A PARADIGM OF WAR REPORTING:
THE SACRAMENTO BEE'S
COVERAGE OF THE VIETNAM WAR
FROM AUGUST 1964 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1968

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FROM AUGUST 1964 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1968

A Thesis

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Abstract

of

A PARADIGM OF WAR REPORTING:
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Statement of the Problem: In a democratic society, the news media is charged with delivering truthful, fair and unbiased news to the public it serves. This is particularly crucial during times of war, when truthful reporting is vital. An analysis of newspaper articles and editorials published in the Sacramento Bee from August 1964 through February of 1968, demonstrates that the Sacramento daily, with a few exceptions, failed to meet that responsibility in covering the Vietnam War during the relevant time frames.

Sources of Data: The Sacramento Bee from August 1964 through February of 1968, and an array of secondary sources providing an analysis of the Vietnam War and journalism.

Conclusions Reached: The Sacramento Bee bought the official story regarding the Vietnam War, passed it on to the public, and framed its news coverage of Vietnam within the parameters of the dominant political consensus in existence at that time. Specifically, that failure to wage war would result in the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.

Joseph A. Pitti, Ph.D.

Date 5/17/11
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A sincere thanks to all of these wonderful professors and human beings.
DEDICATION

For Brittany and Tara
FOREWARD

Professional journalism is vital to the survival of a democratic society. Neil Henry, noted journalist, Professor of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, and author of *American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media*, observes that “In a form of human organization so deeply reliant on freedom of expression and an informed citizenry, professional journalism offers the most valuable vehicle for communicating enlightenment, truth, and clarity and for holding our elected leaders accountable.” However, as Henry emphasizes, “the decline of professionalism in journalism can lead to all manner of dysfunction.” Indeed, he warns, when the standards of the media wane, “Our society becomes less democratic and more vulnerable to oligarchic or authoritarian forces whose power depends on keeping citizens ignorant or deceived.” And, too, because journalists are invaluable participants in the production of news accounts that frequently serve as “the first draft of history,” diminished professional standards vitiate the historical record and jeopardize the formulation of subsequent narratives on the issue at hand.

Democratic societies expect professional journalists to abide by a set of lofty ideals, including the notion that their constant quest for truth always demands intense preparation, investigative tenacity, and the acceptance of only those “facts” that can be verified. According to Henry, truth “remains the only reason anyone should practice journalism.” He believes “it is especially important for journalists to be keen at recognizing and understanding the forces that would undermine or countervail the truth.”
Spotlighting publicists, advertisers, politicians, military leaders, and government officials for being in the business of influencing public opinion, Henry concedes both their superior effectiveness and their proclivity for deception and distortion in reporting events. Journalists, then, should not only be wary of those who would pervert and manipulate the news, but they should always "heed a higher authority for truth seeking: the public's right to know." Responsible for the very "health and sustainability" of American democracy, journalists—in Henry's view, must "sift the real from the artificial, to buffer the public from lies." When, as the gatekeeper of a democratic society, the news media fails to protect the public against other interests—such as those espoused by government, it delivers a grave injustice to the public good and undermines its own raison d'être. During times of war, when credible and truthful reporting is particularly vital, journalists are especially obligated to honor their professional standards to the utmost.
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Chapter 1

The First Casualty of War is Truth.

_Hiram Johnson_

INTRODUCTION

A democratic society entrusts its news media with the duty of reporting accurate, fair and unbiased news. An essential component of this duty is presenting the truth, even when confronted with a maze of conflicting claims and opinions. Public debate in a democracy depends upon truthful and accessible information. Moreover, in American society the news media must provide information that goes beyond government publicity campaigns. This is especially true during times of war, when the press is charged with the highest degree of accountability. William A. Dorman and Steven Livingston emphasize in their analysis of wartime reporting that “The quality of news coverage is never more important than when a society is pondering whether to wage war.” 6 Unfortunately, in time of hostilities, a dangerous political culture often develops as governments, in their rush to garner public support for their wars, engage in intimidation, secrecy, evasion, and even lies. Indeed, belligerence routinely inspires government leaders to manipulate the media by freely spewing false or misleading data, by controlling vital information, and by convincing the public that “war is necessary, that all diplomatic channels have been exhausted, and that the call to military action justifies the inevitable loss of life.” 7 In sum, in times of war, the mobilization of society behind the government requires a persuasive and well-organized effort to manipulate the press.

However, provided it avoids government influence by engaging in assiduous war
reporting, the press may offer the only legitimate checks and balances against rash action in a jingoistic environment. Proper reporting necessitates careful analysis, investigation, and skepticism of government accounts on vital points including the war's progress, the number of casualties, and most importantly on the government's motives for entering and escalating a war. Regrettably, when the press fails to adopt time-honored journalistic standards, it devolves into a purveyor of disinformation and propaganda, shedding its responsibility to provide truthful and credible news to the populace it serves. This, in turn, hinders the public's ability to remain informed about the war, to properly access all aspects of the war, and to challenge, if appropriate, official policy regarding the war.

During the Vietnam War, serious criticism of the government's policy and actions in Southeast Asia by the mainstream press did not arise until February of 1968, after the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive. By that time, thousands of American soldiers had either died or been injured, untold numbers of Vietnamese had suffered similar fates, and the U.S. was firmly entrenched in the conflict. As observed by acclaimed historian Daniel Hallin, author of *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, the press exhibited "heavy dependence on official information before Tet, and greater independence, to a limited degree, later in the war." This occurred, in large part, because during the early years of the war, the U.S. government effectively massaged the news to ensure that most media reports supported American intervention in Vietnam as a means of preventing Communist expansion.

Critics, such as Hallin, intimate that if the press had questioned American policy
in Vietnam as early as 1945, when the Japanese retreated from Vietnam, intense pressure from an informed public might have dissuaded Washington from directly supporting the French return to colonial rule over Vietnam. Conceivably, without American support, the French might have abandoned Indo-China by 1954, if not before, and the United States might have been spared a traumatic and bloody war. Instead, the press not only embraced the government's "domino theory" on Communism, but it failed to question official accounts of the Gulf of Tonkin incident (as described below) or, more importantly, the August 7, 1964 decision by Congress authorizing President Lyndon B. Johnson to take all necessary steps, including armed force, to prevent further "attacks" against American forces. This oversight occurred even though a growing anti-war movement had expressed immediate doubts about the validity of the official reports pertaining to the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Instead of much needed analysis, skepticism, and investigation, press reports and editorials around the country, including those of The Sacramento Bee (henceforth referred to as the Bee) endorsed President Johnson's decision to undertake retaliatory bombing.

Founded in 1857, the Bee has been the largest newspaper serving the Sacramento region for more than a century. The paper's stated objective has been to follow an independent and progressive course, and to serve its readers "without becoming subservient to the whims of popular opinion or the pressures of the powerful." Based upon this goal, readers should expect critical scrutiny by the newspaper of Washington's own version of its policy and actions, particularly during times of war. More specifically, in terms of the Vietnam War, as a progressive and independent newspaper, the Bee
should have challenged government reports on the rationale for going to war, and
subsequently on the wars' escalation, casualties, and costs. An analysis of newspaper
articles and editorials published in the Bee from August 1964 through February of 1968,
in fact demonstrates that the Sacramento daily, with a few notable exceptions, failed to
fully engage in independent and progressive news reporting in covering the Vietnam War
during the relevant time frames. Instead, the Bee bought the official story regarding the
war, passed it on to the public, and carefully positioned its news coverage of Vietnam
within the parameters of the dominant political consensus in existence as the war
developed. This consensus centered on the assumption that failure to wage war would
result in the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia and beyond. In doing so, the Bee
not only provided a powerful forum for the advancement of government rationale on
waging war, but it failed to follow the dictates of professional journalism.
Chapter 2
BACKGROUND

War Reporting

War fascinates people. They like to hear about it, read about it, and even see it. As a result, war has evolved into an important component of popular culture in contemporary society. Newspapers have capitalized on this development by publishing an untold number of stories about wars, including poignant descriptions of the menacing enemy, the battlefield drama, and the fallen hero.

War is also a highly profitable subject for the news media. War sells because it produces not only an ample supply of intriguing and exciting news, but a great demand for such news by a captivated audience. Since the nineteenth century, in part as a result of such profitability, newspaper publishers and their reporters have been enthralled by the subject of war, providing extensive press coverage of virtually every war from the Crimean to the Iraq. However, regardless of how popular and profitable the subject of war is to newspapers, war reporting presents challenges for publishers and reporters, particularly those dedicated to informing their audience with the truth.

Journalists reporting on war encounter a vast array of significant challenges. These include military/government censorship; inaccessibility to the war zone and/or communications equipment; loyalty to the government versus objectivity; balancing the public’s right to know about the war versus the military’s need for secrecy in conducting the war; and, the inevitable bias of the journalist/publisher. Battlefield conditions also hamper journalists in their ability to report on war because these circumstances may
require journalists to piece together confusing and conflicting stories from a wide geographical area, often amidst dangerous conditions. According to Susan L. Carruthers, distinguished journalist and author of *The Media at War*, if truth is obscured in war reporting, “the reason is as likely to be state obstruction and obfuscation as the inherent difficulties, dilemmas and dangers war poses for reporters.” Journalists may even become inured to the atrocities they witness or develop a camaraderie with the soldiers, thereby inhibiting their ability to deliver trustworthy accounts of war. For example, according to one correspondent of the Vietnam War, “Things which shocked you when you first went there, six weeks later shocked you no more. It became easier to let horrifying things slide over you. There was lots of cynicism and you could get very hard after a while.” However, of the significant challenges journalists face in delivering credible news on war, the dilemma involved with presenting the truth versus “official accounts” of the war is particularly problematic for news media since these two versions of war are often at odds.

During wartime, newspaper publishers may become entangled in a “mutually antagonistic relationship” with the government and its military. As noted by Britain’s Ministry of Defense during the Falklands War, “The essence of successful warfare is secrecy; the essence of successful journalism is publicity.” However, even if government and its military leaders in democratic societies seek to deny the public’s unfettered right to accurate war news, they also recognize that public support is essential to the war effort. As a result, they generally attempt to control mass media in wartime and persuade citizens that the war is justified, vital for national security, and the only way to
vanquish the implacable enemy. Unfortunately, the press succumbs to this manipulation. Thus, in wartime, although the media serve as an important conduit between those fighting and those more distantly participating in the war, as observed by Carruthers, “the flow of news and images which often filters through media channels is likely to be as strictly regulated by the state as conditions permit. News and images become strategic commodities in wartime, as subject to rationing as other essential items and sometimes as scarce.” Because elected officials and the military often face significant public opposition to war, they must convince the public that the war, with its inevitable loss of life is necessary, and that all diplomatic channels have been exhausted.

Thus, in an effort to sell the public on its bellicose agenda, governments often call upon the media to act as their handmaiden. They also use the media to help maintain civilian and military morale during wartime. Although not all journalists align themselves willingly with the government and its military, many enthusiastically embrace their role as “cheerleader,” particularly if “they perceive their public as willing participants in a ‘war culture.’” In sum, in reporting on war, mainstream press often defers to the interests of national security resulting in a “statist sensibility... that favors the official perspective, assumptions, and boundaries of thought and vocabulary.”

The relationship between government and the news media during times of war, long the subject of considerable debate, has centered on state censorship and its attendant management of news. According to critics such as Carruthers, governments often “take considerable pains to regulate the presentation of war.” Indeed, as Senator Hiram Johnson opined in 1917, “in war, truth is the first casualty.” Moreover, as emphasized
by Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, Professors of Communication, and authors of 
*Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, “War reporting is generally one-sided. The 
media typically cover war from the point of view of the country in which they and their 
major owners and readers are based, reflecting the point of view of that country’s 
government and its foreign policy elites.”25 State obstruction of the truth about war is a powerful force, particularly when the ends for which war is waged are manipulated by government so that the public cannot perceive any distinction between such ends and an unwavering patriotic support for their country.

