The Mirror With A Memory: How Photography Shaped America’s Perception of the Vietnam War

Michael Szymanski

"Photography is the most nostalgic of arts. Implicit in the act of photography is a recognition of the passage of time, of transience and the inevitability of change." – Art Historian, Caroline Brothers

********

It can be easy to forget how the world viewed war before the advent of photography. Before the invention of photography, wars were perceived as remote and exciting to those who were removed from the action. Details of war were relayed second hand, from mostly biased accounts of soldiers returning home. Some soldiers brought paintings or poems to pass along the grotesque details of battle. It was not until the American Civil War that photographs began to appear, displaying the less romantic side of war. Mathew B. Brady was the first to conceive the idea of documenting combat who would eventually receive permission to sell his war photographs as fine art. His images of raw and untamed realities of war, of which the American public had not seen before, created a need for further explanation of what the United States’ involvement in a number of conflicts meant for domestic perceptions of U.S. foreign policy. The Vietnam Conflict had the deepest impact on the growing American public, creating a need for further explanation of what the United States were at war.

The United States’ involvement in a number of conflicts meant the greatest foreign policy debate the United States had ever faced. This debate had lasting effects on the
How Photography Shaped Perception of the Vietnam War

Szymanski

In the act of the passage of time, of transience and Art Historian, Caroline Brothers

......

It has been argued how the world viewed war before the invention of photography, and exciting to those who were details of war were relayed second counts of soldiers returning home. things or poems to pass along the was not until the American Civil was the first to conceive

the idea of documenting combat through photography. Brady, who would eventually receive permission from President Lincoln himself to sell his war photographs, thought that he could sell these photographs as fine art. His photos depicted the gruesome realities of war, of which the American public wanted no part. His images of raw and untamed violence illustrated scenes and imagery that people wanted to forget.

Throughout the 20th century, the United States became involved in a number of conflicts that would eventually shape domestic perceptions of U.S. foreign policy. Arguably, the Vietnam Conflict had the deepest impact. This research will document a series of iconic images taken during the Vietnam conflict. These photographs, along a distinctive timeline, had a sizeable impact on the growing American distrust of government, creating a need for further explanation of those with whom we were at war.

The United States’ involvement in Vietnam triggered the greatest foreign policy debate the nation had ever known. This debate had lasting effects on the argument over the importance
and relevance of the Cold War itself. The Vietnam Conflict was, after all, an extension of the United States’ Cold War policy of containment. In March of 1947, President Truman had given a speech that outlined the foundation of American foreign policy for many years to follow. In this speech, which became known as the Truman Doctrine, he charged, “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.” These sentiments were precursors for America’s conflicts in both Korea and Vietnam. Political commentator Walter Lippmann warned, in regards to the United States’ involvement in Vietnam, that “viewing the entire world and every local situation within it through the either-or lens of an anticommunist crusade,” would have damaging effects. Truman’s policy of containment expanded over time and caused future presidential administrations to take a more serious look at the events unfolding in Southeast Asia.

151 There have been many books written on the origins of the Cold War and its direct influence on the Vietnam War. Some of the works include Cambridge History of the Cold War, with valu and Jessica Gienow-Hecht. Others include The Michael Kort, and Walter Lafeber’s America, a
The Vietnam Conflict was, in large part, the United States' Cold War policy of containment. President Truman had given the definition of American foreign policy in his 1947 speech, which became known as the Truman Doctrine. "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting armed minorities or outside pressures." These words were precursors for America's involvement in Vietnam. Political commentator Sung An has written in regards to the United States' "viewing the entire world and every country through the either-or lens of an either/or either external threat or internal threat which would have damaging effects. These conflicting ideals were put to the test throughout the Vietnam conflict. Public opinions were sculpted and molded from the media's interpretation of the war. Photography became an important tool used to convey the images of war. For many of the Americans who experienced the effects of the conflict, shaking off the memory of Vietnam was a difficult task. The photographs exhibited within this research will be examined as icons in historical memory. As icons – a site suggesting a cluster of meanings – these photographs have become resources for studying the many different narratives involved in their creation.
The photos held powerful symbolism within various contexts. These images reshaped domestic opinions of the Vietnam War. Author and historian Mary Lynn Rampolla argues that, “we will never know all there is to know about the past because we are constantly posing new questions, and our questions, in turn, help us see the past in new ways.” Thus, historians worked to establish a connection between the images of events frozen in time and their profound effect on U.S. history.

In addition to establishing these connections, historians must also conduct research with the knowledge that the public knew little or nothing of the happenings of war. Regarding many of our American skirmishes, the general public had little in the way of visual conception of what was happening overseas. This was especially true in the case of the Vietnam Conflict. For the hundreds of thousands of troops who served there, and for the millions of people in the U.S. who viewed it on television, Vietnam was simply the name of a series of bloody battles and the United States’ longest conflict to that point. For those who


were in Vietnam, the landscape with monsoons, malaria, bad water, in domestic perspective, Vietnam country in the shape of the letter on a map. When the United 1960’s, both policy makers and the about our new enemy.

At the end of the conflict, Vietnam proved that the United pursue change abroad, and that it a progressive political agenda at home on race, gender, education, and included Luther King Jr., who was the moment time to speak out against war, policy in Vietnam was an “uncon...
symbolism within various contexts. Ninn Rampolla argues that, "we will know about the past because we are ons, and our questions, in turn, help s." Thus, historians worked to en the images of events frozen in on U.S. history.

shing these connections, historians with the knowledge that the public pappenings of war. Regarding many the general public had little in the what was happening overseas. This e of the Vietnam Conflict. For the oops who served there, and for the S. who viewed it on television, e of a series of bloody battles and conflict to that point. For those who were in Vietnam, the landscape was a confusion of crushing heat, monsoons, malaria, bad water, and ambushes. From a domestic perspective, Vietnam was an unknown East Asian country in the shape of the letter “S,” that was difficult to locate on a map. When the United States entered Vietnam in the 1960’s, both policy makers and the public alike knew very little about our new enemy.

