-killers, the army was not an angry, draft-populated body, “the men who fought were volunteers, or men who chose not to evade the draft, and [they] had gone to war for simple, patriotic motives, as their fathers had gone to World War II (Hynes 183).”

Vietnam was the first time the nation was presented the utterly complex and layered narrative that war presents us, though the public were only given the smallest of slices to pull information from. As the nation reeled from the apparent loss in Vietnam, the government would rethink their policies for journalistic access as the nation would inevitably become embroiled in further conflict beyond its own borders. Journalists, too, would have to change their own reporting styles. Yet the journalist only tells one side of the narrative: the civilian perspective who does not actively engage in combat. A voice

that is desperately needed, then, is that of the soldier who lives and dies for the war. The media may distort the truths, and it takes more voices in order to get a clearer picture.

### **III. Soldier and Joint Control**

What, then, is to be learned from the evolving nature of the media's coverage?

Well, for starters we can see that there was not a fair coverage about the nature of a soldier's experience. As we saw with the television interviews, any knowledge to be gleaned from soldiers came from moments where their versions of the truth have been altered by the context of their surroundings. Not only that, but we do not get veterans' speaking on their war experience until the late 70s well after their return home. Time and society then become a factor as the storyteller becomes influenced after their experience. Because of this, we see that there are parts of the narrative that become common threads among multiple storytellers. While each experience is highly individualized, there are traces of the media's influence in the experience of the Vietnam War as a whole. It is important, however, to recognize that influence when sifting through the narratives. We may then get closer to the truth as we examine the interplay between soldier and media.

How, then, was the view of the soldier's experience distorted? For that, we can actually look back to narratives coming out of World War II in the late 40s and 50s. Films and stories that were placed into the mainstream media depicted the strongly heroic "Greatest Generation" for the masses to take in *en masse*. Ron Kovic describes in his narrative *Born on the Fourth of July* how profoundly the films of John Wayne and Audie Murphy drove home to him how important and gallant it was to be the hero in war. "John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes... like Mickey Mantle,"



Kovic writes, and in doing so shows that these war films instilled in him the idea that even in early childhood he would be drawn towards serving his nation in the marines (Kovic 55). Kovic and his friend predicated their lives on the pact that “when [they turned] seventeen [they would] both go down to the marine recruiter...and sign up for the United States Marine Corps (Kovic 56).” However, when Kovic is wounded and subsequently paralyzed while serving in Vietnam, he ceases to find the heroism in his actions. In fact, he gets frustrated over his paralysis. He felt that he had served to become a hero for his nation and became little more than a burden to those around him upon his return. “Now I wanted to know what I had lost my legs for,” he writes, “why [had I] and the others gone [to Vietnam] at all (Kovic 134)?” It’s not that Kovic was not proud of his service, in fact I believe that he values his time serving, but what he experienced during his service was not what he expected, nor what he wanted. Kovic, though got lost in his disillusionment with his mistreatment on the home front. A sad story, really, about how parts of the nation can truly perpetrate a disservice to our veterans once the war has ended. I would argue, though, what Kovic finds in his newfound advocacy reflects what he always wanted to be: a hero. It’s just that he did not find his heroism where he had expected to, nor with the group that he had hoped for as a child. He felt robbed by his country, by the media that led him to so desperately seek that heroism and was thanked with paralysis and maltreatment in the hospitals.

Is the media to blame, then, for his service not meeting his expectations?

Certainly there are other veterans whose experience truly defined their lives to the extent that, when asked “would you serve again,” they answer clearly and bluntly with a definite

“yes.” Their views could not have been shaped by those war movies Kovic had grown up on, could they? Could the media distort their own memories of coming home and their memories of the war? I’d like to visit here a myth that has become so engrained into our society that we believe it to be an absolute truth of the Vietnam War, the myth of soldiers being spat on as they returned home. We can summarize the myth thusly: soldiers, flying into civilian airports on their return to the states were either swarmed with angry protestors or individuals enraged by their government’s actions abroad and subsequently were rewarded with a medal of spit for their role of “baby-killer” and “government murderers.” Jerry Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran himself, discussing his book *The Spitting Image* in an article for the Boston Globe, says it bluntly, “I found nothing. No news reports or even claims that someone was being spat on (Lembcke 2005).” He asserts the claim that the image of the abused veteran by the anti-war crowd was little more than a media and governmental propaganda tool to “dissuade people from opposing the Gulf War (Lembcke ix).” It’s an interesting assertion that the United States involvement in Vietnam had been so defeating for public policy that such mistreatment myths were implemented in order to regain the support for the wars that a new generation of Veterans were being shipped off to fight. This policy was “so effective,” Lembcke writes, “President Bush had effectively turned the means of war, the soldiers themselves, into a reason for the war (Lembcke 2).” Essentially, following Vietnam the soldier’s experience was what *became* the war. Vets and current soldiers were used to create a sympathetic atmosphere in which to conduct foreign policy with the full support of the public. If you do not support the war, then clearly you do not support the soldiers either. Perpetuating

this attitude creates a toxic environment where support is gained for war on the backs of those fighting rather than for the reasons the war is being waged. Again, this is the case of the media distorting the soldier's experience but this time it came at the cost of more wars.