Governments effectively depend on patriotism to control the public discourse on war by silencing its critics as “unpatriotic.” Indeed, officials use patriotism as a means of disciplining the mass media by treating media criticism of war as tantamount to an act of treachery.26 By exploiting patriotic loyalty in this manner, governments eliminate dissent against its war policies. As a result, observes Carruthers, “war is fought in a fog of falsehood, a great deal of it uncovered and accepted as truth. The fog arises from fear and is fed by panic. Any attempt to doubt or even deny even the most fantastic story has to be condemned at once as unpatriotic, if not traitorous.”27 Notwithstanding official efforts, information about the war inevitably filters through to the public. Once the public is convinced that the cost of lives associated with a war is too high of a price to pay for the government’s stated goals, opinion turns against the war.

The Press and the War

The Vietnam War left the U.S. significantly divided on many issues; however, as Hallin notes, “no issue has been more bitterly divisive than the role of media.”28 In
analyzing the role of the media during the Vietnam War, historians have studied the news coverage of the war, and, in particular, how that coverage influenced the outcome of the conflict. Some historians argue that the relationship between government and the news media was antagonistic, that “the media contradicted the more positive view of the war officials sought to project, and that, for better or worse,” the adverse portrayal of the war dramatically influenced public opinion and forced a premature and unsuccessful end to the war. Dubbed by some scholars as the “Vietnam Syndrome” (according to some pundits and scholars, the syndrome continues to plague U.S. policy in conducting war), this persistent journalistic drumbeat against the military conflict in Southeast Asia supposedly turned the country against the war, especially after the public viewed graphic news media images and heard reports of atrocities committed by American soldiers. As a result, at least for those who subscribe to the Vietnam Syndrome thesis, the horrific images and reports featured by the daily press provoked fierce public opposition to the war, forcing the administration to withdraw before American troops could achieve victory.

However, this view of a negative press assumes that an antagonistic relationship existed between the government and the media over the latter’s coverage of the war. Historians such as Daniel Hallin, challenge this assumption. According to Hallin, two powerful forces combined to prevent newspapers and other media sources from deviating significantly from Washington’s official line on Vietnam: “The routines of objective journalism, which tied the news closely to official sources and the Washington agenda, and the ideology of the Cold War, which locked events in a framework of understanding
that made fundamental questioning of American policy essentially unthinkable.” Hallin notes that these forces were particularly in evidence during the early years of the war when journalists relied heavily on government officials, especially in the executive branch, for news on the escalating war in Vietnam.

Thus, reporters not only embraced the official perspective, but they framed it so as to reflect the pervasive fear of Communism that existed throughout American culture. Journalists, endowed with the anti-Communist ethos so common in the Cold War, never questioned whether the preservation of an anti-Communist Vietnam constituted a legitimate U.S. goal. The public, likewise predisposed to believe in the “evils” of Communism, readily accepted the media’s Cold War view on Vietnam. Furthermore, according to Hallin, “in situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as ‘responsible’ members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as whole.” In other words, the American press acted as compliant conduits for the official version of the war in Southeast Asia, because to do otherwise would have been counter to national security and, more importantly, would have been viewed by the public as horribly unpatriotic, if not right down seditious. As it had always done, Washington effectively exploited the war crisis to manage the press. President John F. Kennedy, for example, warned the press (in reference to the Bay of Pigs fiasco) that if it were “awaiting a declaration of war before it imposes the self-discipline of combat conditions, then I can only say that no war ever posed a greater threat to our security. If you are awaiting a finding of ‘clear and present
danger,' then I can only say that the danger has never been more clear and its presence more imminent.\textsuperscript{36} President Kennedy's admonition to the press, although not directly related to the Vietnam War, reminded the press of its duty in all wars to exercise "the self-discipline of combat conditions," ostensibly in the interests of national security. Thus, during the Vietnam War era, "responsible journalists" heeded such advice because failure to do subjected them to charges of giving, albeit unwillingly, "peace and comfort" to America's Communist enemies.\textsuperscript{37}

From the onset of the Vietnam War, the mainstream press, including the \textit{Bee}, carefully framed its presentation of news regarding the conflict within the prevailing political consensus on Communism. By doing so it not only adopted Washington's official line, but it exercised self-imposed restraint in war reporting. According to Phillip Knightley, an award-winning journalist, and author of \textit{The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq}, in Vietnam "the correspondents were not questioning the American intervention itself, but only its effectiveness." Wartime reporters, regardless of how they may have been viewed by government officials, firmly and unequivocally supported the Pentagon's hope of victory in Asia. "What correspondents questioned," writes Knightley, was not American policy, but the tactics used to implement that policy.\textsuperscript{38} The \textit{Bee} was no exception. As demonstrated below (following a brief review of the events leading up to the war), the \textit{Bee}, in the years between the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the Tet Offensive, uncritically accepted U.S. policy in Vietnam. By doing so, the paper fully embraced President Kennedy's admonition that the critical question for the press in war reporting was not "Is
it News?” but whether “Is it in the interest of national security?”39

The Coming of the War

After the Vietnamese seemingly had won their independence from French colonial rule in 1954, they plunged into a bitter civil conflict and ultimately formed two ideologically separate states. By the mid-1950s, the United States cast its lot with South Vietnam, vowing to preserve the noncommunist government against the communist regime in the north that seemed intent on unifying the Vietnamese people under Ho Chi Minh, the Marxist hero of the struggle of liberation against the French. Entangled thereby in a complicated civil war, Washington at first simply furnished arms and money to the South Vietnamese in Saigon. Gradually, however, events inexorably pulled the United States further into the maelstrom that would soon constitute America’s most protracted war. No single incident marked the beginning of the conflict. No clearly defined strategic or territory goals inspired U.S. policies. Two American presidencies—“directly or indirectly shattered by . . . [the war’s] consequences—” lost not only the support of a large portion of the public because of Vietnam, but generally have been deemed ignominious failures in the court of historical opinion.40

The official rationale for fighting the Vietnam War continuously shifted, but typically it centered on preventing Communist expansion in Asia. Americans eventually polarized into two groups (pro-war and antiwar), as thousands of young Americans fought the war. The average American infantryman in Vietnam was just 19 years old (some were as young as 17), compared to the average age of 26 for World War II. By the time the war ran its course, more than 58,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese had
died; over 300,000 Americans sustained significant and often life-altering injuries.\textsuperscript{41}

The Vietnam War arose from the longstanding French imperial rule over the region. In 1850, France invaded Vietnam (known to the French as Cochin China), beginning a lengthy period of ruthless and oppressive domination over the country.\textsuperscript{42} Because Vietnam emerged as the richest and most important colony in the French empire, for over a half century the French suppressed any challenge to their authority in the region. And, indeed, from the onset of the French invasion, the Vietnamese resisted French colonialism by forming various nationalist groups, including the League for Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh for short) in 1941. By most accounts, the Viet Minh proved to be the French empire’s most effective foe.

Ho Chi Minh, a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party, emerged as the leader of the Viet Minh. Exiled from the land of his birth because of his political activities, he had lived most of his life outside of Vietnam as he sought to mobilize international support for an independent homeland. In 1919, using the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc, he appealed to President Woodrow Wilson at Versailles to help bring self-determination to the Vietnamese. However, Ho Chi Minh failed not only in gaining an audience with President Wilson at Versailles, but every political faction at the international conference snubbed him, except for the Socialists.\textsuperscript{43} Significantly, although the peacemakers at Versailles summarily dismantled the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires, they were loath to disturb the colonies belonging to the Triple Entente nations, including France’s possessions in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{44}

Subsequently, Ho Chi Minh, inspired by the writings of Vladimir Lenin, joined
Vietnam’s Communist Party, whose primary aim was to overthrow French imperialism and make Indochina completely independent. As resistance increased among peasants and workers, French colonial policies grew harsher, culminating in a wave of arrests that began in 1939. The French jailed and eventually killed thousands of Vietnamese between 1941 and 1943. In the midst of these developments, Ho Chi Minh continued to gain political and military strength while operating from a cave near the Chinese border, where he called for national unity and independence.

Ironically, American combat troops first fought in Vietnam as allies of Ho Chi Minh during World War II, when the Japanese invaded the country. Japanese occupation of French Indochina, which began in 1940, coincided with Nazi Germany’s conquest of France. Although French colonists offered little opposition to Japan, Ho Chi Minh and the Communists formed a national resistance movement, defying both the Japanese occupation and French colonialism. Within four years, the Viet Minh claimed half a million followers, and a 5,000-man army. In July 1944, the Vichy regime collapsed in France. Soon thereafter, the Japanese ended French rule in Vietnam, replacing French leaders with a Japanese regime. U.S. forces collaborated with Ho Chi Minh to fight the Japanese by providing medical supplies and small arms to Ho Chi Minh and by training his Viet Minh fighters in guerrilla tactics. Ho Chi Minh’s forces in turn had proven useful to the U.S. by rescuing downed U.S. fliers. Five months later, however, following the American nuclear attack, Japan’s empire in Asia, including its colony of Vietnam, collapsed once and for all. Significantly, American advisors accompanied Ho as his troops triumphantly took control of Hanoi, the principal city of northern Vietnam.
When news of the Japanese surrender reached Vietnam a vast celebration ensued. As a crowd of one half million people listened, Ho Chi Minh linked the aspirations of his liberation movement to the American Declaration of Independence by quoting Thomas Jefferson's famous words: "All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights: the right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve happiness." Nevertheless, by October 1945, any semblance of sympathy for Vietnam's future freedom had disappeared from the U.S. and international agenda.

Indeed, the British, charged with administering the Japanese surrender, rearmed French prisoners of war and, with the help of a few additional Indian troops, successfully implemented a coup against the Viet Minh committee that had been administering Saigon. French rule of Vietnam soon resumed. Washington did not object to the reestablishment of French control in the region. Instead, in order to support the Western alliance, the U.S. backed France's effort to regain its colonies in Indochina. Eventually troops from Nationalist China, Great Britain, and France occupied Vietnam as France sought to regain full control of the region. Although Ho Chi Minh appealed to the Americans for help, he did not receive a response, and war soon broke out between the French and Viet Minh. Washington readily favored France, in part, because of its conviction that Vietnam constituted a "domino" that could fall and help transform the Pacific into a Communist-dominated territorial sphere, mortally threatening American interests in the area. Mao Zedong's stunning triumph in China in 1949 did even more to convince United States policymakers that a Red Tide would soon sweep inexorably over East Asia. Hoping to stem the aggressive Communist offensive, both the Truman and
Eisenhower administrations supplied the French with financial assistance together with war materials, including planes and crews to service them. In the meantime, Ho Chi Minh assumed command of the Viet Minh troops, which eventually numbered 300,000, and included thousands of ordinary Vietnamese reserves.53

By 1950, the Viet Minh controlled most of the countryside, while the French held most cities. During this time, however, Mao Zedong consolidated his revolutionary takeover of China, and he soon provided the Viet Minh with direct military aid. In response, Washington increased its assistance to France.54 In spite of this, French casualties mounted and public opinion in France turned vehemently against the war. The Vietnamese finally overpowered the French in a battle at Dienbienphu, which ended the nine-year war.55 But, an independent Vietnam did not emerge. Instead, at the 1954 Geneva Conference, the U.S. and its allies forced the Vietnamese into a compromise, where the new nation agreed to an armistice that “temporarily” divided the country into two military zones at the 17th parallel. The negotiating parties likewise scheduled elections for July 1956, although they did not establish any date for national unification. On the eve of the planned plebiscite, the country, therefore, consisted of two civilian governments: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and the State of Vietnam in the South. Ho Chi Minh assumed control of the North, while Ngo Dinh Diem did the same in the South.56

Subsequently, with Washington’s approval, Diem advised the government in Hanoi, the North’s capital, that not only had he never agreed to the Geneva Conference’s election plan, he had no intention of abiding by it.57 Diem then tightened his political and
military control over the countryside by arresting dissidents, abolishing local councils, replacing appointed officials with those loyal to his regime, and otherwise trampling on the civil rights of the populace. Amid this reign of terror, Diem formed a new government and in the United States at least, he soon came to be known as the “Asian Liberator.” More importantly, from Washington’s geopolitical perspective, it had successfully forged a new nation in Southeast Asia and had handpicked its leader. As historian Marilyn Young notes, “any opposition to Diem would be understood as a hostile act, an attack on America’s baby.” Indeed, Senator John F. Kennedy observed in 1956, “this is our offspring . . . and if it falls victim to any of the perils that threaten its existence—Communism, political anarchy, poverty and the rest—then the United States, with some justification, will be held responsible.”