At the end of the conflict, many historians agreed that Vietnam proved that the United States was simply not suited to pursue change abroad, and that it should concentrate its efforts on a progressive political agenda at home, repairing injustices based on race, gender, education, and income levels. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr., who was the most prominent American at the time to speak out against war, vowed that the United States’ policy in Vietnam was an “unconscionable use of violence and a drain on resources needed at home.”

---

politics, and values were nowhere to be found on the American radar.

Even though American presence in Vietnam had inflicted deep, painful wounds in Americans’ self perceptions, today the number of Americans even with the most elementary knowledge of the events that took place in Vietnam is embarrassingly small. “A sense of potential and a sense of riddance are,” as famed American philosopher George Santayana observed, “the two poles of American liberty.”158 America’s Cold War front had now relocated from the Soviet Union to Southeast Asia.

In a presidential news conference in 1954, President Eisenhower noted that, “you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”159


The goal of containing the south's Indochina transformed into a full-scale war and outlooks figured that our enemy’s technology, know-how, firepower, and Vietnamese Communists overcame American historians, strategists, and things ended so badly.

The distinction between most Americans had ended so badly.


The goal of containing the southward spread of communism in Indochina transformed into a full-scale combat. Initial American outlooks figured that our enemy would succumb to superior technology, know-how, firepower, and grit. In contrary, the Vietnamese Communists overcame substantial odds, leaving American historians, strategists, and veterans to wonder how things ended so badly.

The distinction between memory and history is highly contingent on time and place. The memories that people hold of Vietnam are affected by their age, where they lived, and if they knew someone in the service or killed in the conflict. As the conflict in Vietnam escalated into something far more serious than most Americans had expected, the media coverage of the war expanded and played an integral role in shaping the domestic perceptions of the war. While the 1960’s progressed, the news media began to feed the American appetite for Vietnam related news.168 As the decade came to a close, support for our campaign in Vietnam began to waiver, and public opinion shifted

---

to strongly oppose the war. The use of the photograph in American journalism became an important tool used to shift ideas and historical views of battle.

Historians have long argued the significance of the photograph in terms of importance and validity in historical memory. Art historian Caroline Brothers notes, "Historians have shown a real reluctance to recognize and adopt visual material as a documentary source." 161 The contents of a photograph can only show a moment captured in time. But since the photograph freezes time, it seems to give the past a more tangible form to be studied. Photographs, in a way, abbreviate the past, and this shortfall may actually be a strength. Brothers continues, "At worst images, and particularly photographs, are ignored by historians all together; at best they are used merely in illustration of other histories. [sic]" 162 The argument over whether or not the photograph could be seen as an accurate source of historical data evolved greatly during the Vietnam War era. The content of the photograph demanded more respect from the public, and its context required the perceived images. Like any other photograph requires certain techniques completely understand its substance began in the 1960s would create a single image would have the power to public opinion. The goal of the photograph was to demand more respect from the public, and its context required the perceived images. Like any other photograph requires certain techniques completely understand its substance began in the 1960s would create a single image would have the power to public opinion. The goal of the photograph was to

---

162 Brothers, War Photography and Cultural History 15.
The use of the photograph in history is an important tool used to shift ideas and bring argued the significance of the photograph in historical importance and validity in historical line. Brothers notes, “Historians have recognize and adopt visual material as the contents of a photograph can only be understood in time. But since the photograph can be the past a more tangible form to be used, abbreviate the past, and this way, abbreviate the past, and this strength. Brothers continues, “At photographs, are ignored by the argument over whether or not the an accurate source of historical data vietnam War era. The content of the photograph demanded more respect of both historians and the public, and its context required the public to alter the way it perceived images. Like any other historical document, a photograph requires certain techniques in its reading in order to completely understand its substance. The media frenzy that began in the 1960s would create an environment in which a single image would have the power to shift large portions of public opinion. The goal of the photographer was to ingrain the image into the minds of the viewer and evoke a response.

********

163 Brothers, War Photography and Cultural History 16.
The significant power that photographs held began to alter the way in which journalists and photographers conducted their work. Capturing sensational and emotionally striking images and story lines would become the new objective of the media. The power of the photograph would signify the change in American attitude towards the conflict in Vietnam.

On the morning of June 11, 1963, in protest to the American-backed South Vietnamese Catholic government, a group of Buddhists conducted an act of protest that would shatter American views of the conflict. A motorcade pulled up to a busy Saigon intersection and an elderly Buddhist monk climbed out of one of the vehicles. He sat down in the lotus position, legs crossed, with his palms pressed together in prayer. A large group of monks and nuns surrounded him. One of the other monks doused him with gasoline while another ignited him with a lighter. The flames engulfed him as he sat silently in the street. From time to time, a light breeze pulled the flames away from Duc’s face. His eyes remained closed, but his features were twisted in apparent pain. By the time the monk had fallen over, still burning, the circle of people surrounding the burning monk was Quang Duc, a sixty-six-year-old member of the Buddhist clergy, the other monks and nuns, and a large group of people witnessing the age-old rite of protest in the days and weeks leading up to the crisis in Vietnam. Quang Duc had been tipped off by a correspondent, to the events that day. The monks also handed out leaflets that had been prepared by the burned monk. One of the other monks doused him with gasoline while another ignited him with a lighter. The flames engulfed him as he sat silently in the street. From time to time, a light breeze pulled the flames away from Duc’s face. His eyes remained closed, but his features were twisted in apparent pain. By the time the monk had fallen over, still burning, the circle of people surrounding the burning monk was Quang Duc, a sixty-six-year-old member of the Buddhist clergy, the other monks and nuns, and a large group of people witnessing the age-old rite of protest in the days and weeks leading up to the crisis in Vietnam. Quang Duc had been tipped off by a correspondent, to the events that day. The monks also handed out leaflets that had been prepared by the burned monk.

