# US media’s complex role in Vietnam War challenged by 50-year reflection



On 30 April 1975, the final helicopter lifted off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon, marking the end of the Vietnam War. This milestone, now commemorated fifty years later, has been surrounded by enduring myths about the role of US media coverage during the conflict. The dominant narratives frequently cast the mainstream media either as the principal force that turned American public opinion against the war or as a treacherous entity that undermined a noble military effort. However, the reality is far more complex, refuting both these claims.

According to a detailed analysis by The Guardian, the media's role in shaping American perceptions of the Vietnam War did not fit neatly into either of these narratives. The media's coverage did not spark widespread anti-war sentiment early on nor did it unequivocally support the military cause. Instead, the press often echoed official government accounts, which were frequently misleading or outright false, aiding the escalation of the war rather than critiquing it effectively.

One pivotal event exemplified this dynamic: the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, when US media largely accepted and propagated claims from President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that North Vietnamese gunboats had attacked US Navy destroyers. This led Congress to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, providing an open-ended authorisation for war. The Washington Post’s headline at the time read, “American Planes Hit North Vietnam After 2nd Attack on Our Destroyers; Move Taken to Halt New Aggression.” Yet, in subsequent years, no retractions were issued despite clear doubts about the veracity of these claims. Murrey Marder, the chief diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Post during that period, acknowledged that a retraction would require admitting the lack of critical oversight throughout the war’s coverage. He stated, “If the American press had been doing its job and the Congress had been doing its job, we would never have been involved.”

Domestically, those opposing the war found it challenging to gain traction within mainstream media outlets. A survey by the Boston Globe in 1968 found that none of the 39 major newspapers had editorialised for the withdrawal of US troops, despite public opinion polling nearly half the population viewing the war as a mistake.

The nature of war reporting itself was often numbing and depersonalised. Michael Herr, Esquire’s correspondent in Vietnam during the late 1960s, wrote in his book Dispatches that US media had “never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about.” Instead, military jargon and discussions of 'progress' dominated, diluting the human cost of the conflict.

Television coverage, credited by many with bringing the war's brutal realities into American living rooms, actually played a significant role in promoting the war effort, especially during its escalation years. Research documented in Daniel Hallin’s book The ‘Uncensored War’ revealed that television news commonly dehumanised the enemy, portraying North Vietnamese and Vietcong fighters as fanatical and subhuman, which reinforced rather than challenged the justification for the war. A 1967 Harris poll commissioned by Newsweek showed that 64% of viewers felt TV coverage increased their support for the war, compared to 26% who felt it boosted opposition.

Notable exceptions existed, such as Morley Safer's 1965 report for CBS Evening News showing US Marines burning huts in the village of Cam Ne, but such reports were rare. Media outlets avoided covering numerous atrocities, including the My Lai massacre in March 1968, when US soldiers killed several hundred unarmed Vietnamese civilians. Despite evidence reaching national news media, the story was initially ignored by mainstream outlets and only gained attention through alternative channels and investigative journalist Seymour Hersh's reporting in 1969.

Throughout the war, media discourse remained largely focused on issues of military strategy and effectiveness rather than the morality or legality of US actions. Even prominent figures like CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, after visiting Vietnam, framed the conflict as a military stalemate rather than making a moral indictment. His 1967 commentary emphasised negotiation and military pragmatism, calling for America to be "an honourable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy," rather than condemning the war’s underlying justifications.

In the four decades following the war, successive American presidents have consistently depicted the Vietnam conflict in ways that reinforced patriotic and noble motives, with minimal recognition of the war's contentious realities. Jimmy Carter in 1977 dismissed the notion of moral culpability by describing the destruction as “mutual.” Ronald Reagan hailed the war as a “noble cause” at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1989. Bill Clinton, in 1995 during the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Vietnam, stated, “Whatever we may think about the political decisions of the Vietnam era, the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives.”

Barack Obama in 2012 at the Vietnam War Memorial spoke of honouring veterans and learning lessons, but his presidency closely mirrored some of the war’s escalation dynamics, particularly with increased troop deployments in Afghanistan. Similarly, recent US administrations have supported extensive military operations and arms shipments abroad, including controversial involvements in the Middle East, as noted by ongoing reports from groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concerning civilian casualties in Gaza.

The relationship between the US media and government during the Vietnam War set a precedent for subsequent conflicts, often characterised by uncritical reporting of official narratives and limited challenge to the strategic or moral justifications of military actions. Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers whistleblower, reflected in 2021 on how deception shaped public support: “That there is deception, that the public is evidently misled by it early in the game...is the reality.” He added it was easier to deceive the public with narratives aligned to their beliefs about American moral superiority.

The Guardian’s reporting highlights that the Vietnam War experience illustrates broader patterns of media-government interaction in wartime, where official deception and limited media scrutiny have recurrently influenced public understanding of US military engagements.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2000/mar/20/mondaymediasection.pressandpublishing> - This article discusses how war correspondents during the Vietnam War were often critical of the U.S. military, presenting a bleak picture of the conflict, which contrasts with the mainstream media's portrayal of the war.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/16/ken-burns-vietnam-war-documentary-john-mccain> - Ken Burns' documentary 'The Vietnam War' is mentioned, highlighting the complex narratives surrounding the conflict and the role of media in shaping public perception.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/10/facebook-news-media-editor-vietnam-photo-censorship> - This article addresses the controversy over Facebook's censorship of a Pulitzer-winning Vietnam War photo, underscoring the challenges in media coverage and the dissemination of war imagery.
* <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/19940804/1923616/medias-role-in-the-deceit-that-sparked-vietnam-war> - This piece examines how the media's uncritical reporting of official narratives, such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, contributed to the escalation of the Vietnam War.
* <https://www.tpt.org/post/from-rewire-media-shapes-public-opinion-war/> - This article discusses how media coverage, including the Tet Offensive and the My Lai massacre, influenced public opinion and anti-war sentiment in the United States.
* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/did-the-news-media-led-by-walter-cronkite-lose-the-war-in-vietnam/2018/05/25/a5b3e098-495e-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html> - This article explores the impact of media coverage, particularly by figures like Walter Cronkite, on public perception and policy decisions during the Vietnam War.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/01/us-vietnam-war-media> - Please view link - unable to able to access data