Despite American optimism that a divided Vietnam would stave off a Communist takeover of Southeast Asia, a large segment of Vietnam hoped for national unification. In 1960, insurgents in the north formed a resistance group known as the “National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam” (NFL). Its founders included architects, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and others from the professional sector, as well as Buddhists and members of the Communist Party. As the NFL’s rank and file increased, it soon included untold numbers of the poor. The National Front quickly grew into a powerful political and military force in the South, a development that gravely worried Washington, and led President Kennedy to deploy eleven thousand U.S. “military advisors” to Vietnam in 1962. Widespread opposition to Diem fostered the growth of the NFL-led insurgency and accounted for the precipitous increase in American troops to
levels unimagined by U.S. policy makers just a few years earlier.
Chapter 3

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SACRAMENTO BEE’S

COVERAGE OF THE VIETNAM WAR FROM

AUGUST 1964 TO FEBRUARY 1968

From August 1964 to February 1968, the Bee failed to separate the state from press by framing the war within the Cold War consensus, using the depersonalized and often dehumanizing rhetoric of war in describing events (i.e. “blast,” “pound,” “smash” “clash” “Red” “Enemy” “Yank” “Leathernecks” “Shoot it out” “Rampage” “Missile Might”), and, adhering to news reporting that culturally, politically and ideologically reflected the official line. Because the Bee assumed that South Vietnam must be defended from Communism, this prevented any meaningful geopolitical analysis of the war (other than the occasional editorial that did not condemn the war’s premise, only its tactics and elusive victory). Millions of lives might have been spared if the press, including the Bee, had challenged the underlying assumption that the U.S. military must prevent Communist expansion. However, because this constituted the dominant political ideology at this time, the press continued with its coverage, thereby enabling the administration to contain the debate on Vietnam.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

Most Americans gained their first significant awareness of the events unfolding in Vietnam during August 1964, when the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred. This incident proved particularly important from a historical perspective because it served as the
Johnson administration’s pretext for significantly increasing U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Because of the magnitude of the incident’s consequences on American society, the press, one would expect, should have offered special scrutiny of the official line regarding the alleged attack on American ships by the North Vietnamese gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin. But rather than furnishing the facts necessary for the public to fully understand the unfolding events in Southeast Asia, the press merely repeated the Johnson administration’s version of events. The *Bee* was no different.

The *Bee* first reported on the Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 3, 1964, with the following headline: “Destroyer Repels Attack: US Readies Firm Protest.” The paper set forth two articles beneath the headline, one entitled “LBJ Orders Naval Force Increase,” and the other, “Guns Smash Vietnamese PT Boats.” The first article stated that the U.S. issued a formal protest to North Vietnam for an unprovoked attack on the U.S. destroyer *Maddox*, which purportedly had been in international waters off the shore of Vietnam. The article also advised that President Johnson called for naval forces to be “beefed up in the Gulf of Tonkin area, off Viet Nam, and to destroy any force that attacks them.” The second article stated that three North Vietnamese patrol boats fired torpedoes and guns at the *Maddox*, although the U.S. Navy drove them off with gunfire and airborne attacks. The article also noted that the *Maddox* “was on routine patrol... when it underwent an unprovoked attack by three PT boats.” The *Bee* adhered to official accounts on this event, quoting U.S. State Department Press Officer Robert J. McCloskey and the U.S. Navy throughout its reporting of the incident.

In the same edition, the *Bee* also included an article entitled “Rusk Declares
Policy Goal is AntiRed Victory." The article noted that American policy in Vietnam centered on preventing the spread of Communism in the region. This description of Washington’s agenda reflected the common political consensus on Communism in existence at that time. Specifically, that its spread threatened U.S. security, a consensus unchallenged by the Bee. The article also contained numerous quotes by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, including one in which he emphasized, "'No one has to convince us the contest between freedom and Communist-imperialism--is for keeps. . . This struggle is our first order of business in the state department. And it must never cease to be our first order of business until a worldwide victory for peace and for freedom has been secured.'" The Bee also quoted Rusk as stating that, "'We will defend our vital interests, and those of the free world, by whatever means are required.'" The Bee did not question the validity of the assertion that America had "vital interests" in Vietnam, which needed to be defended, nor did it question the nature of those interests.

The Bee’s headline on August 4, 1964, read as follows: "US sharply Warns North Vietnamese." Relying upon a source "'close to the Pentagon,'" the paper noted that the Maddox had been involved in another "'unfriendly incident'" off of the Vietnam coast, which may have involved an attack by planes. The article further noted that Washington had warned North Vietnam of "'grave consequences'" if any additional attacks occurred. Readers were advised that the U.S. aircraft carrier Constellation and three other naval vessels were quickly heading to Vietnam, and that America was watching to see if "'the attack was an isolated incident or part of a new hazardous Communist strategy.'" The Bee did not question the official line on the story which claimed that "'one of the three
Red boats" had been hit by U.S. forces and that all three of the North Vietnamese PT boats "had been damaged but two were able to beat a slow retreat." On August 5, 1964, most major newspapers around the country carried a headline similar to that of the Washington Post: "AMERICAN PLANES HIT NORTH VIETNAM AFTER 2D ATTACK ON OUR DESTROYERS; MOVE TAKEN TO HALT NEW AGGRESSION." The Bee's August 5, 1964 headline read as follows: "US Planes Hit Red Bases, Johnson Explains Course." Two articles followed below the headline; on the right-hand column, the article was entitled: "Retaliation For Attack Is Fast, Sharp"; on the left-hand column, the article was titled: "Calls Firm Steps Reply to Challenge." The left hand column quoted President Johnson as asserting "that aggression unchallenged is aggression unleashed" and, that "We welcome—and we invite—the scrutiny of all men who seek peace, for peace is the purpose of the course we pursue."

The article also quoted Defense Secretary Robert McNamara as emphasizing that North Vietnam deliberately, and without provocation, attacked the destroyers, but, that "The attacks have been answered." This edition of the Bee also featured a photo of the American destroyers ambushed by the North Vietnamese PT boats, and numerous other stories on the situation, including an article detailing President Johnson's speech on the Gulf of Tonkin incident; a short article stating that the length of Vietnam military duty would be increased from six months to one year; another article stating that Senate leaders would push for a Congressional resolution backing President Johnson's action in Vietnam in order to "obtain a measure of security for the free world in the Far East"; an article describing North Vietnam's claim that it had shot down five U.S. planes; and an
article quoting Senator Barry Goldwater as emphasizing that “‘We cannot allow the American Flag to be shot at anywhere on earth.’ ” The Bee also reported that the European nations, in particular Great Britain, generally supported Washington’s actions. The overriding theme of these articles centered on the notion of America as defender of freedom around the world, standing tough against the menacing “Reds,” as it prepared to take the necessary military steps to prevent the spread of Communism. Unfortunately, the numerous news stories contained in this edition of the Bee not only failed to questioned the veracity of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, but they failed to question the administration’s stated policy of using military force to prevent the spread of Communism in the world. They also ignored the escalating tempo of Washington’s intervention in Vietnam in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which eventually led to a full scale war. Most importantly, these articles treated the “Communist threat” as a baseline reality thereby obscuring the truth: that the ongoing conflict in Vietnam had a political dimension centered on revolution between Communist and non-Communist forces.

Such news reporting continued. The Bee’s headline on August 6, 1964 read as follows: “US Sends Bombers to Defend Viet Nam.” The article just below the headline, “Forces are Built Up on Frontier,” written by Malcolm W. Brown, revealed that as a result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Washington was sending thirty Air Force B57 jet bombers to Vietnam, for use in the event of an attack from the Communist North. The front page of this edition of the Bee also featured the photograph of a soldier embracing his girlfriend as he prepared to leave for Vietnam. The caption read in part, “Parting is
not always such sweet sorrow as described by the poet. When a sailor-man leaves for places where real shells have been traded back and forth, you feel anything but sweet.”

In that edition, the *Bee* also included numerous other articles on the developing situation in Vietnam, advising its readers that Communist China (or “Chinese Reds” as described by the *Bee*) had sent an additional 200,000 troops to its border with North Vietnam, so that a total of 300,000 were now stationed there; that a downed navy flier had been taken prisoner by North Vietnam; that the “Viet Nams” might be invited to a debate at the United Nations Security Council regarding the “North Vietnamese attacks on American warships”; that the House and Senate committees had “quickly adopted a resolution backing President Lyndon Johnson’s military actions in Southeast Asia; and that the Johnson administration was “still puzzled about the motives behind the North Vietnamese attack on the United States destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin.”

In total, the August 6, 1964 edition of the *Bee* carried fourteen articles pertaining to the Gulf of Tonkin incident and Vietnam, along with a large, front page photograph of a departing soldier, and a cartoon in the editorial section; none of these news items questioned the official version of events, or the basic assumption that the U.S. needed to act quickly, decisively, and forcefully to prevent further attacks by North Vietnam and, more significantly, to prevent the spread of Communism in Asia.

Historians have since established that the Johnson administration’s official version of the Gulf of Tonkin incident (which served as rationale for U.S. retaliation, passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, and major escalation of military involvement in Vietnam) was “either misleading or simply false.” First, the *Maddox* was not on routine
patrol in international waters at the time of the incident, as reported by the *Bee,* but on a highly sensitive information gathering mission off the coast of North Vietnam. Second, the South Vietnamese had been conducting commando raids against the North Vietnamese, a fact not included in the *Bee*’s coverage. Third, and most important, the incident on August 4, 1964, which specifically provided justification for the retaliatory attack against North Vietnam, probably did not even occur, even though, according to the *Bee,* a number of North Vietnamese vessels attacked the *Maddox,* and the *Turner Joy* (another U.S. battleship sent to assist the *Maddox*) with torpedoes resulting in a fierce battle between the Americans and North Vietnamese, which lasted for hours, prompting President Johnson to order the bombing of North Vietnam.

As the historical evidence has since established, although the two U.S. battleships detected unidentified signals on their radar which they identified as torpedoes, the sonarman on board the *Maddox* had limited experience, and many of the crew thought afterwards that he was probably picking up the sound of the battleships own propellers. Even though both ships fired furiously into the sea and the *Turner Joy* claimed to have sunk a Vietnamese craft, a search in the morning did not turn up any physical evidence that a craft had been hit and sunk. In spite of a cable from commander of the task force to the Pentagon indicating that the attack appeared doubtful, and that it may have been the result of freak weather or an overeager sonarman, Secretary of Defense McNamara ordered the retaliatory air strikes on North Vietnam. Moreover, the administration framed the incident in such a way that military action seemed beyond the scope of political controversy.
The *Bee* did not analyze, interpret or question these historic events or President Johnson’s subsequent assertion that “it is my duty to the American people to report that renewed hostile actions against the United States’ ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply,” and that “our government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom, and in defense of peace, in southeast Asia.”