Throughout Lembcke's research, he found that many of the spitting reports boiled down to hearsay. A friend of a friend knew a veteran who had been spit on, but that friend might have also been a friend's uncle or some far off acquaintance. The myth has taken on many of the qualities of a classic urban legend, where there is a common thread that holds the narratives together though there are slight details that shift and change from story to story. Details such as who was doing the spitting, where it had occurred, the specifics of the personal details of the storyteller all would change as the narrative continued. As Lembcke writes, "Stories about spat-upon Vietnam veterans are like mercury: Smash one and six more appear (Lembcke 2005)." Of course, it would be only a matter of time for the media to latch on to such tales of maltreatment at the hands of a venomous public. Even the entertainment media got to project stories of spitting unto the masses. In the 1982 film *First Blood*, the main character John Rambo uses the myth of spitting on veterans in a final monologue at the end of the film. "And I come back to the world," he says, "and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting (First Blood 1982)." These lines, in and of themselves, have a few problems within. Lembcke asserts the claim that when veterans returned from war "GIs landed at military bases, not civilian airports" though he admits that "there may have been exceptions (Lembcke 2005)." Not only that, but how would protestors know that such a flight had been

diverted to civilian airspace? If the protestors had been sitting and waiting for the veterans, as the myth says, where would they have received such flight information?

When these myths hit film or other popular culture, they start a cycle where anyone can refer back to them and take that fiction as fact. In doing so, some veterans who feel disillusioned by their experience can use those myths to help cope with their experience upon their return, dropping themselves into a narrative where they can learn to handle their own hardships. Lembcke writes that some “soldiers returning from lost wars have long healed their psychic wounds by accusing their governments and their countrymen of betrayal (Slate 2000).” Such tales provide an outlet for those who have suffered above and beyond their call of duty. Certainly, there is little wrong with finding solace in such tales, but we have to look at how these stories are perpetuated in society to find any truth to the narratives. That is precisely where the media should come in, to shed light on the truths to these stories, to give us insight into the experience of our soldiers overseas. Instead, as Slate points out, outlets such as New York Times and U.S. News & World Report place these stories back into circulation as the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war came near. John Kifner, in his article titled *A Case Study in Disaster for Tomorrow’s Generals* published on April 28, 2000, contains the line that “[army] cadets could not wear their uniforms for fear of being spat on (Kifner 2000).” Even as late as 2000 people are still perpetuating the myths that veterans hid from anti-war protestors when authors such as Lembcke have demonstrated that the opposite was true. Certainly some soldiers did hide from protestors, but the narrative constructed here does not provide for a both/and but rather an either/or. For example, Kifner writes three years later

in his article *Brutal Vietnam Campaign Stirs Memories* that one hundred and fifty veterans had joined anti-war movements, even going as far as to testify to war crimes committed during the Vietnam War, in direct opposition to the claim that these vets were hiding from their service. The truth here becomes not one of cowardice on return, but one of engagement. In fact, antiwar protestors brought veterans of the war into the fold, much like John Kovic. It was not the antiwar movement that tore the medals from his chest; it was the very government that he fought for during his first arrest. Is that truly the public mistreating him, or is it the government and media that failed him and so many others? These stories that contain myth do not serve their intention; that is, to illuminate the war narrative. They only serve to distort these narratives further. If the media is meant to show the truth to the people, then they ought to have shed light on these myths in order to dispel them instead of only propagate them further. The only way possible to combat such actions is to go straight to the source to see more war narratives brought to life by the very people who experienced it.

Quite frankly, to say viewing these narratives is the only way to experience these stories seems like a closed off absolute. That is not to say that there cannot be an engagement between the soldier's memoirs and media sources, as there are, but it remains a strong way to see the war through the eyes of those who experienced it first hand in combat. When we look at narratives such as Terry Rizzutti's *The Second Tour* we see through their supposed fictional accounts kernels of truths to their own experience. "But life's a bitch – and then you die," Rizzutti writes as a reflection on his combat experience (Rizzutti 3). He reflects much of the same frustration with his country that

Kovic presents in his novel, a country that “exploited [the youth] in the name of patriotism” and sent him to a war that he didn’t ask for. We were “used and abused,” he tells a doctor early on in his narrative, “This country hasn’t learned a damn thing. It’s going to happen again and again (Rizzutti 6).”