---

165 Young, Marilyn, The Vietnam War, A History, 127-150.
that photographs held began to alter and photographers conducted their new objective of the media. The photographs would signify the change in American opinion of Vietnam.

June 11, 1963, in protest to the Vietnamese catholic government, a Buddhist monk climbed out of a motorcade pulled up to a busy street down in the lotus position, legs twisted in apparent pain. By the time the ambulance arrived, the monk had fallen over, still burning as the fire consumed him.

The night before, the Buddhist monks had made a phone call to tip off Malcolm Browne, an Associated Press (AP) correspondent, to the events that would transpire the following day. The monks also handed out copies of a suicide biography that had been prepared by the burning monk. The name of the monk was Quang Duc, a sixty-six-year-old who had been a member of the Buddhist clergy since the age of fifteen. The people surrounding the burning monk, along with Browne, chose not to intervene. The circle around him served as a barrier against intervention, this was a group action. Thousands witnessed the age-old rite of protest by suicide. Few gestures could have drawn greater attention to the reality of the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam. Quang Duc had met with his religious and spiritual leaders in the days and weeks prior to this event to

165 Young, Marilyn, *The Vietnam War, A History in Documents*, 62.
discuss his beliefs. His intentions were to draw attention to the harsh treatment that Buddhists were receiving from the U.S.-backed Catholic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was put into power by the U.S. in the hopes that he would serve as a barrier from further communist expansion into South Vietnam.  

The *New York Times*’ David Halberstam, who had also witnessed the event, noted, “Thich Quang Duc became a hero to the Buddhists in Vietnam, and he dramatized their cause for the rest of the world.” Halberstam continued:

I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think...As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.  

---

170 Young, *The Vietnam War, A History in Documents*, 63.  
entions were to draw attention to the
Gaoists were receiving from the U.S.-
Gao Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was put into
hopes that he would serve as a barrier
ansion into South Vietnam. 168

David Halberstam, who had also
Thich Quang Duc became a hero to
and he dramatized their cause for the

tam continued:
that sight again, but once was
ines were coming from a human
ings burn surprisingly
hind me I could hear the
the Vietnamese who were
was too shocked to cry, too
ake notes or ask questions, too
en think... As he burned he
a muscle, never uttered a
outward composure in sharp
wailing people around him. 170

Witnessing an event like this first hand can have lasting
effects. Viewing images like this after the fact also had
resounding effects on American political and social culture.

The backlash that this photograph produced was both a
journalistic dream and a resounding nightmare for U.S. officials
who believed that photographs and reports similar to that of the
burning monk would turn the American public against the effort
in Vietnam. 171 John F. Kennedy eventually tried to have
Halberstam transferred, but the publisher of the New York Times
rebuffed this request. 172 In an effort to shape the stories reported
back to the U.S., Carl Rowan, then director of the U.S.
Information Agency in Washington, instructed the U.S. mission
in Saigon to "steer the news media away from events that are
likely to result in undesirable stories." As was the case with
many embarrassing government documents from this period, his
classified memorandum on this subject found its way to print. 173

Collision of Religion, World Politics and
1963.

122

As the antiwar sentiment grew during the 1960's—in part due to images similar to that of the burning monk—so did efforts by U.S. college students to protest the war. In April of 1965, Paul Potter, the president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)\textsuperscript{174}, called on opponents of American policy in Vietnam to attend a protest rally in Washington D.C.\textsuperscript{175} In a speech given at this rally, Potter would call into question the entire basis of U.S. foreign policy dating back to the beginning of the Cold War. Potter called for a social movement to demand an end to the conflict in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{176} He insisted that, “our problems are not in Vietnam […] but are here in the United States.” The SDS president continued, “What we must do is begin to build a democratic and humane society in which Vietnams are unthinkable, in which human life and initiative are precious.”\textsuperscript{177} The formation of groups similar to the SDS showcased the idea that antiwar opinions were growing, especially among students, and that student action could play a significant role in shaping policymakers in the U.S.

From 1965 to 1975, television played a significant role in shaping the Vietnam Conflict. New technology and the use of battlefields of Southeast Asia, photographers with the ability to capture the consequences for American moral climate, U.S., led to deep divisions in how government, military, and social change was perceived.

Designated by journalist Mike Wallace as the living-room war,” the coverage in Vietnam evoked America’s simultaneously in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{178} More than any other time, Americans were subjected to nightly images of the war. Prior to the Tet offensive in February 1968, the coverage illustrated the extent of the conflict and the toll it had taken on the American public.

\textsuperscript{174} The SDS was a student activist movement that served as a representation of the “New Left” in the United States. Formed in the early 1960s, the organization grew rapidly and dissolved in 1969. The group preached participatory democracy and student involvement.

\textsuperscript{175} Foner, Eric, \textit{Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History}, 301.

\textsuperscript{176} Foner, Eric, \textit{Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History}, 301.