Instead the *Bee* supported the official line as reflected by an editorial on August 8, 1964, which stated that “President Johnson has taken the only steps honorably open to him. North Vietnamese PT boats with no known provocation attacked the United States destroyer *Maddox*, patrolling in international waters.” The editorial went on to observe that failure to respond to the attacks would have “given substance to Red China’s charge that America is a paper tiger and destroyed the faith of the free world in America’s courage and backbone, multiplying the risk of Communism making converts all over the globe.”

The *Bee* not only repeated Washington’s account of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, but it framed its analysis of the incident squarely within the prevailing political consensus on the perils of Communism, as evidenced by these additional comments from the editorial:

> Some people ask why we are in Viet Nam at all. We are backing South Viet Nam because we cannot allow a Communist takeover of that country lest it stimulate a worldwide rush to Communism, because with southeast Asia’s resources Red China would become formidable, because Australia might be outflanked, because it probably would cause a shift in the balance of power to Communism and because no self respecting nation can allow itself to retreat from direct aggression.

During the 1960s, according to Hallin, the U.S. government indirectly controlled the media. Two powerful mechanisms enabled the administration to exercise this control.
The first consisted of a bipartisan consensus on the Cold War that united journalists and government policymakers. This consensus, as indicated above, centered on the common belief that Communism threatened U.S. national security. The second mechanism was objective journalism. As emphasized by Hallin, the assumptions of “objective journalism” made it exceedingly easy for officials to manipulate day-to-day news content. There was little ‘editorializing’ in the columns of major American newspapers at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incident: most of the reporting, in the best tradition of objective journalism, ‘just gave the facts.’ But they were not just any facts. They were official facts. . . .” Therefore, journalists during the Vietnam era not only failed to eliminate political influence, but they provided a powerful forum for that influence. Moreover, because journalists were an integral part of the bipartisan consensus on the Communist threat, they assumed that the defense of South Vietnam against Communist aggression constituted a legitimate American goal. This theme pervaded press coverage of the war.

Beginning with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Bee presented its coverage of Vietnam by incorporating Cold War ideology and its attendant core symbols, particularly in terms of its front page stories, which may be the most important influence on mass public opinion. Phrases or terms such as “Red” “risk of Communism,” “Communist takeover,” “aggression,” “AntiRed Victory,” “Communist aggression in Southeast Asia,” are located throughout the Bee’s coverage of the war. For example, in 1966, long after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Bee included an editorial from the Saturday Evening Post, entitled Viet Nam, As Reds See It, which referred to Soviet Communists as “naturally evil.” In another example, the Bee referred to the North Vietnamese as “Fanatics,” in a
front page headline, thereby contributing to a growing dehumanization of the North Vietnamese people. Journalists, including those associated with the Bee, seemed to take for granted the association of these terms with the escalating conflict in Vietnam and treated it "as a sort of baseline reality, which can be used to give meaning to day-to-day events. The reporter [felt] no need to either justify these phrases, to attribute them to any authority, or otherwise to signal that they involve[d] an interpretation of reality."94 Placing the growing conflict in Vietnam within the parameters of Cold War ideology meant that readers viewed the conflict as one requiring American intervention to prevent the outside aggression threatening national security. The Bee did not question this premise nor the possibility that the raging conflict in Vietnam actually evolved from a revolution between the Vietnamese, and not from the threat of outside forces. Instead, the Bee merely passed on the U.S. government's version of events.

On August 7, 1964, the Bee reported (based on an Associated Press release), that Congress voted overwhelmingly to back President Johnson's call for a retaliatory military strike in Vietnam, even though there were serious questions about the Gulf of Tonkin incident. With the exception of two Senators, no Congressional member dared to vote against a presidential call for arms, particularly during an election year.95 Moreover, as recalled by Representative Dante B. Fascell of Florida, "The president needed the authority. Who cared about the facts of the so-called incident that would trigger this authority? So the resolution was just hammered right on through by everybody."96 An editorial by the Bee on August 11, 1964, endorsed this course of action, emphasizing that although "[t]here were troubled men among those who voted for the resolution... they
knew they had to back up the president before the world.\textsuperscript{97}

The War Escalates

The war quickly escalated in 1965 as Pentagon strategists committed to isolating and crippling the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFL). By December 31, 1965, 184,300 American troops were stationed in Vietnam and 636 had died. Two years later Johnson raised the number of American troops in South Vietnam to 485,600, and by then 19,562 had died. According to historian David Hunt, as the war escalated, American troops, along with soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), engaged in daily search and destroy missions. American artillery shells “rained down day and night, B-52’s bombed densely populated villages, and helicopter gunships strafed ‘suspicious’ individuals unlucky enough to be caught out in the open. U.S. planes blanketed crops with poison sprays while bulldozers tore up paddies, orchards and homes.”\textsuperscript{98}

In spite of this massive escalation and military effort, “victory” remained elusive. For example, a government-sponsored study concluded that the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam had had no measurable effect on Hanoi’s ability to mount and support military operations; that North Vietnam’s agricultural economy could not be significantly damaged by air attack; that its transportation system could easily be rebuilt after an attack; that it made no difference how many North Vietnamese factories were destroyed, the North Vietnamese still funneled weapons into the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and, finally, that the government estimated that it took a hundred tons of bombs dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to kill a single North Vietnamese soldier.\textsuperscript{99} A study by the U.S.
Army further showed that from 1966 to 1967, the Communists initiated the overwhelming majority of all battles in South Vietnam, as opposed to the seemingly feckless American forces. President Johnson soon referred to the conflict as “that bitch of a war.” Defense Secretary McNamara warned: “There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.” Amidst this ongoing escalation, confusion and doubt at the highest levels of the administration, the Bee continued to regurgitate the official line from Washington.

Unfortunately, as observed by Knightly, the administration “tried either flatly to deny what it was doing or to minimize the effects or to conceal the results behind a torrent of questionable statistics, a bewildering range of euphemisms, and a vocabulary of specially created words that debased the English language.” The Bee did not see past this government-sponsored propaganda about the war. Instead, in a “guts and glory” style, it merely reported on the war’s progress, while offering continuing support for the administration’s stance that the “forces of good were locked in battle once again with the forces of evil.” For example, an editorial in the Bee on February 8, 1965, analyzed a statement distributed at the National Buddhist Center in Saigon. The statement asserted that:

> Even though Americans are dying and even though they are insulted, they must still cling to our land in order to maintain peace for the country. If they cannot find ways of granting aid they will have no place to sell the goods they produce. If they cannot sell, then their plants will shut down. If the plants shut down hundreds
of thousands will be out of work the United States position in South Viet Nam. It mocks the sacrifice in dollars expended there to stem Communism . . . . The United States is not in South Vietnam simply out of friendship. It would be dishonest to pretend this. The US has a vital and legitimate interest in stopping Communism in its ambition to take over the country . . . . Somebody should tell the Buddhists the enemy is in the north." 105

Thus, rather than question U.S. policy in Vietnam, specifically the prudence of sacrificing lives and money to stem Communism, the Bee opined that the Buddhists should look “north” to find the enemy. Further, the Bee emphasized that, “the US has a vital and legitimate interest in stopping Communism.” This statement fell squarely within Washington’s stated goal of preventing the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, as justification for the escalating war in Vietnam, and more importantly it reiterated its Manichean view that as the force of “good,” the United States was locked in a crucial battle with the evil Communists.

Operation Rolling Thunder, which involved large scale bombing of North Vietnam by the U.S., commenced in March of 1965, as 3,500 Marines arrived at China Beach to defend an American air base at Da Nang.106 On a daily basis, the Bee carried front-page news of these developments. On March 3, 1965, for example, the Bee featured such a lead story titled, “US Jets Smash Again At Communist Bases.”107 Citing “American officials in Saigon,” and President Johnson, the article explained that more than thirty United States Air Force jets had conducted attacks against “Red military targets in North Vietnam.”108 The article concluded by observing that Secretary of State Dean Rusk had met with a Soviet envoy regarding the war, and had explained that although the U.S. did not want war in Southeast Asia, it would take whatever means were necessary to stop the continuing aggression by the Communists.109 In another article
dated March 9, 1965, titled “US Marines Continue Viet Nam Landings,” the Bee noted that four plane-loads of U.S. Marines had landed in Da Nang, bringing the total number of Marines in Da Nang to 3,500. In the same edition, the Bee included an article reporting that Secretary of State Dean Rusk had “pledged continued large scale economic and military aid to South Viet Nam.” According to the Bee, Rusk believed that “inaction in the face of challenge is the sure path to disaster.”

Although an editorial by the Bee in March of 1965 reflected a sense of uneasiness about America’s commitment to Vietnam, it still did not question the underlying policy considerations for waging war in Vietnam, but merely the tactics and ability of the Americans to win over the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. According to the editorial, “the crucial support of the Vietnamese” was lacking. The editorial also observed that, “Today the government America supports in South Viet Nam is a farce. The Viet Cong has cut the country in two and is in physical control of more territory than the Saigon government. Not one third of the people in South Viet Nam give allegiance to the American supported regime.” The editorial further emphasized that:

Here in the United States it is difficult to accept the fact that the battle to win the support of the Vietnamese peasant has been lost, yet this is the case. More numerous bombing campaigns on guerrilla concentrations, supply lines and villages are not likely to win over the undecided. America has the power to win a war in Viet Nam but it should not embark on the enterprise on the premise that it has the support of the Vietnamese people.

The editorial continued on, comparing the Vietnam War to the Korean, and questioning the wisdom of an expanded war in Vietnam, because although America “went to Vietnam to preserve the freedom of the people,” what logic is there in continuing with the war if “the people whose freedom they are seeking to preserve are opposed to its efforts?”
The *Bee* essentially blamed the Vietnamese people for failing to appreciate the efforts that were being extended had been extended on their behalf to “preserve their freedom.” It questioned the effectiveness of U.S. involvement, but not the intervention itself. Finally, the editorial stressed that the U.S. could win the war in Vietnam, but it would have to do so without the support of the Vietnamese people. The *Bee* refused to suggest that America might lose the war, or more importantly, even hint that America had gone to war because of an unfounded fear of Communism.

In April of 1965, the *Bee* carried two front page stories. One reported that the U.S. planned to send more troops to Vietnam, as an addition to the 28,000 military personnel already in Vietnam. The *Bee* cited Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor for the details on this story. As reported by the *Bee*, Taylor asserted that he intended to pursue the necessary actions to ensure that the anti-Communist campaign remained effective. The other article advised that four American soldiers had been killed in Vietnam while conducting an attack on a Viet Cong stronghold. Citing a United States military spokesman, the *Bee* also noted that those deaths brought the American toll in Vietnam combat to 320 since 1961.

The war continued to escalate. For example, by July of 1965, approximately 125,000 U.S. combat troops were stationed in Vietnam, and by November, over 220,000. Further, as reported in the *Bee* in July of 1965, President Johnson confirmed that the conflict was expanding and that military reserves might have to be called up, in addition to increasing draft quotas. The *Bee* also reported in August of 1965 that President Johnson had requested an emergency war fund of 1.7 billion to increase U.S. military
strength in Vietnam. Once again, the *Bee* merely recited facts obtained from the administration without questioning U.S. policy and objectives in Vietnam, even though these requests for troop and funding increases solidified the U.S. commitment to war in Southeast Asia. In January of 1966, the *Bee* carried a headline, “Marines Send Big Force At N. Viets, Cong.” The story noted that “Thousands of U.S. Marines landed Friday...in what was described as the biggest amphibious assault since Inchon in the Korean War... . Their objective was to seek out and destroy North Vietnamese regular troops and hardcore Viet Cong units.” In March of 1966, the *Bee* reported that “B52s Pound Hanoi Unit In Jungle Near Saigon.” According to the news account, “The B52s dropped their huge bomb loads only four miles ahead of thousands of U.S. and Australian foot soldiers cutting through the brush with machetes and jungle knives.”