While the media can be a crisscrossing web of half-truth and finger pointing, the soldier’s narrative contains concurrent strings of feeling that is passed over when such stories get relayed to the media. Both Kovic and Rizzutti reflect a frustration with the war they fought, and the media that led them there. Rizzutti, like Kovic, discusses the influences that on-screen war heroes like John Wayne and Audie Murphy had on the young men entering the war in Vietnam. Instead of discussing the influence on himself, Terry Rizzutti notices (through the eyes of his character Rootie) the effect it had on a fresh recruit younger than him. He tells us, “We named him Audie Murphy based on his desire to win medals. ‘I’m gonna start slow,’ he said, ‘just a bronze star at first, maybe a silver after a while (Rizzutti 12).” He later describes this recruit being killed not even two months into his rotation in Vietnam. The inspirations of the mythological war heroes of the Greatest Generation were a dangerous prospect for those who fought and died in Vietnam. For Ron Kovic, it saw his disillusionment take a very real place in the great history of the Vietnam War, the war that saw the disparagement of the idea that there could ever *be* a good war.

What was this war to the soldiers? Well, in Walter Cronkite’s Tet Offensive documentary we get a glimpse of a soldier having some down time with his comrades.

When asked if he sought revenge on the enemy he hardly hesitated to answer the affirmative. Terry Rizzutti reflects the same sentiment in his novel, “When your buddies are dying and you know a way to stop it, you stop it. At one level, stopping it means killing all that moves before it kills you. The safety rule we called it (Rizzutti 9).” We can tie this back to the idea that war creates a strange environment; in this strange environment, you must kill in order to save lives and to preserve is to eliminate. When the news gives us that short clip of a soldier seeming to pine for revenge, we’re missing the whole story. We’re missing the narrative of the man who has seen too much evil for one lifetime. Since he remains anonymous as per the interview it is impossible to research into his story, but reasonable assumptions can be made. Yes, soldiers can and do commit terrible acts – it comes with the territory. However, they can be portrayed in a way that highlights their environment and how that affects their behavior. Since soldiers have a duality of victim and perpetrator they must be portrayed as both without leaning too far in either direction. These men who are mired in combat are seeing and acting upon orders that the ordinary man simply is not meant to act upon. They are actively changed by their environment and hardened into people unrecognizable from their departure into war. “No man goes through war without being changed by it,” writes Samuel Hynes, “...And though that process will not be explicit in every narrative... it will be there (Hynes 3).” These are what we can derive from the soldier’s narrative: the ways that they have changed from the conflict even if they are not immediately apparent. These are the raw stories that provide outsiders’ insight into what war *is*, and giving the soldiers that narrative control is vital. War isolates, war destroys, and the straight

personal narrative can give us those brief flashes of truth, even if the majority of the population will never “be there.”

What happens, though, when the journalist’s narrative and the soldier’s narrative become inexorably intertwined? In works such as *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* we see a joint narrative described by two men who experienced combat, though with vastly different experiences with that time. Joseph Galloway and Harold Moore collaborated on this narrative to describe the heavy fighting in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 during the American escalation in South Vietnam. What separates this from the previous narratives discussed are the two distinct voices that appear throughout the book. When we hear from Colonel Moore, we see a systematic military voice, one that has seen combat but also has a full understanding of the strategy behind military action. We see this quite clearly in the descriptions of troop movements during the battle. Moore writes, “My battalion used a simple two up, one back formation – A/2/5 on the left, B/1/7 on the right, [and] C/2/5 following A/2/5.” In doing so, Moore can provide the audience with an idea of how the military functions during combat operations. He can dissect strategy and explain in layman’s terms what happened on a grand level. However, this creates a strange sort of detachment from the human side of the battle. Moore alleviates this to a certain extent by highlighting his feelings towards the end of the battle, along with brief asides on the high regard he held for his men. “I made it very clear,” Moore writes, “...that I was the first man of my battalion to set foot in this terrible killing ground and I damned well intended to be the last man to leave (Moore & Galloway 185).” In those words he shows the burdens held by an officer, that the lives of his men and the



importance of the officer on the field outweighed his own wish to make it home alive. This goes on to his respect for the men under his command. When Sergeant Kluge comes in as the 7th Calvary's relief he comes upon a fallen soldier in a foxhole, directing his men to drag the deceased back to the rallying area. Colonel Moore directs them otherwise. As Sergeant Kluge recalls, "[Colonel Moore] came up behind me and said: 'No, you won't do that Sergeant. He's one of my troopers and you will show respect. Get two more men and *carry* him to the landing zone. (Moore 197)."

