of righteous indignation. The effect of these scenes, brought into our homes via television, was one of shock. We saw civil rights marchers and children being bitten by police dogs. The Civil Rights Act suddenly had the support it needed. Those images changed history." NBC correspondent Bill Monroe agreed, saying unequivocally, "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 wouldn't have happened without TV." Ralph McGill, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, had similar praise for the broadcast medium, saying, "Had it not been for television showing us 'Bull' Connor and his dogs and the march on Selma, there would not have been the momentum to push the Civil Rights Acts through Congress. Television performed a magnificent service."  

From a historian's viewpoint, Gary Orfield wrote of the images from Birmingham, "Anyone watching TV could understand what it felt like to have a dog, capable of tearing a man apart, lunge at him during a peaceful march. One image of a woman held down by five policemen was worth a million pious words. Brutal use of powerful firehoses to knock down demonstrators made the crisis clear in homes across the country." And John Lewis, who in 1965 led the voting rights march in Selma and today is a member of Congress, said, "If it hadn't been for television on that day, we wouldn't have gotten the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Civil Rights Movement in this country owes a great deal to television."  

Newspapers and magazines can communicate information about an event, but television news has the power to transmit the experience of actually being part of that event. For two centuries, a minority of American citizens committed to advancing the cause of black civil rights had struggled to convince the majority of the justness of their cause. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, television allowed that minority to succeed by bringing a simplicity and a moral clarity to the confrontation between the bigotry of segregationists and the determination of oppressed African Americans. The images that television news conveyed to its viewers moved the conscience of a nation and helped propel the people of the United States to take concrete steps toward leveling the racial playing field in this country.

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**Vietnam War: Bringing the Battlefield into the American Living Room**

The coming of age of television news not only coincided with the Civil Rights Movement but also emerged at virtually the same time as the United States military buildup in Vietnam. The nightly network evening news programs expanded from fifteen minutes to half an hour in 1965, the first American ground troops were sent to Indochina in 1965. The Vietnam War, therefore, became the first televised war. It also eventually evolved into the least successful foreign war in American history. These two facts may not be coincidental.

Many media and political experts have argued that by bringing grisly images of battle into the American living room, television news played a key role in turning the American public against the Vietnam War and, ultimately, in hastening the end of that prolonged conflict. Although those observers are widely divided on whether ending the war was the right or wrong decision, they agree that television news showed the raw horror of war in ways that print journalism could not. Violence, carnage, and human suffering were depicted in withering reality, but politics and strategy, which were not easily translated onto film, were largely ignored. So television viewers were left to conclude that the Vietnam War was senseless and immoral.

Numerous scholars as well as journalists have made this point. In the book *The Vietnam Legacy*, Edward Shils wrote, "Television gave the American people vivid images of certain aspects of the war in
Vietnam which they could never have gotten from reading newspapers and periodicals. It made them see the war as a meaningless destruction of lives and landscapes. National syndicated columnist Bob Greene wrote, "Forget the words that the network correspondents spoke. It was that video, night after night, that turned Americans against the Vietnam adventure. It was one thing for a newspaperman to describe, even in the most graphic terms, carnage that he had seen; it was quite another for a television viewer to see the same carnage at dinnertime." And veteran NBC commentator Edwin Newman concluded, "Television brought the Vietnam War into our living rooms on a nightly basis. They produced close-up, sensational images of war. American viewers saw the real experience of war transformed into theatrics on the twenty-one-inch screen. And they recoiled."

Although the observers range widely in their political perspectives on the war, they share the fundamental belief that television news caused the American people to question the morality of war and ultimately to lose what could be called the national will to kill. Many critics say this loss of resolve resulted in American forces being withdrawn from Southeast Asia prematurely, others praise the United States for finally ending a prolonged war it never should have entered in the first place. For better or worse, graphic televised images turned the American public against the war and helped bring an end to the fighting.

**America's Longest War**

President Truman initiated U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the early 1950s when he sent military aid to the French colony. Truman and the men who entered the White House after him hoped to stop Vietnam from following China, its neighbor to the north, into communism. In 1954, Vietnam was divided in half—Ho Chi Minh's communist government in the north was headquartered in Hanoi, the pro-democracy government in the south was centered in Saigon. American involvement continued under both Republican and Democratic administrations, with President Eisenhower dispatching military advisers to South Vietnam and then President Kennedy increasing the number of advisers. President Johnson took an even stronger hand against the communists, for the first time committing American troops to Indochina.

Vietnam first moved onto the radar screen in the lives of most Americans in 1964. American military personnel announced that North Vietnamese patrol boats had fired on American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, prompting Johnson to order a retaliatory strike that destroyed twenty-five boats and an oil depot. At LBJ's request, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution assuring its support for "all necessary action" to defend United States forces in Southeast Asia.