As such requests for additional troops and funds continued, disagreement in the Johnson administration developed over the war strategy. Specifically, civilians in the Defense Department, led by Robert S. McNamara, who had concluded that there was “no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon,” argued that further escalation of the war would create serious political problems in both the United States and South Vietnam. Alternatively, General William Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs believed increased military pressure would cause a North Vietnamese defeat. Johnson eventually accepted Westmoreland’s recommendations, in part, approving both an increase in troop size to 525,000, and a substantial increase in bombing.

In response to the continuing escalation of the war, and an increasingly uneasy American public regarding the unfolding events, on January 16, 1966, the *Bee* featured an
editorial titled “Of A Sudden, A Bewildered US Faces General Asian War.”" The editorial expressed apprehension over the nation’s growing involvement in Vietnam, noting that “a bewildered America discovers it is on the brink of an involvement which could mean general war in Asia, where simple logistics would make it nearly impossible for the United States to win a conventional engagement.” The editorial also summarized the report of a Congressional fact-finding team that had recently returned to the United States from a 35-day trip to Southeast Asia to study the “operation of US policy and the attitudes of foreign governments towards that policy.” The Bee highlighted the team’s three main concerns over the situation, including the “fear that the Viet Nam struggle could escalate to a general war in Southeast Asia with all of the vast expense in lives and in dollars it would take to fight such a war.” In response to the senate team’s assessment, the Bee’s editorial noted that “Lamentably, the senators could offer little hope for a reasonable solution. Their view of the war, and the possibility of further escalation, was dark,” which evidenced some limited willingness by the Bee to question U.S. policy on Vietnam as early as 1966, but again such criticism did not challenge the war’s premise but only its cost, duration, and likelihood of success.

Demonstrating the Bee’s continuing commitment to the official line, two days later, on January 18, 1966, the Bee featured a headline story titled “LBJ Seeks 113,000 More Fighting Men,” which noted that the Johnson administration had asked Congress for additional troops, “principally to strengthen Army and Marine ground forces,” in addition to another $12 billion to “to underwrite the soaring costs of the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam.” The Bee also observed, without analysis or critique, that “This is the
second major supplementary money request and military manpower increase for this year stemming from the deeper U.S. commitment in Viet Nam.” In an article on the war carried in that edition, titled “7,000 Fresh US Troops Land To Strengthen Viet Nam Force” (also featured on the front page of that edition), the Bee observed that “seven thousand more U.S. fighting men poured into South Vietnam today to strengthen Saigon’s defenses against guerrilla attack and to put more muscle in the Marine beachhead on the central coast. . . . They brought the total American troop strength in South Vietnam to 191,000 men.” The article then engaged in banalities when it added that “Pretty Vietnamese girls welcomed the infantrymen with a large banner, flowers and an occasional discreet kiss. Gen William C. Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam, also greeted the troops while an Army band played Hawaiian music.” The Bee’s description of the “welcoming committee” created the sense that the troops were venturing on a tropical vacation as opposed to landing in a deadly battlefield.

The Bee followed these accounts two days later with an article titled, “McNamara Discloses Plan for Massive Vietnam Firepower,” in which the Bee summarized McNamara’s comments on the escalation, specifically as, “We must be prepared to deploy even more forces if the Communists choose to expand their operations in Viet Nam.” Again, the Bee framed its coverage of war news within the simplistic construct of democracy versus communism, and continued with its use of hackneyed war rhetoric such as “Massive Vietnam Firepower.”

On January 21, 1966, the Bee featured an article from the New York Times, written by James Reston (“Washington Still Avoids ‘Great Debate’ On War”), which
suggested disagreement about the war, thereby again exposing the Bees’s awareness that significant debate existed about the war. The article stated that “The process of debate in Washington, even one so solemn as risking war with a quarter of the human race, is an astonishing and depressing business…. No capitol ever talked so much about ‘Great Debates’ or had so few of them.” According to Reston, the real debate, which the administration had avoided, was “the China question, which lies behind the whole war.”134 However, the “debate” did not center on whether the U.S. should be in Vietnam, but instead, according to Reston, centered on U.S. policy and actions against Communist China, perceived as the real problem in Southeast Asia.

Thus, although the Bee included an article that discussed a “debate” on the war, the editors did not explore the idea further, and they quickly followed the editorial with numerous stories centered on the ubiquitous culture of war, including a piece titled, “US Planes, Destroyers Pound At Viet Cong Targets in South,” which stated that “U.S. warplanes flew more than 400 combat missions against suspected Red targets in South Viet Nam today and three U.S. 7th Fleet destroyers unloosed a coastal barrage of 729 heavy shells in a massive display of American firepower.” The newspaper quoted “A US spokesman [who] said hundreds of huts and small buildings were hit in the bombardment of Viet Cong concentrations and supply camps. . . .”135 The Bees’s use of bellicose words and catch phrases, such as to “pound suspected Red targets” and “show massive display of American firepower,” reveals an adherence to war culture ideology and symbolism. Two days later, the Bee reported that 32,900 men would be drafted by the army and marines in March. In the headline story that day, “LBJ Attacks Fanatics In
N. Viet," the newspaper paraphrased President Johnson to the effect that the lack of peace in Vietnam was due to "a few fanatical leaders belonging to a cult of hopelessness," and who are ""pursuing the old cynical strategy of rule or ruin.""136 In another story, also featured on the front page as a headline, "GI's Find, "Rout Viet Cong Troops In Heavy Clash,"" the Bee referred to a battle as a "head-on collision.""137 Again, the Bee employed certain inflammatory and often dehumanizing terms (such as "a few fanatical leaders") that suggest its readiness to subject official interpretations and characterizations of the war's events to nothing more than knee-jerk, superficial analysis.

By the spring of 1967, the U.S. was firmly entrenched in Vietnam, as the North Vietnamese concentrated large numbers of troops just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). This changed the pattern of fighting for the United States, which switched from mobile search and destroy operations to a series of battles in which the North Vietnamese besieged a large number of American outposts, causing U.S. casualties to swell. As a result, intense battles, which were fought in places such as Con Thien, Dak To, and Khe Sanh (which lasted for seventy-seven days), all garnered the attention of the American public through the extensive press coverage. However, by providing details of these battles, including the casualties and costs, the press, including the Bee, remained committed to a pro-administration perspective of the war. Regardless, such coverage most likely had the unintended consequences of adding fuel to a developing anti-war movement in the U.S. and around the world.

Protests Emerge as the Casualties Mount and the Costs Soar

The war escalated and so did the protests over its wisdom.138 Indeed, as the war's
military and civilian casualties increased, more U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam, the costs of the war skyrocketed, and the battles raged on, a concerted anti-war movement emerged in the United States. According to Marilyn Young, although the movement “was never uniform in its ideology, its compositions, or its tactics,” the voice of a growing number of people demanded that Johnson bring the troops home.

*Increasing Casualties and Costs*

News accounts of U.S. military casualties slowly emerged. For example, in a story featured on January 19, 1966, the *Bee* included a short article on page 4 of section A, titled “US Losses Rise Despite War Letup,” which, in the pertinent part, quoted “A U.S. spokesman [who] said American casualties for the week ending Jan. 15 were 52 killed, 237 wounded and three missing or captured, compared with 43 killed, 202 wounded or captured the previous week.” It does not appear that the *Bee* included the article as a means of exposing the war’s heavy human costs, but merely as a dispassionate recital of facts provided by the Pentagon on the war’s casualties. Indeed, this propensity to eschew outrage over the sanguinary evidence of the military conflict remained a constant in the daily newspaper’s reporting through 1968. On January 25, 1966, the *Bee* reported as its main headline on the front page that 46 “Yanks” were killed in Vietnam when an Air Force troop transport “crashed in dense fog and rain.” The *Bee* quoted “U.S. officials [who] said it was the worst America air crash in the Vietnamese War,” as of that date. In the same edition of the *Bee*, another story advised that Viet Cong had ambushed a marine base killing “3 Yanks.” In March of 1966, the *Bee* announced that “100 Yanks” had died in the previous week in Viet Nam, and that an additional 808 had
been wounded in the fighting. During that time, the *Bee* also featured a headliner that read, “Reds Down Six Yank Planes On Air Strikes: Marines Open Two New Drives,” which detailed the loss of the planes and the fact that two fliers had been killed, two had been captured, and that two others were missing. Another story added that “10 Leathernecks were killed in the crash of a Marine helicopter, and an A4 Skyhawk crashed on a bombing run. . . .”

The U.S. news media also began reporting (on a limited basis) that the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese were “inadvertently” killing innocent civilians and even their own troops. For example, the press related that U.S. aircraft had “accidently” bombed a friendly village, killing seven innocent civilians and wounding fifty-one; that other American planes had likewise dropped bombs on a group of South Vietnamese civilians, killing fourteen and wounding nineteen; and that U.S. forces had shelled a small South Vietnamese village, killing sixty-three civilians and wounding eighty-three. (cite) The *Bee* carried such stories of death by friendly-fire on the front page (although the accounts were typically brief and placed towards the bottom of the page). They bore descriptive titles, such as “Yank Fliers Hit Friendly Viet Town In Error,” which detailed an “inadvertent” U.S. shelling by two planes of “the tiny village of De Duc . . . with bombs and machine gun fire.” This assault on a “friendly village 40 miles north of Qui Nhon” resulted in 48 civilians killed and 55 wounded. According to the *Bee*, the attack “was a violation of new air firepower rules laid down a week ago. . . and a full investigation is under way. . . .” The *Bee* also noted that a military spokesman confirmed both the absence of enemy ground troops in the area and the lack of fire power coming
from De Duc. Finally, the American Command conceded that the U.S. had “not warn[ed] the villagers of the attack.”145

Consistently, the *Bee* failed to condemn the bombing either in the articles or by means of editorials; instead, it parroted the facts proffered by the administration and blithely seemed to accept the notion that the military would look into the incident via its investigatory process. In the same issue that informed readers about the tragic assault on De Duc, the *Bee*’s major headline of that day read “Thousands March to Back US Viet Policy,” which assured Sacramentans that despite the military’s mishaps, the majority of Americans still supported the war.

Another article featured prominently on that same edition’s front page (“Wounded Marine Loses Gun, Hurls Taunts At Cong”) described “a badly mauled Marine patrol under attack in Da Nang by the Viet Cong, yelling taunts at the Viet Cong, including the shouts of one badly wounded marine, ‘I’m alive, baby, I’m still alive.’”146 This article celebrated the toughness of U.S. troops who mocked the “enemy” even when badly wounded, thereby glorifying the war effort.

In another story carried by the *Bee*, titled “6 GIs Die Under Own Artillery Fire,” the *Bee* highlighted a growing problem in which U.S. troops were even killing each other accidentally. In the article, the *Bee* noted that “Six U.S. paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division were killed and three wounded when caught in an artillery barrage from their own lines. . . .” According to the *Bee*, a military spokesman advised that the “paratroopers were members of a squad that inadvertently [had] moved into the line of fire.”147 Once again, although the *Bee* placed the story on the front page, it was merely a
brief article, located near the bottom of the page, whereas the main headline was “LBJ Okays Water Bill,” thereby suggesting that a water bill deserved greater attention than a story in which American soldiers inadvertently killed their own paratroopers. Subsequently, the Bee carried a story titled “GI’s Killed in Viet Nam Total 1,750,” noting that “The number of Americans killed in combat in Viet Nam” had now surpassed “the totals for the Spanish-American Wars.” The Bee further added that, according to the Pentagon’s weekly summary, sixty-eight American servicemen had died in Vietnam the previous week, and that 354 others had been wounded, bringing the total wounded to 8,357. Although the Bee’s comparison of the current mortality figures with the Spanish American wars in 1898 might have afforded the Sacramento newspaper an opportunity for “a teaching moment,” it not only eschewed any kind of historical analysis of the two wars, it refused to draw any military or moral lessons from the bloody conflict raging in Southeast Asia or to question the administration’s commitment to war in Vietnam.