\textsuperscript{177} Foner, Eric, \textit{Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History}, 302.

ent grew during the 1960’s—in part of the burning monk—so did efforts to protest the war. In April of 1965, a rally in Washington D.C. In a letter and that student action could have a direct impact on policymakers in the U.S.

From 1965 to 1975, television, along with photography, played a significant role in shaping American perceptions of the Vietnam Conflict. New technology, and unlimited access to the battlefields of Southeast Asia, invested field reporters and photographers with the ability to broadcast reports with unprecedented speed. The carnage of the conflict and the consequences for American morale, both in Vietnam and in the U.S., led to deep divisions in how Americans viewed the role of government, military, and social change.

Designated by journalist Michael J. Arlen as the “living-room war,” the coverage in Vietnam would alter the way in which news was reported. The term “living-room war” would evoke America’s simultaneously intimate and distant relationship to Vietnam. More than any other conflicts before, Americans were subjected to nightly images of violence and destruction.

Prior to the Tet offensive in February 1968, Americans were subjected to nightly images of violence and destruction.

given a view of a "clean, effective technological war." 179 What was also argued during the late 1960's was that combat scenes from Vietnam appeared less real because "the physical size of the television screen [...] still shows one a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall." 180 Aside from this factor, in early media coverage, the most grisly aspects of combat were censored from television because they were not appropriate for news programs shown during dinner time. Television, in other words, was forced to censor combat footage because of audience considerations. 181 News photography, however, was not subjected to such moralistic restrictions.

*******

As the conflict dragged on inconclusively, combat reporting became caught up in the ambiguities of the press's relationship to official information and the government that supplied it. Los Angeles Times reporter William Tuohy warned, "We're drowning in facts here, but we're starved for information"


[...]


183 ""Street Clashes Go On In Vietnam, Foe Still Holds February 2, 1968."
"Effective technological war."\textsuperscript{179} What late 1960's was that combat scenes real because "the physical size of the shows one a picture of men three men three inches tall."\textsuperscript{180} Aside from coverage, the most grisly aspects of television because they were not programs shown during dinner time. was forced to censor combat footage considerations.\textsuperscript{181} News photography, to such moralistic restrictions.

\textbf{**********}


\[
\text{[...]} \text{If the reporters who were living and breathing the story every day could not make sense of things, what chance does the public have?}^{182}\text{ The American public was given a chance to view the atrocities of combat for themselves on the morning of February 2, 1968.}
\]

\textit{The New York Times} read, "Street Clashes Go On In Vietnam, Foe Still Holds Parts Of Cities."\textsuperscript{183} Below the headline, a gruesome photograph captured by AP

\begin{center}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\begin{minipage}{0.5\textwidth}
\begin{quote}
\textbf{The New York Times} read, "Street Clashes Go On In Vietnam, Foe Still Holds Parts Of Cities."\textsuperscript{183}
\end{quote}
\end{minipage}
\end{center}


photographer Eddie Adams shows a Vietcong guerrilla being executed at point-blank range. Easily one of the most recognizable images of war in American history, Adams’ photograph captured the essence of the escalating violence in Vietnam. What the image did not show, as is continually a problem with combat photography, was the background of what was taking place on the streets of Saigon.

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the chief of South Vietnam’s national police, was well known in Saigon for his brutal tactics. After a number of bloody attacks on several of his men, including one gunned down with his wife and children, his hunt for communist invaders became personal. On the morning of February 1, 1968, Eddie Adams was roaming the streets of battle-hardened Saigon, following a number a serious attacks during the Tet offensive. Adams spotted a group of government troops with a prisoner in tow. The man wore black shorts and a checkered top, with his hands bound behind him. The soldiers marched their captive to Loan, who drew his pistol and waived a group of bystanders away. Without any pistol to the prisoner’s head and squinted, and fell backwards, with No one present spoke a word. The heard aside from the discharge of the from Adams’ camera. Loan was standing a few feet behind him. “And many of my men,” he said quietly understand. Do you?” This kill South Vietnam would have immense both a military and political perspective.

Those present could not have of this photograph from a historic occurrence during the North Viet offensive” of early 1968, which was Tet Offensive. The offensive dramatic military campaigns undert

185 Wyatt, Paper Soldiers: The American Press
188 Wyatt, Paper Soldiers: The American Press
shows a Vietcong guerrilla being mge. Easily one of the most ar 1n American history, Adams did not show, as is continually a
~raphy, was the background of what
~

Loan, the chief of South Vietnam’s own in Saigon for his brutal tactics.
acks on several of his men, including his wife and children, his hunt for personal. On the morning of ms was roaming the streets of battle-
number a serious attacks during the d a group of government troops with wore black shorts and a checkered behind him. The soldiers marched rew his pistol and waived a group of bystanders away. Without any hesitation, Loan placed the pistol to the prisoner’s head and squeezed the trigger. The man grimaced, and fell backwards, with blood gushing from his head. No one present spoke a word. The only sound that could be heard aside from the discharge of the pistol was the shutter click from Adams’ camera. Loan then turned to the reporters standing a few feet behind him. “They killed many Americans and many of my men,” he said quietly in English. “Buddha will understand. Do you?” This killing of one man by another in South Vietnam would have immeasurable consequences from both a military and political perspective.