In 1965, Johnson ordered offensive bombing raids and sent the first ground troops, with the number of GIs in Vietnam rising to 175,000 by year's end. Although the Americans were better equipped than the North Vietnamese, they were unfamiliar with the warfare practiced by the rebel Viet Cong guerrilla fighters. Time after time, the enemy evaded the Americans by melting into the jungle. Determined to defeat the communists, Johnson continued to escalate the American war effort. By 1967, troops exceeded 500,000. Ultimately, the United States paid a high price for fighting in Vietnam, with more than 58,000 American men and women dying in the war. The number of Southeast Asians who died is not known, estimates generally range from one million to three million.

**The Most Powerful Medium in History**

Although television existed during the Korean War, it had not yet evolved into a major news medium. By the mid-1960s, however, more people were receiving their news from television than from newspapers. And as the Vietnam War continued, that balance increasingly shifted toward television. By 1972, two out of three persons surveyed named television as their major news source.1

By the height of the war, the network evening news programs were drawing huge numbers of viewers. CBS, NBC, and ABC attracted a combined audience of thirty-five million per night. One of the most committed of those viewers was President Johnson, who became so obsessed by television news that he had three TV sets in the Oval Office—one for each network.

Television correspondents in Vietnam, as well as their print counterparts, were free to go where they pleased and report what they wished. For this was the first—and last—American war with no military censorship. During the early years of fighting, journalists were such committed cheerleaders for the government that officials felt voluntary guidelines were fully adequate. Those rules identified fifteen categories of information, such as troop movements and casualty figures, that were off limits until they were officially announced in Saigon. Violation of the rules meant a reporter would lose his or her accreditation, but that happened only four times during the entire war.
Through 1967, television coverage was overwhelmingly favorable to American policy, although many of the images from the war certainly offended human sensibilities. After the Tet Offensive in early 1968, television’s portrayal of the war became more critical. Technological advances in the 1960s boosted the capabilities of television news. New, lightweight cameras combined with jet air transportation and communication satellites meant that for the first time, film from the front became a regular part of daily news coverage. Further advances meant that black-and-white images were transformed into color ones—blood could be seen in all its horrific brilliance.

**Exposing the Horrors of War**

From the moment ground troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, television presented viewers with the most realistic battlefront images possible. TV defined the reality of war as, in a word, blood.

Mike Wallace of CBS recalled that he and other correspondents, eager to get their stories on the air, did their best to find the gory combat footage their bosses in New York wanted. Wallace said, “Correspondents kept a kind of scorecard as to which pieces we shot and were not used, and an inordinate number of combat pieces were used, compared with some first-rate pieces in the political area or non-bloody stories.”

Typical was a 1967 piece in which NBC’s Greg Harris joined a platoon of GIs. Harris reported, “In the first twenty-six days of the present operation, this particular unit killed 270 VC while suffering only three wounded Americans.” Film then showed American soldiers charging boldly into a village, bayonets drawn. Harris continued, “Cong Phu was burned and blasted to death.” As footage showed the huts burning, Harris began his summation, “The war in First Corps is changing for the enemy”—but then he stopped. He remained silent for several seconds so the image of a Vietnamese body being pulled out of a hole, by the hair, could have its full, gruesome impact. His final words added more drama still, “Today the Viet Cong lost the use of Cong Phu. Tomorrow they will lose the use of another village, then another.” As Harris wrapped up, the film showed the huts in the village continuing to burn.

Hundreds of such reports aired day after day, week after week. Each told of a unit burning a village, with film often showing dead bodies—many of them charred. NBC correspondent Jack Perkins said matter-of-factly during one report about a village being burned, “There was no discriminating one house from another. There did not need to be. The whole village was destroyed.”
Although lurid images of dead and wounded Vietnamese soldiers and civilians often filled the screen, the most sought-after film was of blood flowing from the veins of American GIs. An NBC News vice president said at the time, "It's not a Vietnamese war; it's an American war in Asia. And that's the only story the American audience is interested in." He told his correspondents to concentrate on providing graphic images of American soldiers engaged in combat—preferably mortal.

The bloody scenes were often featured as dramatic close-ups with flames engulfing thatched roofs and black smoke billowing into the sky serving as backdrops. Typical was a heart-rending NBC sequence that showed, in the distance, women and children fleeing from their burning homes while, in the foreground, a young GI screamed in anguish "It hurts! It hurts!" as medics rushed him past the eye of the camera, his right leg reduced to a bloody stump.