In one horrific news account, the Bee featured a story, “Ashau Troops Shot 7 In Copter Seats Fight,” in which the newspaper reported that:

South Vietnamese troops had to be shot by their American and Vietnamese comrades when they over-loaded helicopters evacuating forces from the lonely outpost at Ashau, overrun last week by the Communists. . .Defense Department officials said seven Vietnamese soldiers were killed by codefenders of the outpost as a ‘last ditch effort’ to permit evacuations of the wounded.

According to the account, which originated with the Defense Department, during the “removal of the wounded some ‘able-bodied members of the CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Group] rushed onto the helicopters’ before the wounded could be taken aboard.” As a result, the overloaded choppers could not get off the ground. When
many of the Allied soldiers refused orders to get off the aircraft, American and South Vietnamese officers opened fire on the insubordinate Vietnamese troops, clinging to the helicopters in a desperate attempt to escape Ashau.\textsuperscript{150} One U.S. soldier even threw a grenade wounding several of his own comrades.

Stories about the U.S. military’s wide use of chemicals and the resultant destruction of the Vietnamese countryside also slowly emerged. For example, on January 18, 1966, the \textit{Bee} carried an article “Scientists Decry US ‘Crop Killing’ In Vietnam” that described the effort of a group of scientists from Harvard, Dartmouth, and other major American universities to prohibit the U.S. from using chemicals in Vietnam. According to the article, twenty-nine prominent New England scientists charged that the U.S. was using harmful chemical herbicides to “destroy crops that might feed Viet Cong guerilla troops hiding in the countryside,”\textsuperscript{151} warning emphatically that this practice represented an attack on the region’s entire population because both military personnel and civilians would suffer grievous consequences.\textsuperscript{152} The scientists unequivocally condemned the tactic as barbarous and indiscriminate,\textsuperscript{153} and as indicative of “a shocking deterioration in our moral standards.” Although the \textit{Bee} carried the story, it neither took a stand against chemical warfare via an editorial, nor did the daily newspaper suggest in any manner that such practices evidenced yet another aspect of the war that deserved debate.

In terms of the war’s costs, the national press, including the \textit{Bee}, repeatedly included stories regarding President Johnson’s efforts at convincing Congress to approve additional war funds, without questioning the prudence of such requests. For example, on January 19, 1966, the \textit{Bee} contained the following headline, “LBJ Asks For War Fund of
$12.7 Billion.” The article noted that the president beseeched Congress for nearly thirteen billion dollars in additional monies “to finance the war in Vietnam,” declaring: “We hope the aggression will end; [but] we must be prepared if it does not.” In addition, the *Bee* relayed that “the second supplemental defense money request this fiscal year will provide, among other things, for an additional 113,000 men to the armed forces and for buying their equipment.” Again, the Sacramento newspaper never suggested that the growing costs of the war might deserve a national debate, particularly since such heavy expenditures might seriously jeopardize LBJ’s “Great Society” programs.

The trend for increased military spending in Vietnam continued and, by the middle of 1967, the United States’ expenditures on the Asian war had reached twenty billion dollars. This resulted in a surcharge in taxes for both individuals and corporations that drew vehement and widespread opposition from Americans throughout the country. Indeed, immediately following the increase in taxes, Gallup and Harris polls indicated (for the first time) that those who opposed the war outnumbered those who favored it by 46 to 44 percent.

Global condemnation of the Vietnam War also increased. For example, the *Bee* featured a story, “French Official Says US Errs In Vietnam Clash,” which noted that Claude E. Batault, consul-general of France in San Francisco, advised members of Sacramento’s Comstock Club that the U.S. was repeating France’s mistakes in Vietnam by “waging war against communism.” The article also observed that in Batault’s opinion there could be “no military solution in Vietnam with the possible exception of outright war with Red China.” On January 20, 1966, moreover, the *Bee* included an article that
noted that the Johnson administration felt “considerable pressure from abroad to prolong the pause in the bombing of North Viet Nam well beyond this week’s three-day general truce in the war.”\textsuperscript{158}

The \textit{Sacramento Bee} reflected the country’s malaise over the war in late January 1966, and for the first time sounded the siren of pessimism about the Asian conflict. An editorial in the \textit{Bee}, entitled “Peace Drive Deadline Happily is Denied,” captured this emerging gloomy sentiment by observing that:

\begin{quote}
It has become increasingly clear American military operations short of the use of nuclear weapons are not going to end the war in Viet Nam, and, in the shadow of military escalation, many advances in the Great Society would lapse. This is not the counsel of defeat, for by this time it is clear the United States cannot itself be defeated in Viet Nam but it can allow itself to be bled massively in a place of the enemy’s choosing, 10,000 miles from home. Force was given to the concept of an exhausting, indecisive war by retired Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin...[who] said America is presently stretching its resources beyond all reason. Gavin did not advocate the withdrawal of American forces from South Viet Nam but recommended that this nation limit its military activities to the holding of coastal enclaves where air and sea power can be crushingly utilized. This proposal makes some sense since it clearly is impossible and undesirable for the US to act as unilateral policeman for the world.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Bee}’s waning confidence in a victorious outcome in Vietnam was further evident in an article on January 20, 1966, entitled “Prospect of Early Peace Talks Fade,” which observed, “If Johnson has any new public peace moves in mind, he has given no sign of them so far. Officials say, however, that secret diplomatic efforts are continuing and will go on in the future.”\textsuperscript{160} Despite its fears that neither a military or a diplomatic triumph was forthcoming any time soon, the Sacramento daily continued to portray the enemy in Southeast Asia in the most negative light. In fact, in the last mentioned account, the \textit{Bee} featured a large “AP Wirephoto” depicting a group of relatives trying to help a crying and wounded fifteen-year-old Vietnamese boy who had sustained injuries to his leg in a “Viet Cong massacre attack on a refugee camp.”\textsuperscript{161} Clearly the \textit{Bee} sought to
portray the Viet Cong as ruthless and cruel assassins of innocent civilians.

This kind of characterization of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese seemed to suggest that a protracted war—as undesirable as it could be—had to be fought on behalf of the forces of good. At the same time, General Gavin’s proposed coastal enclave strategy might produce an eventual victory, without the United States having to fight a full-scale land war in Asia. With hope for military success still alive, the Bee—like the great majority of newspapers across the United States—continued to offer its readers news stories about increased casualties, greater wartime expenditures, persistent use of chemical warfare, and the proliferation of global protests against the “imperialistic conflict.” So, too, the Bee followed the national press in continuing to express a pro-administration perspective, specifically on the on-going crusade against World Communism. As the handmaiden of the anti-communist movement, the Bee and most other newspapers thus failed to offer any meaningful critique of the war, other than to question tactics and results. In spite of this servile press, the anti-war movement emerged in full force.

Protests Emerge

The earliest protests against the Vietnam War consisted of teach-ins on college campuses. Quickly spreading to over a hundred institutions of higher learning around the country during the spring and fall of 1965, teach-ins engaged thousands of demonstrators to condemn the war. For example, in late March, 3,000 students turned out for a “teach-in” on the Vietnam War at the University of Michigan. On October 30, 1965, the Bee carried a headline story titled “US Critics Draw Jeers at SSC,” which reported that:
Amid frequent heckling and picket signs charging treason, two student groups staged a Viet Nam teach-in at Sacramento State College yesterday afternoon to provide a forum for views highly critical of official American policy. About 2,000 spectators jammed the main quad to hear three professors denounce U.S. involvement in Viet Nam as inept and inhuman. 162

The article also observed that although representatives from Berkeley and Stanford student protest groups had criticized American military actions, a significant number of students in support of U.S. policy carried signs with statements such as “If You Don’t Like It Here Go There.” The Bee also featured a large, front-page photograph of the teach-in. Notably, by referring to the protestors as “US Critics,” the Bee seemingly hinted that the opponents of the war were at least un-American, if not seditious. This mind-set reflected a long-held view that in time of war all Americans were obligated to come together against the enemy, especially a Communist foe dedicated to the destruction of the United States. Or as the line went: “My country right or wrong, My Mother drunk or sober.”

College administrators soon struggled to suppress campus uprisings and protests against the war. The Bee highlighted this growing tension at institutions of higher learning in California by reporting that “guidelines for dealing with campus disturbances . . . [had] been transmitted to junior college officials by Dr. Max Rafferty, state superintendent of public instruction.” 163 By the fall of 1965, however, thousands of protestors joined the students, often taking to the streets around the country, demanding an end to the war. For example, 15,000 marched in Berkeley on October 16, 1965; 20,000 marched in Manhattan on the same day; and 25,000 marched on Washington, D.C., on November 27, 1965. 164
The *Bee* offered its readers numerous stories on the burgeoning anti-war movement across the country. Ostensibly these accounts appeared to be models of neutral, professional journalism. But by portraying the opponents of the war as nothing more than shaggy-haired dissidents forever in opposition to Washington's policies, the *Bee* contributed to the popular notion that they were disloyal, irresponsible Americans. On March 24, 1966, for instance, the *Bee* featured an article, “3,000 UC Students Meet to Plan Anti-Goldberg Demonstrations,” which advised that a large group of UC Berkeley students were meeting to plan a demonstration against U.S. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, who was scheduled to speak at the campus on Vietnam policy. Instead of addressing the dissenters as worthy idealists who posed serious questions about the direction of American foreign policies, the *Bee*—and indeed the mainstream press in general—implied that the anti-war movement was comprised of narcissistic, rebellious juveniles who hated all authority figures, whether parents, the police, or Lyndon Baines Johnson and his minions. It is telling that prior to 1968 the *Bee* never offered an editorial that embraced the anti-war movement on its own terms. This failure meant that the newspaper thus served the interests of Washington's ill-fated foreign policies.

Despite little sympathy from the press, the popular crusade against the Vietnam War gained momentum, especially as civil rights leaders such as the Reverend Martin Luther King joined the cause. The convergence of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement alarmed the administration in a major way. Although leaders in the civil rights campaign had spoken against the war as early as 1966 (for example, in January of 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee claimed that the
United States had been deceptive in its claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people\textsuperscript{166}, when the Reverend King “threw himself fully into the antiwar movement in April 1967,"\textsuperscript{167} the two popular movements merged into a powerful alliance. Prior to 1967, the Reverend King had objected to the war on the basis of his non-violence pacifist convictions. However, in 1967, the public and press took note as the Reverend King opposed the war on political grounds, thereby greatly advancing the growing link between the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. Indeed, King issued a “declaration of independence” from the war in Vietnam when, as he said:

> It became clear . . . that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population . . . to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia . . . [and elsewhere in the United States].\textsuperscript{168}

In the spring of 1967, several hundred thousand marchers followed Martin Luther King and other notables from New York City’s Central Park to the United Nations, where they demanded the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{169}

Antiwar leaders decided to organize a series of demonstrations in the fall of 1967. The effort started with the “Stop the Draft Week” in Oakland, California, in which protesters tried to shut down the functioning of the Oakland induction center. The police arrested several hundred dissidents. At the same time, in San Francisco, draft resisters turned in 400 draft cards to the attorney-general. On Friday, October 20, 10,000 protesters engaged in a massive street battle with the Oakland police. Protestors charged police, built barricades, and in general shut down the downtown area of Oakland. On the following day, in Washington, D.C., demonstrators, including Jerry Rubin and Abbie
Hoffman, both veteran antiwar organizers, converged on the Pentagon. Several thousand of the protesters broke through the lines of federal marshals, soldiers, and National Guardsmen and reached the side of the Pentagon's building. Marshals moved in with clubs and tear gas, arresting nearly 700. Robert McNamara watched the protest from the roof of the Pentagon.