With that in mind, we must then see the media's voice when it comes to Joseph Galloway's account. Given the structure of the narrative, the voices are so intertwined it can be difficult to separate the two during the reading. Galloway mostly comes through in between Moore's personal recollections of strategy and of the battle, where we see voices of the men who fought at LZ X-Ray interviewed in a journalistic style. In fact, it is within these in-betweens that we get any sense of Galloway's feelings on the battle when his own voice comes through. This is all the clearer in the aftermath of the firefight at LZ X-Ray when more journalists arrive on the scene to get a sense of what had happened. When all of the journalists hit the ground at the sound of some errant rifle fire, Galloway still stands, saying, "Bullshit. That stuff ain't aimed at us (Moore & Galloway 197)." The other journalists are further described by Galloway and Moore as looking nervous as they fanned out around the battlefield, must as Galloway had been when he had first got there. What this goes to illustrate, insofar as media voices go, is that the act of combat affects people on a noticeable level regardless of their training or background. More interesting, however, is that the narrative does not probe this idea further. Galloway and Moore seem

to keep an objective distance from the carnage, with only smatterings of the effect of combat on those they have interviewed. The chapter *Policing the Battlefield* has the most emotion of the entire narrative at that point, giving a sense of the aftermath of that prolonged combat. In quoting Jack Smith, one of the journalists who landed after the firefight, the authors show us that the men “said little, just looked around with darting, nervous eyes. Whenever [Smith] heard a shell [come] close, [he’d] duck for cover but [the soldiers] kept standing (Moore and Galloway 195).” This is followed by the other journalists exclaiming that the landing zone looked like there had been a bloodbath, as the landing zone was littered with fallen soldiers and wounded. This is the closest look we get at what a firefight can leave in its wake, evoking the emotions that the majority of the combat descriptions are lacking. Later in the chapter “*The Secretary of the Army regrets...*” we are further introduced to some of the struggle of families coming to terms with those lost in the Ia Drang.

That is not to say that the narrative is *bad* for missing the human component. In fact, it is quite the opposite; the narrative gives insight into what happens on a strategic level while also illustrating the individual actions of the men who took part in the fighting. This serves as an anchor to the more emotional tales provided by Rizzutti, Kovic, and many others. While those narratives show us the “boots on the ground” perspective we do not see combat from the perspective of the officers who command them. This, as discussed, can lead to a feeling of disconnect from the narrative as, when reading, we are given a bird’s eye view rather than the up close and personal views provided by the solo narrative. Moore and Galloway’s omniscient viewpoint, though, can

give perspectives that would otherwise be missed if seen from only one man. This is seen on Colonel Moore's return to the camp at Pleiku when they visit the bar. Upon their entry, they are denied as the "[officer's club] did not belong to them (Moore and Galloway 205)." Moore then put his weapons on the bar, threatening to "clean house" if he was not served drinks he and his men had earned over the last few days (206). When another officer comes in, though, retelling Moore's fight in the Ia Drang they are given drinks that "they couldn't buy," and are able to unwind (206). This scene, an excerpt lifted from J.D Coleman's book *The Dawn of Helicopter Warfare*, serves three purposes. One, to give us an omniscient scene that provides Moore's stress after the fight from a set of eyes that is not an author. Two, the scene is meant to illustrate the intense stress that an officer can carry before, during, and after a firefight. And finally, three, the excerpt begins to demonstrate the amount of respect given within military units to those who have been in combat, and have lived to tell about it. The third aspect, of that scene, is perhaps the most interesting. In both Terry Rizzutti and Ron Kovic's narratives the theme of questioning one's heroics in horrific circumstances is a mainstay throughout their respective journeys. With Colonel Moore jointly controlling the narrative with the media, however, there is an insistence that all of the men in the Ia Drang valley are heroes deserving of undying respect.

Are all of these men heroes? For simply doing their duty which they have signed on for, it becomes hard to see why all of these men are considered to be heroic. What does it mean to be a hero? For Hal Moore and Galloway, heroism stems from sacrifice in the line of duty. Whether those sacrifices comes at the ultimate price of death or from the

person to person costs of having engaged in combat, the pair make it clear that service in a combat zone is something heroic and worth recognition. On the other hand, we see Ron Kovic and Terry Rizzutti grappling with the idea that their actions in battle were unheroic and not worth recognition for the high cost of combat. There is a dichotomy here that I would argue is underlined by the media involvement in Hal Moore's narrative. As we see in *The Spitting Image*, the media is highly involved and intertwined in the portrayal of heroism to the public when it comes to military action.