A Zippo Cigarette Lighter Ignites a Firestorm

The most controversial story of the early years of the war was by Morley Safer of CBS. One day in 1965, Safer was having coffee with some marine officers when one of them asked if he would like to join them on a field operation the next day. Safer did not hesitate a moment. After an amphibious carrier took them to Cam Ne, the men marched single file into the village and, in very orderly fashion, burned every hut to the ground. The film was riveting. As the huts burst into flames, the marines could be seen waving the Vietnamese peasants to run, but the film also showed that the warnings were useless because they were in English, while the confused looks on the women's and children's faces communicated that they understood only Vietnamese. But the most poignant detail on the film evolved from the equipment the marines used to ignite the thatched roofs: Zippo cigarette lighters.

When the film arrived in New York, network executives recognized the explosive nature of a report that depicted American soldiers cavalierly destroying a Vietnamese village. Fred Friendly, the producer who had piloted Edward R. Murrow through his battles with Joseph McCarthy ten years earlier, was awakened in the middle of the night. Friendly agreed to run the footage only after talking with Safer personally over the telephone to be sure the story was accurate.

Safer's narrative for the story began with a recitation of facts—"The day's operation burned down 150 houses, wounded three women, killed one baby, and netted these four prisoners"—as Safer pointed to four elderly men. The intrepid correspondent, clearly shocked by the horror he had witnessed, then added his own highly critical comments, "Today's operation is the frustration of Vietnam in miniature."

Friendly did not go home after the "Zippo segment" aired. Instead, he went knowingly to his office and began answering the phone calls from hundreds of angry Americans who cursed CBS for portraying American GIs as heartless killers and America's effort to stop communism as a senseless exercise in inhumanity.

Among the callers was President Johnson. The leader of the free world called Frank Stanton, president of CBS News. Johnson's first question was as vivid as the film itself—"Frank, are you trying to f**k me?" Letting loose with the full fury of his monumental temper, Johnson continued, "Your boys just shot on the American flag." LBJ denounced Safer as a communist and accused him of having bribed the marine officer. The president later had Safer investigated. When the reporter's record was found to be flawless, Johnson took solace in learning that Safer had been born in Canada. The president said petulantly, "I knew he wasn't an American."
important with this inconclusive war. And in a presidential election year, the public had a direct means of expressing its dissatisfaction.

The role television news played in the Tet Offensive was momentous. Just as Vietnam was America's first television war, Tet was America's first television superbattle. The story had drama, suspense, and enormous public interest. With the communists acting offensively and taking the United States military by surprise, the very future of democracy seemed to be on the line. Television news pulled out all the stops.

The epicenter of the offensive was the very symbol of the United States presence in Vietnam: the American Embassy. In the chaos of the surprise attack and the haste to report the news as quickly as possible, inaccurate information was broadcast. NBC's Chet Huntley told anxious viewers, "The Viet Cong seized part of the United States Embassy in Saigon early Wednesday. Snipers are in buildings and on rooftops near the embassy and are firing on American personnel inside the compound. Twenty suicide commandos are reported to be holding the first floor of the embassy." Huntley was wrong. The Viet Cong entered and held the embassy compound for six hours but never penetrated the embassy building itself.

The embassy remained the focal point of coverage for three days, as an ongoing gun battle on the grounds provided a live-action bonanza for TV crews. Barrages of automatic weapon fire, scenes of men running for cover behind trees, and the lifeless bodies of two fallen GIs made for some of the most eye-popping news images in American military history—as exciting as a Hollywood Western. On the network evening news shows, CBS aired a full minute of the gun battle; NBC let its film run for two minutes, and ABC continued its film uninterrupted for three minutes—including footage of the network's Vietnamese sound man being wounded on camera by a stray bullet.

CBS and NBC quickly produced half-hour special news programs on Tet that aired that third night. Alarmist in tone, the programs portrayed the offensive as a brutal bloodbath, with lengthy footage that was unmatched in its sheer volume of gore and carnage. The prime-time spectacles strongly reinforced the message that Tet was a devastating defeat for the United States. CBS called its special Saigon Under Fire, NBC opted for Viet Cong Terror: A Guerrilla Offensive.

At the same time the networks filled the TV screens with portraits of havoc and an American military run amok, they also filled the ears of the public with words of pessimism. Jeff Graubnick of CBS told his audience, "The Viet Cong proved they could take and hold almost any area they chose." And ABC's Joseph Harsch expressed a similar skepticism toward American forces when he reported, "Best estimates here are that the enemy has not yet, and probably never will, run out of the manpower to keep his effort going. It is the exact opposite of what American leaders have, for months, been leading us to expect."11

In the midst of the crisis, it was understandable that the networks had initially reported incomplete and inaccurate information. Impossible to excuse, however, was the fact that CBS, NBC, and ABC all continued to portray Tet as a Viet Cong victory even after the fog had lifted and the Americans were providing indisputable evidence that the offensive had failed. Despite that evidence, the networks failed to set the record straight, allowing their hasty judgments to stand.