Those present could not have anticipated the significance of this photograph from a historical perspective. The incident occurred during the North Vietnamese-Vietcong “general offensive” of early 1968, which was commonly referred to as the Tet Offensive. The offensive was one of the boldest and dramatic military campaigns undertaken by either side during the

conflict. The attacks, which ran deep into South Vietnamese territory, shattered the optimism of the American military. The attacks also had a similar effect on American political and public opinion. Tet historian Don Oberdorfer believed that “The Tet Offensive shocked a citizenry which had been led to believe that success in Vietnam was just around the corner.” The Tet Offensive, thanks to Eddie Adams’ photograph, became a significant historical marker defining a major turning point in American public opinion. Many blamed the press for distorting the facts during the offensive. It should be noted that nearly 9,000 American and South Vietnamese soldiers, along with 58,000 North Vietnamese troops, were killed. It is also estimated that over 14,000 South Vietnamese civilians perished. While the Communists suffered high casualties during Tet, the offensive succeeded in shattering the American public’s belief in its own government’s pronouncement that the campaign was being won.

The photograph of Loan’s assassin turned “a military triumph” for the Communists into a ‘psychological defeat’ for the South Vietnamese. The reasoning behind this statement is best explained by a man in military clothing. The photograph, taken on February 23, 1968 in which the ed

which ran deep into South Vietnamese
timism of the American military.\textsuperscript{189} The
effect on American political and public
on Oberdorfer believed that “The Tet
enry which had been led to believe that
just around the corner.”\textsuperscript{190} The Tet
odie Adams’ photograph, became a
ker defining a major turning point in

Many blamed the press for distorting
tive. It should be noted that nearly
m Vietnamese soldiers, along with
roops, were killed. It is also estimated
etnamese civilians perished.\textsuperscript{191} While
igh casualties during Tet, the offensive
American public’s belief in its own
ent that the campaign was being won.\textsuperscript{192}

\begin{quote}
The photograph of Loan’s execution of the Vietcong
assassin turned “a military triumph for the United States and
South Vietnamese into a ‘psychological victory’ for the enemy.”\textsuperscript{193}
The reasoning behind this statement lies in the context of the
photograph. To the casual observer of the \textit{New York Times} that
morning, it appeared to be a picture of a civilian being executed
by a man in military clothing. These factors, combined with the
growing number of American casualties, would help expand a
growing rift between supporters and protesters. A “crisis of
confidence” was created in the government, in the media, and in
the public, to which the Tet Offensive was “more climax than
cause.”\textsuperscript{194} As noted by author Clarence Wyatt, Buddha may have
understood the meaning of the man’s death, but such
understanding was harder for the less divine to obtain.

Eddie Adams’ photograph served as fuel in the growing
fire that raged amongst the protesters who rallied against the
conflict. The \textit{Wall Street Journal} printed an editorial on
February 23, 1968 in which the editor noted that “the American

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
people should be getting ready to accept, if they have not already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed." 195

Opinions similar to this became more commonplace throughout the U.S. following the Tet Offensive. The American public, with the image of General Loan’s execution on their mind, began to seriously doubt their support for the war in Vietnam. Following the publication of Adams’ image, the ranks of the dissidents swelled. Within the United States and abroad, the Cold War consensus that had sustained U.S. overseas commitments for the previous two decades began to fracture. 196

An additional contributing factor to the public perception of the war came from CBS anchorman, Walter Cronkite. Following a trip to Vietnam on February 27, 1968, Cronkite reported on his findings to the American public. 197 In an effort to sum up the winners and losers of the recent Tet Offensive, Cronkite lamented, “The referees of history may make it a draw.” 198

The CBS anchorman would warn:

> We have been too optimistic of the American victory in Vietnam and in War, no longer in the silhoutte of the darkest cloud[s]... to victory today is to admit the evidence, the openly wrong in the past. The edge of defeat is the edge of pessimism. To say stalemate seems the unsatisfactory conclusion.

As President Lyndon Johnson watched White House, he told his press secretary had lost Cronkite, he had lost “Mr. Average Voter.”

By 1970, protests to America reached fevering heights. President Cambodia added fuel to the growing of students around the country demanding they felt was unjust. Student protests and Army Reserve units that were c

197 Young, The Vietnam War, A History in Documents, 86.
198 Young, The Vietnam War, A History in Documents, 86.
ready to accept, if they have not already, that Vietnam effort may be doomed."

became more commonplace throughout the war. The American public, with Johnson’s execution on their mind, began to question their support for the war in Vietnam. Following Johnson’s image, the ranks of the dissidents in the United States and abroad, the Cold War began to fracture. 196

A contributing factor to the public perception of the war was CBS anchorman, Walter Cronkite. Early on February 27, 1968, Cronkite warned the American public. In an effort to enter into the perspective of losers of the recent Tet Offensive, Cronkite said, "The optimists may make it a draw." 198

warn:

As President Lyndon Johnson watched from his television in the White House, he told his press secretary George Christian that Cronkite’s report was a turning point. Johnson noted that if he had lost Cronkite, he had lost "Mr. Average Citizen" as well. 200

By 1970, protests to American presence in Vietnam reached fevering heights. President Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia added fuel to the growing dissent in the U.S. Millions of students around the country demonstrated against a war that they felt was unjust. Student protests led to conflicts with police and Army Reserve units that were called in to control the crowds.

---

195 Young, The Vietnam War, A History in Documents, 86.
196 Young, The Vietnam War, A History in Documents, 87.
197 Young, The Vietnam War, A History in Documents, 86.
The tides were turning within the United States, and the growing anti-war sentiment was being shared not only by students, but also with major figures in the public eye. In an album released in March of 1970, rock and roll icon Jimi Hendrix penned a number of songs about the negative viewpoints he shared on the Vietnam War.

In one song titled, “Machine Gun,” Hendrix opens up with a guitar riff intended to mimic the sound of an assault rifle. The lyrics of the song were intended to illustrate the viewpoint of a soldier at war. One particular verse pleaded:

The Same way you shoot me down, baby
You’ll be goin’ just the same
Three times the pain
And your own self to blame

Hendrix could not have predicted how close this song would strike to home, less than a month after its initial release.

