

Vietnam: The First Television War – part 1

The Vietnam War (1955–75) was a time of great controversy in the United States. Cold War tensions ran high as the country relentlessly fought against the alleged evils of communism.

At the same time, advances in video and audio recording enabled both easier and more news coverage. From 1950 to 1966, the percentage of Americans who owned a television skyrocketed from 9 percent to 93 percent as televisions became essential for everyday life.

With the proliferation of televisions, news networks strived to have the most exciting, dramatic, and attractive stories. They competed for the finest reporters, highest-rated equipment, and largest number of viewers. To succeed, they had to do something unprecedented: *on-site* coverage of the war in Vietnam. For the first time in American history, the news from the front lines was brought straight into the living room.

So why was Vietnam called the first “television war”?

During World War II, morale was high. Camera crews stayed in noncombat areas to show the happier, more upbeat side of war. The stories were broadcast as motion pictures shown in theaters. And the newscasters shared only good news and reported bad news with a cheery disposition.

Government censorship over the media influenced this outlook—if the press wanted access to stories about the war, they had to receive credentials from the military. This ensured that the news didn’t report anything that the military did not want disclosed to the public. Big stories like the A-bomb stayed out of the news until after the war ended. The main focus of the media was high morale and support for the war effort.

In contrast, the television news networks had a leaker view of the war in Vietnam. After the Tet Offensive in 1968—which the public saw as a defeat—reports turned unfavorable toward the war effort. The censorship that was in effect during World War II was much more lax by the 1960s. Camera crews were on-site almost constantly in combat zones. Journalists wrote day-to-day coverage and recorded their stories in the field. This gave Americans a more realistic glimpse into the lives of their soldiers, and they didn’t like what they saw.

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Vietnam: The First Television War – part 2

On April 1, 1968, the day after President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection, he stated:

As I sat in my office last evening, waiting to speak, I thought of the many times each week when television brings the war into the American home. No one can say exactly what effect those vivid scenes have on American opinion. Historians must only guess at the effect that television would have had during earlier conflicts on the future of this Nation: during the Korean war, for example, at that time when our forces were pushed back there to Pusan; of World War II, the Battle of the Bulge, or when our men were slugging it out in Europe or when most of our Air Force was shot down that day in June 1942 off Australia.

Televising the Vietnam War helped to divide a nation that took pride in its ability to unify. The dramatization of stories in the news distorted the public’s perception of what was actually happening in the field. Since it was visible in their homes, Americans were able to connect and empathize with the soldiers more than ever before. This caused an outcry of public opinion against the war.

By seeing the war on television, the anti-war advocates argued that the war was unnecessary, and hundreds of thousands of “American boys” were not dying for a noble cause. In fact, they believed that the United States was involved in a war in which they shouldn’t be involved at all.

In contrast, the pro-war supporters regarded anti-war marches as disloyal to U.S. soldiers. They saw the perils of the battlefield and felt an obligation to support their troops regardless of whether they should be there or not. The disagreements between the pro-war and anti-war advocates caused a partition in the American population that still persists.

In addition, the strong public anti-war opinions expressed in the media influenced U.S. policy makers. Americans could see military abuses on television, such as the My Lai Massacre in 1968, which sparked riots in cities and university campuses across the nation. This outrage, fueled by television coverage, ultimately led to the decision to withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1973, and end of the U.S involvement in the war.

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