

## **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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