---


within the United States, and the growing 
being shared not only by students, but 
the public eye. In an album released in 
roll icon Jimi Hendrix penned a number 
viewpoints he shared on the Vietnam 
"Machine Gun," Hendrix opens up 
to mimic the sound of an assault rifle.201 
intended to illustrate the viewpoint of 
ular verse pleaded:

may you shoot me down, baby 
atin' just the same 
the pain 
self to blame202 
edicted how close this song would 
month after its initial release.

College campuses became the front for America’s battle 
against the conflict in Vietnam. On May 4, 1970, John Paul Filo, 
a lab technician in the Kent State University School of 
Journalism, arrived to work around 8:00AM. Filo noted, 
“Colleges and Universities were erupting after Nixon’s 
ouncement of the Cambodian invasion.”203 Campuses all 
over the nation were seething over a number of issues, but the

201 Leekley, John, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs (New York: Random 
House, 1980), 78.
Cambodian invasion suddenly crystallized the unrest.²⁰⁴ At Kent State, the National Guard had been called after student protesting led to the campus ROTC building being burned down.²⁰⁵ Later that morning, following the destruction of the ROTC building, and after Filo closed his lab down in order to attend a student rally, students and National Guard members had confronted each other across the student commons, separated by about 200 yards. Filo remembered a barrage of tear gas, and he began running back and forth between the two groups to take photos.²⁰⁶

John Filo was scared. A huge man, six-feet-three and over 215 pounds, he could have been mistaken as a football player if it were not for his full Abraham Lincoln beard.²⁰⁷ The National Guardsmen lined up, fixed bayonets, and began to sweep across the commons towards the students. Filo remembered the sight of the Guardsmen, “there were about seventy-five (of them), helmeted and wearing black gas masks.

They looked grotesque.”²⁰⁸ After the Guard began to retreat to the top of back, the students followed, keeping the Guard.²⁰⁹ As the Guard moved, dodge rocks, they turned suddenly began firing directly into the crowd directions.²¹⁰

Once the firing stopped, Filo, body of Jeff Miller. Filo would later lying all over the commons. As he turned to flee the scene, Filo had blood was extensive, like kicking on he turned to flee the scene, Filo had got to document this,” he told him pictures.²¹² As the chaos of the scene

²⁰⁵ Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
²⁰⁶ Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
²⁰⁸ Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
²⁰⁹ Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
²¹⁰ Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
²¹² "Witness Describes Kent State Shooting By November 1974."

136
They looked grotesque."208 After a short amount of time, the Guard began to retreat to the top of a small hill. As they moved back, the students followed, keeping a distance between the two groups. The hostile crowd was shouting and throwing rocks at the Guard.209 As the Guard moved backward and continued to dodge rocks, they turned suddenly, dropped to one knee, and began firing directly into the crowd. People scattered in all directions.210

Once the firing stopped, Filo remembered seeing bodies lying all over the commons. As he turned around, he saw the body of Jeff Miller. Filo would later testify, "He had been shot in the neck. It could have only been a few seconds, but already the blood was extensive, like kicking over a bucket of blood."211 As he turned to flee the scene, Filo had a realization. "Someone has got to document this," he told himself, and he began shooting pictures.212 As the chaos of the scene began to unfold, Filo noted

208 Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
209 Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
210 Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 78.
that nobody was going near the body. Then there was a girl, a
fourteen-year-old runaway named Mary Ann Vecchio, who came
running up the street and knelt down next to the body. Filo began
to walk towards her, camera in hand. He added that, “Her body
was shaking... she was crying. And then she screamed – a God-
awful scream.” Filo’s reflexes took over, and that was it. One
frame.213

When the shooting stopped, four students dead were dead
and many others wounded. One was paralyzed for life.214 In
fulfillment of the war’s evil talent for tearing the country apart,
our soldiers were now firing upon Americans. Filo’s photo hit
front pages around the nation the following day.215 The shooting
magnified the country’s deep divisions. On May 25, Newsweek
published a poll asking who was primarily responsible for the
student deaths. Eleven percent said the National Guard; 58
percent said the students.216 The Nixon administration reacted to
the deaths with wanton insensitivity.

Ron Ziegler, whose statements
referred to the deaths as a reminder
of violence, it invites tragedy.”217 The
turning against the war, but the vil-
towns and universities would only be

The image captured at Kent
illustration of the youthful revolt
epitome of grief, the perfect syr
turmoil. The Kent State demon-
induced a backlash of editorials and
order must be restored at all costs to
The image seized the nation’s at-
shift in the media’s coverage of the
focus more on the conflict within the
caused by the photo reached near

213 Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 79.
the body. Then there was a girl, a named Mary Ann Vecchio, who came helt down next to the body. Filo began a in hand. He added that, "Her body ting. And then she screamed - a God- mes took over, and that was it. One stopped, four students dead were dead d. One was paralyzed for life. In il talent for tearing the country apart, ing upon Americans. Filo's photo hit on the following day. The shooting deep divisions. On May 25, Newsweek ho was primarily responsible for the 7 percent said the National Guard; 58 4 The Nixon administration reacted to 214 Prize Photographs, 79. 215 at Happened and Why, 414. 216 of A Nation’s Pain,” New York Times, 30 April 217 Kamow, Vietnam: A History, 611. of A Nation’s Pain,” New York Times, 30 April 218 Hairman, Robert, “Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photograph,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly Vol. 31 (2001): 4-31.
nation. The image of Vecchio’s screaming face reminded Americans that the students protesting this war were just like their own children. Many years after the photo was taken, Vecchio was reached for comment.