What does this say about the truth in the war narrative? Is war structured? Is it chaotic? Are there heroes? Given these narratives, we get the idea that war is all of these things. War is a walking paradox of order and chaos, and to get a full view of what these narratives bring us about the truth it is necessary to view all sides. While the integrative narrative between soldier and media gives us an encompassing view we can further enrich that narrative by layering in the intensely personal accounts of combat and the war experience that give us this paradoxical understanding that *is* armed conflict. If we view the integrative narrative as the best way to get the full scope of the war story, where does that leave us today when war has become so highly politicized? Going forward, the integrative approach to control over the war narrative becomes all the more important to finding the truth in combat.

#### **IV. Integration in the Modern Era**

With these narratives in mind, in what ways did the media and military relationship change in the years following Vietnam? I, briefly, discussed an example of an integrative narrative: a narrative that pulls in both civilian and soldier voices in order to give a fuller sense of what war *is*. In this increasingly politicized war climate, though, how can we find the truth amidst the modern conflicts in the Middle East? In order to answer this, we must look at how military policy altered in the years following the Vietnam War and how those changes carried into the modern conflicts. Within that context, we can see the integrative narrative become all the more important as politics and combat become further intertwined. As we will see, this approach is not without fault as politics and personal feelings can pollute the truth, therein painting a narrative that is not fully indicative of what truly happens on the modern battlefield. It becomes, in some cases, ways to make war palatable to the masses rather than provide an accurate portrait of modern war.

Coming out of the Vietnam War, the military decided to keep the news media and personnel at arms-length by setting limits on the number of journalists allowed in conflict zones while also severely limiting their access to areas of operation. Vietnam was seen by the military as a blunder of censorship policy, a time where heavier censorship could have mitigated the outcry of the public against the war. By replacing the leash that the military had once held over reporters, they could reign in public support and therein help

to legitimize times of conflict and strife. This would limit some of the control that the news media had gained over the war narrative during the late 60s and early 70s, instead turning that control directly over to the military and soldiers. Media, though, clearly could be used as a tool for the support of war, so keeping it on a tight leash would bring about a reasonable outcome for military and government policy, that is, to galvanize support for future wars fought abroad.

Pascale Combelles-Siegel, an analyst researching policy with the Department of Defense, writes that between Vietnam, the conflict in Grenada, and the Gulf War in 1992, “the Pentagon engaged in negotiations and unilateral actions to try to improve media access to the battlefield (Combelles-Siegel 9).” In the aftermath of Grenada, the Pentagon came to five basic tenets in order to improve Public Affairs operations in the event of armed conflict. Combelles-Siegel lists them thusly:

- I. *“Public affairs planning should begin as soon as operational planning begins.*
- II. *News pooling should only be used in the early phases of operations until full coverage is possible*
- III. *The Secretary of Defense should keep an updated accreditation list of correspondents in case of a military operation in need of a news pool*
- IV. *The basic principle governing media access should be compliance with predetermined ground rules set by the military*

V. *Public Affairs should plan logistics for both communications and transport”*

This list highlights the policies that the military put in place in order to limit the control media could have over the story. By generating news pools the military could select exactly which information needed to be provided to reporters and the ways in which they could use those stories. That is not to say that there were no reporters present at these conflicts, as reporters attached to units became increasingly used, and popular, with military officials. If the military wanted the best way to show the media the stories to tell, it would be to *embed* them into a military unit. In this way, officers and soldiers could paint the picture that would represent them best.

Indeed, embedding led us to some of the best representations of the integrative narrative, allowing for further joint control over a war story that showed the reporter’s fact-finding along with the soldier’s human experience in the midst of combat. It is not without fault, however, as reporters stationed in the field will miss out on the wider context of the war. Patrick Cockburn, an editorialist for the Independent News Corp in the UK, draws from his own experience being embedded saying that “it leads reporters to see the Iraqi and Afghan conflicts primarily in military terms, while the most important developments are political or... have little to do with foreign forces (Cockburn 2010).” Further, he recalls that there are some embedded journalists that “drink up everything the army tells them and [reports] it as fact,” indicating that the army still wanted to retain control over the stories that would come out of the reporter’s time with their respective

unit. This highlights the underlying danger of embedding that is, being pointed in such a direction that the wider context of the conflict is missed in the reporting and the retelling of the narrative. While you may get the human side of the story combined with the overarching military strategy, you then may miss the political undercutting, war atrocities, and the wider social-cultural scene derived from war time.