In addition to teach-ins, sit-ins, and street demonstrations, protestors used other methods to deliver their anti-war message. For example, draft resistance became an important facet of the anti-war movement. Protestors of the draft, often referred to as "draft dodgers" by supporters of the war, used various methods of engaging in draft resistance, such as "induction refusal," which became increasingly popular. In mid-1965, the state and federal authorities prosecuted 380 individuals for "induction refusal"; by 1969, the number had increased to 3,305. Public burning of draft cards originated in Boston (in 1965) and soon spread around the country, evolving into a symbolic anti-war statement used in many protests, including the April 15, 1967, New York demonstration.

Protesters used other more isolated and yet dramatic forms of protest. For example, in August of 1965, the Vietnam Day Committee in Northern California attempted to block trains carrying troops by lying on the tracks. In one particularly horrific protest, which occurred during the summer of 1965, a young male Quaker pacifist drenched himself with gasoline and then set himself on fire in front of the Pentagon, with Secretary of Defense McNamara watching nearby. The Bee reported on the anti-war dissent. For example, one small article, titled "Draftee Admits Painting Big Sign," related how "an unemployed laboratory technician scheduled to be inducted into
the army this month, was arrested early today on a charge of painting the word ‘Why?’ in four-foot letters on the front of his selective service office. He was charged with malicious mischief.” In another unusual form of protest reported by the Bee, albeit in a small article toward the back of section A, a group of UC students sent $1,000.00 (solicited on the Berkeley campus of the University of California) to the North Vietnamese. As reported by the Bee, the students raised the funds for “medical supplies to the victims of U.S. aggression in Viet Nam.” Even though the title of the article read “UC Students Send $1000.00 to N. Viets,” the article itself explained that the students had actually sent $500.00 to the “Liberation Red Cross in Prague,” a group operated by the Viet Cong, and a similar sum to the International Red Cross office in Geneva, Switzerland. The students earmarked the latter monetary gift to be distributed among the North Vietnamese.

As the Asian conflict continued without resolution, members of Congress and other political leaders expressed greater concern with the war’s progress; some even articulated outright disapproval. For example, on January 25, 1966, the Bee—then an afternoon newspaper—reported that on that day “President Johnson [had] sent U.N. Ambassador Arthur J. Goldberg to the House of Representatives . . . to help quiet a growing restlessness among members about U.S.-Viet Nam policy.” This same account also revealed that “Goldberg met secretly with representatives who signed a letter to Johnson last week urging broader participation by the United Nations in efforts to achieve peace in Viet Nam.” Senator J. William Fulbright, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, emerged as an open critic of the war. On the same day as
the Goldberg story, the *Bee* noted that Fulbright, a Democrat from Arkansas, favored the inclusion of the Viet Cong (akin to including the Taliban) in any peace talks, because “the war is between the Viet Cong guerillas, supported by North Viet Nam, and the United States and South Vietnam. . . .” For Fulbright, “The policy of not recognizing the Viet Cong as a major party to any negotiations may be a stumbling block to the peace offensive.”174 At the same time, however, the *Bee* also reported that Senator Edward Hebert from Louisiana, a member of the House Armed Service Committee, rejected their participation and referred to the Viet Cong as no more than “just a bunch of bandits.”175

In another account, titled “Fulbright Challenges US On War,” the Sacramento daily informed its readers that Senator Fulbright had called on Secretary of State Dean Rusk to justify “the enormous sacrifice of lives and treasure” in South Viet Nam. Further, the *Bee* quoted Fulbright “as having a feeling the involvement [in East Asia] began when the US ‘inadvertently’ stepped into a colonial war in the 1950s, ‘perhaps on the wrong side.’”176

Oregon’s Senator Wayne Morse joined the growing number of Congressional members criticizing the war. The *Bee* reported in early 1966 that he told a group of senators “he will try to force a test vote on President Johnson’s claimed authority to conduct ‘an undeclared and illegal’ war in Viet Nam . . . .” Describing the Oregon senator as “a bitter critic of the administration polices in Asia and Latin America,” the Sacramento newspaper claimed that Morse would “introduce a resolution Monday intended to rescind the broad authority to the President voted by Congress in August 1964.”177 The *Bee* further quoted Morse that “he would ask his resolution go to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for a thorough investigation of U.S. policies in both
Asia and Latin America." The Bee perhaps betrayed its regard for Morse and his proposed action by burying its account on page A4, by using a tiny heading, and by limiting the story to a few small paragraphs. Overall, the McClatchy paper seemingly portrayed Morse as a disgruntled crank whose proposed resolution mirrored the views of an insignificant number of obstructionist senators. It likewise failed to fully explain to its readers the reasons why some in the Senate believed LBJ had abused his constitutional powers as the nation’s chief military commander. In contrast, one of the main headlines of that day, featured on the front page, in large, bold print, read “GI's Find, Rout Viet Cong Troops in Heavy Clash.” The newspaper’s resort to bellicose language (“rout” and “clash”) that celebrated American battleground success reflected a “guts and glory” approach to journalism that once again marked that the Bee was marching in lockstep with the administration.

As the world learned about the numerous outrages committed on both sides against innocent non-combatants in Southeast Asia, moral opinion turned against the war. Some religious groups, such as the Roman Catholic Church, called for an end to the sanguinary conflict. In January of 1966, the Bee reported on its front page that “Pope Would Have UN End Viet War.” According to the article, “Pope Paul VI today suggested United Nations arbitration, through neutral nations, for ending the Viet Nam War. He also endorsed President Johnson’s peace offensive.”

Questionable Accounts of the War’s Progress

Beginning in 1967, as public support for the war waned slightly, the Johnson administration initiated a major public relations campaign to garner public approval for
the war. As part of that campaign, the administration used various methods to distribute propaganda about the U.S. military’s achievements in Vietnam. Such methods included television news interviews, speeches by high level members of Congress and the administration (such as Dean Rusk and William P. Bundy), and articles in well known publications. The administration used these public relations techniques to emphasize the significant rise of North Vietnamese casualties; to suggest that the heavy bombing by the U.S. had deterred North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam; to stress that U.S. forces were gaining the upper hand in South Vietnam; and to state that the U.S. would turn over the military campaign to South Vietnamese forces within two years. President Johnson even took to the airwaves (in December of 1967), appearing in an interview on CBS news, where he claimed that the North Vietnamese had yet to win a victory on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{181}

The administration’s public relations campaign produced some success as President Johnson’s popularity rose eleven points in the polls. However, anti-war demonstrations continued, and Senator Fulbright confirmed the protestor’s worst fears with his testimony before the Senate. During this testimony, Senator Fulbright asserted that the Johnson administration had prepared a draft resolution authorizing military action in South Vietnam before the alleged Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred.\textsuperscript{182}

On January 25, 1968, Robert Komer, director of the “Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support” (CORDS), the agency charged with winning the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese peasantry, held a news conference on the state of affairs in South Vietnam. Although Komer
acknowledged during the press conference that much still needed to be accomplished in
South Vietnam, he stated that the overall trend, in terms of the war effort, was
“significantly upward.” He claimed that sixty-seven percent of South Vietnam’s
population lived in secure areas; that the rice harvest was richer than in previous years;
and that the locals were even buying tractors and Honda motorcycles. Komer further
stressed that, “You don’t start buying tractors with your piasters . . . unless you expect
you are going to be able to use them.” However, five days after Komer expressed his
enthusiastic optimism regarding the upward trajectory of the conflict, the North
Vietnamese launched the Tet Offense.

The Tet Offensive and a Changing Tide of Media Coverage

From the Gulf of Tonkin incident during the summer of 1964 through the end of
1967, the major news story about the Vietnam War centered on the escalation of
America’s war effort, the multiplication of the number of troops in South Vietnam, and
the intensity of U.S. bombing attacks on North Vietnam.” The news media’s focus on
deployment of American forces and combat operations created the impression that the
United States, by virtue of its massive military strength, was winning the war. When this
perceived state of affairs proved false, the U.S. public, including its press, experienced an
acute sense of betrayal and rage. Media accounts soon reflected this disenchantment with
the government’s interpretation of the conflict’s progress. In Robin Anderson’s words,
“the war’s tenacious grip displaced television images of victorious battles narrated by
authoritative voices and replaced them with scenes of burning villages, grief-stricken
civilians and a bloody Saigon street where a summary execution was caught live on
The Communist offensive began as the South Vietnamese celebrated “Tet” (the Vietnamese lunar New Year holiday), one of their most popular holidays. Specifically, on January 30 and 31, 1968, in a surprise move, 80,000 North Vietnamese forces (and Viet Cong) launched simultaneous attacks on every significant city in South Vietnam, including Hue, where eight battalions seized the old imperial capital, and Saigon, where the North Vietnamese attacked many vital administrative buildings, including the presidential palace. The North Vietnamese also besieged the newly constructed U.S. Embassy in Saigon, blew a hole in the wall, and began advancing on the compound. Although more than seven hundred North Vietnamese forces died during the initial attack, the battles marked the beginning of a long onslaught in what is now commonly referred to as the Tet Offensive. The fighting that ensued, which represented some of the heaviest combat in the war as of that date, evolved into three distinct phases: the initial February attack; a second fierce assault that began in May and lasted until June; and then a third offensive that started on August 17 and lasted for six weeks.

Significantly, the Tet Offensive brought the war to South Vietnam’s urban centers for the first time, inflicting immense damage to the country’s infrastructure, in addition to causing significant military and civilian casualties. The numerous press accounts in the United States, which inevitably focused attention on the fierce street fighting that occurred in urban areas in Vietnam, “shook American war planners, the press and the public alike.” A war that the Johnson administration had for five years characterized as “‘winnable,’ ‘clean’ and ‘just’ had suddenly become brutal, messy and costly.”
Although the North Vietnamese (and Viet Cong) failed to hold any city for more than a few weeks, lost almost half of their fighters in the offensive, and emerged from the offensive with a much weaker fighting force than they had at the onset, the Tet Offensive shattered the American illusion that the U.S. was winning the war and thereby altered the war’s course.

On January 30, 1968, the Bee began its coverage of the Tet Offensive with a front page headline, “Cong Shell Saigon in Biggest Offensive.” The article described rockets and mortar shells landing around Saigon and specifically asserted that Viet Cong guerrillas and the North Vietnamese had launched their mightiest offensive of the war. According to the Bee, “They hit eight major cities and more than a score of towns and villages in coordinated attacks, inflicting casualties and immense damage . . . They destroyed or damaged tens of millions of dollars worth of U.S. jet planes and helicopters.”

Following the initial attack, the Johnson administration launched an immediate effort to manage public opinion regarding the widespread and unexpected attack. As part of that effort, President Johnson ordered General Westmoreland to issue daily reports on the siege. Therefore, a few days following the initial assault, CBS news reporter Robert Schakne asked the American head of military operations in Vietnam for an assessment of the situation. Westmoreland responded that the North Vietnamese had suffered an immense defeat by exposing themselves to the American military’s firepower. However, in spite of his positive spin on the attack, gloom soon pervaded many news accounts.