Memory researchers point out that “prior familiarity shapes both social and personal memory.”219 People generally fit new events into already familiar frames, distorting whatever does not fit. The images being circulated within U.S. newspapers and on television began to take hold in the collective memory of the general public. In its most popularly promoted form, the wartime photograph became a new marker in the historical memory of many Americans.

Amid the uprising within the United States revolving around the growing dissent of the conflict, combat carried on in Vietnam. By 1972, most U.S. helicopter units had left Vietnam, which made it more difficult for reporters to reach the battle-affected areas of the Southern portion of the country.220

140


220 Chong, Denise, *The Girl In the Picture*, 21.

141

Reporters and photographers were forced to travel roads that led out of Saigon in order to reach the early afternoon hours of June 8, that, in some opinions, tipped the balance of the conflict in the U.S. government’s direction. The North Vietnamese was a village twenty-five miles west of Saigon, and South Vietnam had attempted to lift a blockade across Route 1, which linked it to the capital.

In order to break the blockade, South Vietnam
Vecchio’s screaming face reminded us protesting this war were just like any years after the photo was taken, comment.

Reporters and photographers were forced to travel the dangerous roads that led out of Saigon in order to report on the fighting. In the early afternoon hours of June 8, 1972, an image was captured that, in some opinions, tipped the scales regarding the unprecedented unpopularity of the conflict among Americans.

The North Vietnamese was holding Trang Bang, a small village twenty-five miles west of Saigon. The Vietcong had run a blockade across Route 1, which linked Trang Bang to the capital. In order to break the blockade, South Vietnamese forces called in
Only a few hours earlier, AP photographer Huynh Cong “Nick” Ut had loaded up his camera gear, field survival kit, and flak-jacket, and loaded up on the bus that would deliver him to his destination. A native of South Vietnam, Ut had grown up with war. That morning, he was traveling Route 1 by foot. He preferred to cover the war this way, scouring the countryside for images that could capture the horror unfolding in his native land. Around noon, once the air support had been called in, Ut, along with a large group of reporters and soldiers, waited alongside Route 1 for the planes to arrive and perform their bombing run. A South Vietnamese soldier threw a yellow smoke grenade to mark the target area. The village had fallen silent, and the speculation was that any remaining North Vietnamese had fled. Two Skyraiders, which were vintage Korean War planes, bombed the edge of the village in a familiar pattern. First they used explosive bombs, then incendiary bombs that included a mixture of varying explosives, including white phosphorous and napalm. After emanated from Trang Bang.

The third child born in her family was born on April 6, 1963. Kim, which meant “happiness,” Kim had immediately began to flee the village with her family, Phuc had fallen a few seconds, one older and one younger. The South Vietnamese bombers fired napalm splattered sticky balls of fire struck with such force from behind ground. As she continued to run, burning clothes in the way one way one way.

---

221 Leekley, Moments: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs, 84.
222 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 60.
223 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 61.
224 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 9.
225 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 9.
227 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 65.
228 “Girl, 9, Survives Napalm Burns,” New York
hours earlier, AP photographer Huynh

up his camera gear, field survival kit,

up on the bus that would deliver him
tive of South Vietnam, Ut had grown

in the field, he was traveling Route 1 by foot.

on this way, scouring the countryside
ure the horror unfolding in his native
the air support had been called in, Ut,

of reporters and soldiers, waited
planes to arrive and perform their

Vietnamese soldier threw a yellow

one target area. The village had fallen

on was that any remaining North

Two Skyraiders, which were vintage

the edge of the village in a familiar

plosive bombs, then incendiary bombs

varying explosives, including white

phosphorous and napalm. After the bombs fell, only silence
emanated from Trang Bang.224

The third child born in her family, Phan Thi Kim Phuc
was born on April 6, 1963.225 Known to her family as Phuc,
which meant “happiness,” Kim had been helping her family
repair mortar damage to their small house on the morning of June

When her family noticed the yellow smoke grenades, they
immediately began to flee the village. Never the fastest runner in
her family, Phuc had fallen a few steps behind her two brothers,
one older and one younger.227 Then she heard a deafening pop.
The South Vietnamese bombers flew over and its canisters of
napalm splattered sticky balls of fire across the road.228 She
was struck with such force from behind that she fell face first to the
ground. As she continued to run, she pulled at the neck of her
burning clothes— in the way one would in discomfort on a hot
day. Her first memory as she ran was the sight of a brownish-

---

224 Chong, Denise, *The Girl In the Picture*, 61-64.
225 Chong, Denise, *The Girl In the Picture*, 9.
227 Chong, Denise, *The Girl In the Picture*, 65.
glob on her left arm. She tried to brush it off, only to scream in
pain as the burning sensation had now spread to her hand.229 The
napalm had incinerated her ponytail, burned her neck, and almost
all of her back and left arm.230

Nick Ut recalled Phuc screaming, “Nong qua, nong qua”
repeatedly as she ran down Route 1. “Too hot, too hot.” Ut
photographed the group as they ran by him, and would pour
water from his canteen over Phuc’s burning flesh.231 Urged on
by the girl’s uncle, Ut commandeered a car and rushed Phuc,
along with her badly burned brothers back to the AP bus and then
onto the hospital outside of Saigon.232 Aside from his actions
that saved the life of young Kim Phuc, the photo he had captured
would become an infamous symbol of the hysteria caused by the
Vietnam Conflict.