This became especially clear with the American occupation of Iraq. In Dexter Filkins' *The Forever War*, Filkins provides us the dichotomy drawn between what the army wants to show embedded reporters and what occurs behind the veil. This is shown no clearer than in his account of visiting the neo-natal ward at an Iraqi hospital. Paul Bremer, a military official with Coalition Provisional Authority, accompanies Filkins to the hospital and within his speech to local Iraqis he lauds the positive changes to Iraq in regards to public health. "There is eleven times more electricity now than before we arrived," he says, further giving the idea that the invasion was good for the Iraqi people (Filkins 137). Though, when Filkins breaks off from the government entourage, he finds that medically things are not as well as they seem. Following the invasion electricity may have been more plentiful, but it was more susceptible to blackouts; blackouts spell disaster for hospitals, especially in neo-natal and trauma wards. Hassan Naji, a hospital record keeper, tells Filkins "democracy has ruined this hospital," and the rampant looting following the American dismantling of the Saddam Hussein regime has left the hospital with minimal supplies and inefficient record keeping. What we see of Bremer, the side of the story that is in support of Americans, shows us one that tries to turn a blind eye to the tragedy unfolding at the hospital as he merely pauses to say "I don't like seeing this at



all,” before simply moving on to the next administrative matter (138). This demonstrates that government officials wanted to maintain the heroic narrative to the accompanying press. Yes, there are some negative outcomes to our invasion, they seem to say, but look at all the good we’re doing. It takes Filkins the physical act of separating from that entourage in order to tell the real story back to the United States; he shows that the war has more overreaching consequence than most outlets would provide to the public. The real story in this case being that the American occupation was having a heavy toll on human life beyond that of the combat – that there was more context to the war than the fighting. He was not alone either; his story is corroborated by *New York Times* where they write that “the first few weeks of American occupation... have left a great deal to be desired (New York Times 2003).”

Even if the Army does want to control the sights of reporters, they cannot guarantee that they will not investigate further when they are able. By trying to strictly control what gets out, they tend to enable reporters to go further to get the whole story. This does carry its own challenges though, as the allure of editorializing can place some gaps into the truth. While the political context is paramount in providing the context for what a soldier’s narrative means to the historical narrative, it is possible to muddy the truth to place the soldiers as merely a service to the wider political narrative. In an article for the *New Yorker*, George Packer writes that “Journalists and historians have to distort war: in order to find the plot—causation, sequence, meaning—they make war more intelligible than it really is (Packer 2014).” Throughout the article, he discusses how the soldier’s control over the war narrative is vital to the understanding of what it does to

people; in essence, Packer is providing us with the soldier's truths and how those are an integral key of the telling of the war narrative in a more chaotic nature than a journalist would. He notes that the modern narratives coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan maintains the idea of "exploded illusions," or the idea that war does not play out as anyone had expected. While these stories are fewer and far between giving the recentness of the conflict, they provide adequate backdrop to begin finding the truths to the combat occurring overseas. Packer cites David Finkel's book *Thank You for Your Service* where he makes the claim that the culture surrounding supporting the troops has become one of passive neglect. He writes, "[The soldiers] returned to heroes' welcomes and a flickering curiosity. Because hardly anyone back home really wanted to know, the combatant's status turned into a mark of otherness, a blessing and a curse (Packer 2014)." This is an important claim. We on the home front want to support the soldiers, to empathize with their struggle and yet we do not want to see the harsh truths of war. We prefer, according to Packer, to keep those stories at arm's length as long as our fighting men and women come home again. We even saw this highlighted in Ron Kovic's memoir coming out from the 1970s: "We've seen enough of [disfigured veterans]. Every night for the last couple of years people have seen it on the six o'clock news and they're tired of it (Kovic 148)."

This explains why stories on the wars in the Middle East have dropped off in recent years. People get tired of the harshness of war, and they want to see that things are going well while hoping they'll get to see their veterans cared for and home again. We inherently want to be sheltered from the violence, a key reason why we do not see the

images of fallen American troops. If something is out of sight, it is out of mind and is easier to handle and make sense of. I argue that this is where an integrative approach of journalist and soldier becomes all the more important. It is a narrative that is written with a civilian eye with the soldier's experience put at the forefront of the telling. This is made clear by both the work of Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington and also the work of Evan Wright.

For this, we must turn first to Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington in their work on the book *War* and also on the twin documentaries *Korengal* and *Restrepo*. Junger, a contributor to *Vanity Fair* and ABC News, spent a year in the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan, a hotly contested plot of land in the northeastern region of the country. During that year, he was embedded with the men of the 503<sup>rd</sup> and sought to relay the war experience back to the people back home. This project was two-fold: one to portray to the American people what a combat situation would truly look like and the other to provide insight into what a soldier thinks during the war, and how it lingers with them afterwards. In a 2014 interview with Rolling Stone Magazine he says that "I very consciously wanted audiences to feel like they were getting as close as they could to the combat experience... to [give audiences] a little bit more perspective on things (Fear 2014)." He recognizes that *Restrepo* was meant to "be an experience" while *Korengal* was meant "to be more of an exploration" of what was occurring in the fighting in Afghanistan (Fear 2014). This is the integrative narrative at work, shining a light on the different aspects of what the war experience can be. Junger, however, recognizes that his focus is solely on the human aspect of the story, writing that:

*“The moral basis of the war doesn’t seem to interest soldiers much, and its long-term success or failure has a relevance of almost zero. Soldiers worry about these things about as much as farmhands worry about the global economy, which is to say, they recognize stupidity when it’s right in front of them but they generally leave the big picture to others (Junger 25).”*

This is further highlighted in direct comparisons to what a soldier understands as opposed to a civilian. “In a way that few civilians could understand,” he writes, “[the soldiers] were more at ease facing a known threat than languishing in the tropical heat facing an unknown one (Junger 35).” Junger shows here that the concerns of the soldier are far removed from the concerns they would have back home. He provides the idea that soldiers are concerned with the immediacy of a situation and the fact that they have a strong idea of what awaits them on patrol. As Captain Kearney tells us in *Restrepo*, they become hyper-vigilant on patrol. If so much of a rock is out of place a soldier asks himself, “Why is it out of place? Was someone walking above it to make it move?” while wondering if it is a warning sign to an ambush (*Restrepo* 2010).

His goal, in the end, was to provide the audiences at home with a glimpse of what war is to the soldiers. “I wanted people to understand what these guys were going through... [because] a lot of the news wasn’t really telling people what was happening,” Junger said, further underlining his intention to help show the truth of war (Fear 2014). If the politics does not concern the men and women fighting the war, then it is not conducive to the provision of their view. Instead, he focuses on their feelings, their

thoughts on combat, and the strange behavior of “missing the war.” At a recent TED convention Junger explains the phenomenon of missing war. He outlines a culture that is fascinated with combat, where we pay money to be “entertained by a Hollywood war movie” and yet we “wouldn’t want to have anything to do with [war]” in our personal lives (Junger 2014). Junger says that we find combat compelling, and if we as “peace-loving people” find war and violence so compelling, so must a “20-year old soldier who [has] been trained in it (Junger 2014).” He goes on to explain the neurological impacts of combat, the high-energy adrenaline rush that comes from getting shot at—an experience he himself can relate to—and how it brings on excitement and exhilaration that is not easily replaced. Furthermore, he goes on to describe the brotherhood that is forged when in a warzone. Junger differentiates this from friendship, however, defining brotherhood instead as “a mutual agreement in a group that you will put the welfare of the group, you will put the safety of everyone in the group above that of your own (Junger 2014).” Here lies the strength of the civilian eye providing insight into this experience. Sebastian Junger does not have combat training, despite having been a correspondent for over twenty years. Though in his experience in combat he can provide—in a civilian’s terms—what it means to be in combat, and how that experience can linger on well after the war has ended. This understanding is crucial if we are to find any truth, though Junger believes that “war does not have a simple, neat truth,” instead he thinks that war is just as convoluted as ever, with these conflicting ideas of the horrors of combat, yet missing it when it’s gone, becoming his proof. If there is no simple truth, however, then the complex one must be all of these things aggregated.

If we shift our attention towards Evan Wright and his work on *Generation Kill*, we can see an entirely different narrative unfold than the one in the Korengal Valley that can show truth in war must be from an aggregate of experience rather than a single, simple truth. In 2003 Wright, reporting for Rolling Stone magazine, was embedded with the First Reconnaissance Battalion of Marines at the dawn of the U.S. incursion into Iraq. Wright's job was simply to report on the marine's movement into Iraq to unseat the regime of Saddam Hussein. What he got, though, was a far more complex narrative that probed into how soldiers conducted themselves on an interpersonal level. Yes, we still were provided the same ideas of brotherhood that Sebastian Junger reported for us, but *Generation Kill* got further into the downtime that soldiers can have at times, and how their interactions illustrate the culture of war. Being adapted into a television series from his original articles, we are given a unique opportunity to see this culture at play. We see the marines joking with each other and playing with crude, sometimes racist language. Corporal Josh Ray Person is shown reacting to a child's letter as a cocky, killing machine, miming masturbation while saying that he'd "rather receive dirty porn [magazines]" than letters from kids (*Generation Kill* 2008). Now Evan Wright in writing this serves to show that these twenty or so year old marines act in much the same manner as a typical twenty-something. "People were offended," he said in an interview with Big Think, "that these soldiers weren't talking like Tom Hanks." This is a stark reminder of what defines the Hollywood war story, and what a war narrative looks like. To continue the use of Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* as an example, we see the fictional soldiers as the strong heroic types who must always do the right, moral thing when placed up

against the evils of the Nazi Army. Where *Saving Private Ryan* is a tribute to war veterans, with increasingly heroic acts ending in the final desperate stand against a German counterattack where Tom Hanks sacrifices himself for the survival of his men, *Generation Kill* shows that war is never that clean or that heroic. These soldiers are not clean, heroic patriots. In fact, the one patriotic Captain Dave McGraw (nicknamed Captain America) is shown to be incompetent and openly commits a war crime when taking a prisoner by threatening him with a gun to his head. Evan Wright portrays them as real people, fallible people who interact with each other as people casually would in such bizarre circumstances such as war.