Initially, the American public reacted to the Tet Offensive by rallying around the
war effort. For example, immediately after the attack, the number of people referring to themselves as “hawks” increased from 56 per cent to 61 per cent. However, by the end of February 1968, the percentage of the American public who believed the United States was progressing in the war effort had dropped from 51 per cent to 32 percent. Further, by March of 1968, President Johnson’s approval rating on the war had likewise dropped 13 points to 26 per cent, and the number of Americans who believed the United States had made a mistake in entering the war was on the rise. Americans developed this dismal assessment even though the situation stabilized somewhat immediately after Tet, and even though the North Vietnamese and the NFL suffered a major military setback following the attack because of their enormous casualties. Too, Washington officials were certainly heartened when the fragile, unpopular South Vietnamese government and army did not collapse in the wake of the furious Tet onslaught.

In the beginning, the press, including the Bee, generally adopted the official line; specifically, that the Tet Offensive constituted a huge military defeat for the North Vietnamese and the NFL, and a major victory for the United States. For example, Walter Cronkite reported that “First and simplest, the Vietnamese suffered a military defeat.” However, as the battles raged on and the casualties mounted, any remaining optimism about the war dissipated. As doubt about the war’s progress and objectives emerged, press coverage of the war gradually shifted from an emphasis on the “guts and glory” of war to a focus on the costs and casualties of war. In the now infamous Associated Press news story (by Peter Arnett), an American major at Ben Tre was quoted as stating that “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.” The press also began to
expose the brutality of the war by featuring more articles and photographs of damaged cities and civilian casualties. For example, during this time, television film coverage of war casualties jumped from 2.4 to 6.8 times per week. In one specific and disturbing instance of the press' increasing willingness to depict the war's atrocities, on February 19, 1968, as the Tet Offensive raged on, NBC news featured some of the most famous television footage of the war: Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan (a U.S. ally) executing a Viet Cong prisoner standing on a street side, with his hands tied behind his back. The footage, although edited for viewers, depicted the general shooting the restrained and unarmed prisoner in the head at close range. Newspapers such as the *New York Times* published the same story, accompanied by the now famous AP photograph taken by Eddie Adams of the tragedy.

The *New York Times* article regarding the Loan execution also quoted an unidentified American advisor as stating that, "We usually kill the seriously wounded Viet Cong . . . The hospitals are so full . . . there is no room for the enemy . . . [and] when you've seen five-year-old girls with their eyes blindfolded . . . and bullets in their brains, you look for revenge. I saw two little girls that dead [sic] yesterday. One hour ago I shot a Viet Cong." The *Bee* published the Adam's photograph, thereby demonstrating its willingness to likewise display the glaring brutality of war, on its front page.

Eventually, following the Tet Offensive, the press began questioning, even criticizing the war. This trend first surfaced in television newscasts. According to Hallin, prior to the Tet Offensive, news broadcasters in favor of the war far outnumbered critics by a margin of 26.3 to 4.5 percent. Following the Tet Offensive, the margin
increased from 26.3 (critics) to 28.4 (supporters). In one example, one of the most famous and respected news anchors of the day, Walter Cronkite, had always referred to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as “Communists”; after the Tet Offensive he rarely used the term when speaking about the two groups. Further, on February 27, 1968, after Cronkite informed his national audience that “we are mired in stalemate,” he added, “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.” In response to Cronkite’s commentary, President Johnson reportedly said in private, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost the nation.” In February 1968, the Associated Press reported that 1,829 Americans had died, which represented more fatalities than in the first five years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

On March 10, 1968, even though polls indicated that a solid majority of Americans favored a phased withdrawal from Vietnam and a near-majority considered the U.S. involvement in Vietnam a mistake, General Westmoreland requested 206,000 more troops for Vietnam, a forty percent increase in the over half million U.S. troops already in Vietnam, in order to “regain the initiative.” Press criticism of the war effort soon swelled.

Although the press still analyzed the event within the framework of good versus evil, democracy versus communism, according to Hallin press criticism of the war increased because, “journalists seemed to have interpreted Tet, without consciously making the distinction, for what it said rather than what it did—as proof, regardless of who won or lost it, that the war was not under control.” Essentially, in spite of the
North Vietnamese casualties, the intensity of the attack showed both the American public and its press, that the U.S. military could be defeated. Moreover, as Henry Kissinger observed, although Tet may have been a military victory for the United States, it was “a political defeat in the countryside for Saigon and the United States...[therefore] the prevalent strategy could no longer achieve its objectives within a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people.”

McGeorge Bundy confessed to the president that he was “much affected by my [own] belief that the sentiment in this country has shifted very heavily since the Tet Offensive. This is not because our people are quitters... What has happened is that a great many people—even very determined and loyal people—have begun to think that Vietnam is really a bottomless pit.”

A New York Times editorial (March 1968) concluded that, “the policy of military escalation in Southeast Asia which President Johnson and his Pentagon advisors have followed for more than three years is futile—and worse... The time has come to abandon this bankrupt policy... The fate of the nation depends on it.”

The Wall Street Journal as well opined that “We think the American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed; it may be falling apart beneath our feet.”

Newsweek provides a poignant example of the shift in war reporting that occurred after Tet. In 1966, prior to the Tet Offensive, in a blatant act of censorship, Newsweek refused to print a story by one of its reporters who had traveled to Vietnam, which concluded that “the much heralded progress in the delta was arrogant nonsense; that things had, rather, gone from bad to worse in almost every category.” However, in
March of 1968, during the Tet Offensive, *Newsweek* declared, “After three years of gradual escalation, President Johnson’s strategy for Vietnam has run into a dead end . . . . Only the deluded can console themselves with the comforting feeling that suddenly the war will turn a corner and the enemy will wither away . . . the war cannot be won by military means without tearing apart the whole fabric of national life and international relations.”

The *Bee’s* coverage of the Tet Offensive during the early days of February 1968, largely focused on the guts and glory perspective, with headlines such as “Marine Jets Smash Enemy Tank Column,” “US Lists 14,999 Cong Dead in Violent Clashes,” and “LBJ Says Reds Fail in Vietnam.” However, in a striking example of a changing tide of coverage, the *Bee* featured, on its front page, near the top, the horrific picture of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan firing the fatal bullet into the head of the unarmed and blindfolded captured Viet Cong solider. The *Bee’s* willingness to present this shocking picture on its front page evidenced a nod towards a different view of the war, one that was far more ominous than previously reported.

On March 31, 1968, President Johnson addressed the nation and announced an unconditional halt in the bombing of North Vietnam and the commencement of a peace effort. At the end of the address, Johnson made a shocking announcement: “I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party as your president.” Within a week of this announcement, the president’s job approval rating jumped 13 points. Johnson’s announcement marked the end of official talk about victory in Vietnam. Although Richard M. Nixon, LBJ’s successor, embarked on a new policy dedicated to the
“Vietnamization” of the war and to the gradual withdrawal of troops, the U.S. continued with a devastating and costly war effort in Vietnam for seven more years. During this time, Nixon conducted a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia and Laos, mined the harbors of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports, and unleashed the heaviest bombing of the war (the U.S. dropped more bombs on Vietnam and its neighboring countries during the Nixon administration than were dropped by all combatants in World War II). Tragically, almost half of the U.S. casualties suffered in the Vietnam War occurred in the years after the Tet Offensive during the Nixon Administration.217 Press coverage that critically challenged Washington’s version of the Asian conflict during the years leading up to the Tet Offensive might have aroused the U.S. populace into demanding an end to a catastrophic war that would continue on for years.
Because, as observed by Thomas Jefferson, “[T]he basis of our government . . . [is] the opinion of the people,” then the “very first object” of Americans “should be to keep that right . . .” Indeed, for the Virginia statesmen, the press represented the principal safeguard of any democratic society and, he wrote, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” For Jefferson, then, the press is the real bellwether of a healthy democratic society. As the willingness of the press to accurately report on events erodes, he cautioned, so does democracy, particularly during times of war.

Jefferson’s warnings resonated with many Americans in the 1960s, as they witnessed demagogic leaders call for the suppression of dissident voices in the press who might be lending comfort to the republic’s totalitarian enemies. In commenting about a decade shaped by obsessive fear, Philip Knightly wrote:

Given the increased danger; greater degree of manipulation and control by government; and the new emphasis on seeing the war through the eyes of soldiers, the age of war correspondent as hero appears to be over. Whether war correspondents would wish to continue as propagandists and myth-makers, plying their craft subservient to those who wage wars, is a decision they will need to make for themselves.
News reporting during the years between 1964 and 1968, a particularly critical phase of the Vietnam War, serves as a powerful and unfortunate example of government manipulation over news. More importantly, it illustrates the willingness of those charged with delivering the truth to accept that manipulation. According to Robin Anderson, author of *A Century of Media, A Century of War*, one of the most significant moments in the history of war and news media occurred during the Vietnam War.\(^\text{220}\) The media’s servile relationship with the government compromised the press’ reporting on the war in Southeast Asia and ensured that the press would not provide the U.S. public with accurate accounts of the war. Instead, the populace received news accounts, such as those provided by the *Bee*, which reflected the government’s “facts” and perspectives on the war, as opposed to the accurate and truthful reporting required and deserved by the U.S. populace. Unfortunately, recent history tells us that the Vietnam lesson has yet to be learned.
ENDNOTES


4. Henry, 220.

5. Ibid, 221.


19. Ibid., 4.


22. Dorman, 36.


24. Hiram Johnson, as quoted in Carruthers, 9.


29. Hallin, 4.


32. Hallin, 110.

33. Hallin, 10.

34. Knightly, 40; Hallin, 48.

35. Hallin, 10.

36. President John F. Kennedy, quoted in Hallin, 14.

37. Hallin, 25.

38. Knightly, 417.

39. President John F. Kennedy, quoted in Hallin, 14.

40. Isserman, 67.


43. Langguth, 35.

44. Young, 3.

45. Langguth, 35.

46. Langguth, 50; Young, 3-6.
47. Young, 10.

48. Isserman, 68.

49. Ho Chi Minh, as quoted in Langguth, 59; Young, 11.


51. Young, 13.

52. Langguth, 55; Young, 29.

53. Langguth, 114.

54. Young, 30.


56. Young, 41-42.

57. Langguth, 96.

58. Gettleman, 133; Young, 58.

59. Gettleman, 133.

60. Young, 58.

61. Senator John F. Kennedy, as quoted in Young, 59.

62. Young, 82.


72. Hallin, 15.

74. The Sacramento Bee, August 5, 1964.
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82. Hallin, 16.
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84. Hallin, 19.
87. The Sacramento Bee (editorial), August 8, 1964.
88. The Sacramento Bee (editorial), August 8, 1964.
89. Hallin, 25.
90. Hallin, 25.
91. Hallin, 58.
92. Hallin, 73.
94. Hallin, 53.
95. Langguth, 306.
96. Dante B. Fascell, as quoted by Young, 120.
97. The Sacramento Bee, August 11, 1964.
98. David Hunt in Gettleman, 360.
100. Isserman, 191.

101. Isserman, 191.


103. Knightley, 418.

104. Hallin, 158.


106. Langguth, 350-352.


122. Hallin, 159.

123. Hallin, 159.


138. Isserman, 170.
139. Young, 197.


156. Young, 211.


164. Gettlemen, p. 296.


166. Gettlemen, 29

167. Gettlemen, 300.

168. Young, 199.

169. Isserman, 183.


185. Cooke, p. 158.
188. Anderson, p. 51.
190. Hammond, 111.
191. Hallin, 168.
192. Hallin, 168.
193. Hallin, 171.
194. Hallin, 171.
195. Hallin, 171.
197. *The Sacramento Bee*, *(NEED CITE)*
198. Hammond, 126.
199. Hammond, 126.
200. Quoted in Hallin, 170.
203. Cooke, p. 150.
204. Hallin, 173.
205. Quoted in Goodman, 83.


216. Isserman, 225.


220. Anderson, xxi.
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