The photograph of Kim Phuc remains among the indelible
images from the Vietnam effort. George Esper, the AP’s last
bureau chief in Saigon, who remarked that “In the eyes of the
Communists ordered all foreign journalists to leave the
country, all photography was strictly forbidden. The power of that image and its impact in the hands of the
Esper concluded that, “There were probably people who
destructive effects of war and how it shaped people’s
life at it and said, ‘This war has got to be stopped.’ They
shutter in Trang Bang on June 8, 1972, was
Time, however, did not shine a light on the Vietnam
front and in the minds of those who had
combat photography to encapsulate the destructive effects of war.
allowed additional scrutiny to be placed on the
subsequent to the Paris ceasefire accords.

229 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 66.
231 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 68.
232 Chong, Denise, The Girl In the Picture, 69.
tried to brush it off, only to scream in pain when the fire had now spread to her hand.\textsuperscript{229} The ponytail, burned her neck, and almost burned her sachet. Phuc screaming, “Nong qua, nong qua” on Route 1. “Too hot, too hot.” Ut phan ran by him, and would pour water on her Phuc’s burning flesh.\textsuperscript{231} Urged on, they commandeered a car and rushed Phuc, her brothers back to the AP bus and then to the AP office in Saigon.\textsuperscript{232} Aside from his actions of Saigon, Kim Phuc, the photo he had captured is symbol of the hysteria caused by the battle. George Esper, the AP’s last bureau chief in Saigon, who remained in country until the Communists ordered all foreign journalists out, spoke about the power of that image and its impact on the Vietnam Conflict. Esper concluded that, “There were many casualty pictures, but this one was haunting […] In her expression was fear and horror, which was how people felt about war. This picture showed the destructive effects of war and how wrong it was. People looked at it and said, ’This war has got to end.’”\textsuperscript{233} The click of the shutter in Trang Bang on June 8, 1972, captured a moment in time. Time, however, did not stand still for the Vietnam campaign, as the battles would carry on for another year for the U.S., and three for the Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{234} Once the fighting ended for Americans in Vietnam, the battles still waged on the media front and in the minds of those who fought there. The ability of combat photography to encapsulate solitary moments in time allowed additional scrutiny to be placed upon U.S. policymakers subsequent to the Paris ceasefire accord.

\textsuperscript{233} Chong, Denise, \textit{The Girl In the Picture}, xv.
\textsuperscript{234} Chong, Denise, \textit{The Girl In the Picture}, xv.
In spite of the proliferation of arguments that continue to distrust the ‘image,’ artists, photojournalists, and amateurs continue to produce a large number of images as a means to bear witness to historical trauma. Oliver Wendell Holmes, early American author and physician, summed up the popular conception when he noted in 1859 that the camera was even more than “the mirror of reality;” it was “the mirror with a memory.”

Photography began with copper plate negatives and the use of cartridges from a revolver to trigger the shutter. It evolved into a tool that could be harnessed by those brave enough to venture into battle and risk their lives in an effort to render accurate reflections of war. More than any other event preceding it, the Vietnam Conflict provoked a revival in the urgent need to bring traumatic historical events to the collective attention of the American public. In lieu of being able to witness the events firsthand, Vietnam wartime photography began to shape cultural memory of the United States. The Vietnam Conflict was, and continues to be, a prime example of a significant historical event that has been viewed through the image. Still photography played a subservient role in bringing atrocities of battle back home where they could be viewed on a domestic scale. Despite historical regards to the validity of images as “the mirror of reality,” the photograph is potentially the most immersive medium when coupled with words.

The Vietnam Conflict divided lines and among those who served such events since the Civil War had not been seen so frequently. Historian Paul Hendrickson called the Vietnam experience, “a puzzle without piece.” No television news broadcast, film portrayal the Vietnam experience in the same way that photograph was able to capture the conflict. Vietnam photographers had the perverse nature to penetrate some of mankind. It was their duty to disperse.

---

236 Davidson, James, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, 209.

---
iferation of arguments that continue to
artists, photojournalists, and amateurs
e number of images as a means to bear
ma. Oliver Wendell Holmes, early
physician, summed up the popular
in 1859 that the camera was even more
"it was "the mirror with a memory."\(^{235}\)
copper plate negatives and the use of
to trigger the shutter.\(^{236}\) It evolved into
pressed by those brave enough to venture
lives in an effort to render accurate
than any other event preceding it, the
rd a revival in the urgent need to bring
its to the collective attention of the
of being able to witness the events
photography began to shape cultural
ates. The Vietnam Conflict was, and
example of a significant historical event

that has been viewed through the image in all its manifestations.
Still photography played a substantial role in relaying the
atrocities of battle back home where they could be interpreted on
a domestic scale. Despite historical and cultural skepticism in
regards to the validity of images, history has proven that a
photograph is potentially the most influential witness we have.

The Vietnam Conflict divided Americans along class
lines and among those who served and those who did not. No
such events since the Civil War had affected the United States as
much as America's ill-fated venture in Vietnam. Author and
Historian Paul Hendrickson called the United States' Vietnam
experience, "a puzzle without pieces, a riddle without rhyme."\(^{237}\)
No television news broadcast, film, or song could accurately
portray the Vietnam experience in the manner in which a single
photograph was able to capture the mood and spirit of the
conflict. Vietnam photographers had the privilege and also the
perverse nature to penetrate some of the most profane moments
of mankind. It was their duty to display the images they captured

for all people to see, for children to pass on to theirs, so that the global community might one day learn not to indulge itself in continuing violence.

Bibliography


Davidson, James and Lytle, Mark. *After Historical Detection*. New York:


children to pass on to theirs, so that the
one day learn not to indulge itself in

Bibliography