However, Wright provides this story in an accessible way for both the soldiers he claims to have written the book for and the audience back home. He highlights that he wanted to make the soldiers he got close to laugh, but also make them uncomfortable with things that Wright would report on. As far as laughing, this humor to him came from those casual relationships that he, like Junger, had the opportunity to forge while embedded with them. This is vital, as it highlights the soldiers he was with as the real people that they are and Wright gained that understanding in his experience with them. Wright became comfortable enough to joke with them, yet objective enough to be able to show some of the muck-ups of “incompetence” that he observed from some of the officers (Big Think 2012). Even the men themselves described a handful of the higher ups—especially shown by the men dubbing a group leader “Encino Man” and openly mocking him for wanting to be “overly tactical” during the initial stage of the invasion-- as going to any lengths to win medals or earn glory, often at the projected expense of the

men under them. Wright does not shy away from the gory horror of war, often depicting the dead Iraqi soldiers and people over showing wounded American soldiers. While I would highlight this as a critique of his narrative as that avoids the American death surrounding war, since he did not actively experience a friendly casualty while embedded it makes sense that it would only be the Iraqi side that he would illustrate the intense death around them. In doing so, he shows us brief glimpses of the civilian suffering of war telling us that their lives (and their deaths) matter too and not just Americans. Yet Wright gives us an inside eye much like Sebastian Junger, and in that we find a strong look at the soldier's culture in ways that only a civilian could observe. He recognizes the alien ways these interactions may seem but he embraces them as an integral part of what their experience is. This is the brotherhood that Junger spoke of, that even though they insult each other, shout out racial slurs at abandon, and hold some officers in contempt each one would willingly die for the other. The integrative narrative shows us this, and it is imperative we give these stories the same care and attention we would for any news story we might find.

As the media's role changed into the modern theaters of war, their role became all the more meaningful when applied properly. There are clear dangers of politicization and embedding in that war can be misrepresented as it unfolds, but if we show the human side of this story placed into the context of civilian culture the media's role cannot be overstated. This is a clear evolution from Vietnam, and a change that can help us get to the bottom of what war truly is. If we can keep providing this integrative narrative as these wars come to a close, we can begin to mitigate the damage that future myths can



cause as we saw with the legacy of Vietnam. Therefore, it becomes all the more imperative that the integrative narrative becomes a cornerstone of what a war story can be.

## **V: Conclusion**

George Packer says that “There’s no truth in war – just each soldier’s experience,” yet, if we can aggregate their experiences, we can see the basic truths begin to become apparent. The media is a key player in finding truth in the war narrative, even if the soldier’s part may be the most important. It is in the ways that the media can deliver these narratives that are integral to how we can come to understand these stories. We have seen how the media gained a large amount of sway in the telling of the war narrative, and how in turn it affected the stories and memories of the Vietnam War. However, we have seen the changing relationship of the media and the military, and how an integrative narrative becomes paramount in tying those stories into where we can derive truth.

Why is this important? Today we have woven war into every aspect of our society. The film *American Sniper* has grossed \$209 million in the weeks since its release, the video game series *Call of Duty* has sold more than 64.92 million units worldwide. We have reduced war to simplistic myths of heroes with little context, and assigning point values to accruing endless kills against anonymous people over the internet. We are still involved in military action overseas despite recent downscaling of armed forces in the Middle East. The narratives coming from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the mounting conflict with ISIS will be directly affected by how they are represented and portrayed to the public. How we remember these conflicts is tied directly to how they are written about and reported. We saw with Vietnam that myths of that war are *still*

prevalent today, with fallout reaching from the justification for further armed conflict to as far as how we ought to treat our returning veterans. Our nation faces a difficult question as these conflicts wind down and gear up: how ought we to handle war in our society?

If we take these integrative narratives, and we place them in conversation with the wider political and cultural context we might find the truth in war. “There is no one, simple truth to war,” says Sebastian Junger, but we can try to aggregate one. War is sadistic, war is heroic, war can build countries, and war can break them. I do not know what war really is without experiencing it, but I can try.

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