Later in 1968, field producer Jack Fern proposed that NBC undertake a three-part series showing that Tet had, in fact, been a military failure for the Viet Cong. Network executives rejected the proposal, saying such a series would only confuse viewers. The executives told Fern, "Tet was already established in the public's mind as a defeat, and, therefore, it was an American defeat."12

The Shot Felt 'Round the World

The single television image that, more than any other, burnt the brutality of war into the consciousness of the American people was the filmed execution of a Vietnamese man on a Saigon street a few days after the Tet Offensive began.

NBC correspondent Howard Tuckner and his two Vietnamese cameramen were standing on a street near the Buddhist An Quang Pagoda, a center of government opposition, on the fateful morning. At the far end of the block, they saw several South Vietnamese soldiers with a prisoner wearing casual civilian clothes—plain shirt, black shorts, no shoes. The soldiers walked toward the newsmen to present the prisoner to General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The cameramen began filming the prisoner, clearly showing that his hands were tied behind his back and he had been beaten.

The prisoner was marched down the street toward Loan, who then drew his sub-nosed, .38 revolver and waved away the soldiers. The prisoner stood three feet away, his eyes downcast. Without speaking to the man, Loan lifted his right arm and stretched it out straight as his index finger squeezed the trigger. There was the crack of a shot and a grimace on the prisoner's face as the bullet slammed into his brain. The dead man's legs folded beneath him. As he fell to the ground, blood spurt grotesquely from his head. General Loan calmly returned the revolver to its holster.13

Tuckner knew what he had. He called NBC in New York: "THIS STORY IS COMPETITIVE. CBS AND ABC WERE THERE BUT WE ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO HAVE FILM OF THE EXECUTION."
Tuckner ended the cable by flagging the fact that there could be "BLOOD SPRAYING OUT" of the prisoner’s head and then referring to the cameraman: "IF HE HAS IT ALL, IT’S STARTLING STUFF." He had it all. He also had a huge audience. Because of the excitement that the Tet Offensive had created, the NBC audience watching that night’s program had jumped from the standard fifteen million to a staggering twenty million. And the full-color images of the street-corner execution made history: the world’s first televised death.

Robert Northshield, executive producer of the NBC Huntley-Brinkley Report, never considered not running the film, but he cut it immediately after the gunshot in order to spare viewers from the spurtting blood. Northshield "went to black" as soon as the man hit the ground and kept the screen empty for three seconds to provide a buffer between the stomach-wrenching image and the commercial that followed. Even so, the producer acknowledged, "It was the strongest stuff American viewers had ever seen."

Tuckner’s narration was terse. He merely said who the men in the images were—although the victim was not identified by name, then or since—and let the film roll: "Government troops had captured the commander of the Viet Cong commando unit. He was roughed up badly but refused to talk. A South Vietnamese officer held the pistol taken from the enemy officer. The Chief of South Vietnam's National Police Force, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, was waiting for him."

Viewers were horrified. More than a thousand of them called NBC to complain that the film was in bad taste, particularly because it was aired during the early evening when children might be watching. Tuckner defended airing the chilling scene, saying, "The film showed, at a time when all eyes were on Saigon, that although the United States went over there ostensibly to keep South Vietnam free from communism and the communists were accused of atrocities, that a leading figure of the Saigon government killed a man in the street without a trial."

Observers have described the film as having a seminal effect on the American public. Washington Post Vietnam reporter Don Oberdorfer labeled the film "the picture that shocked the world," saying the grotesque scene "seemed to many people to confirm the suspicion that this was a ‘wrong war.’" The Associated Press wrote that there was a "worldwide reaction" to the film, and Time magazine said, "That picture is lodged in people’s memories" because it showed a South Vietnamese government official "cold-bloodedly executing" a thin, frightened man by "rampantly blowing the suspect’s brains out." In his study of the impact of television on American society, NBC’s Edwin Newman said, "This film revolted the nation. What was this war turning us into? What kind of people allowed such things to happen? Television pictures were disturbing. Public opinion was moving. Television caused the change."

Post-Tet: Exposing the War as Horrible... and Unwinnable

The man who set the tone for television coverage after the cataclysmic Tet Offensive was Walter Cronkite. The avuncular CBS anchor, with his kind and gentle manner, had shepherd the nation through many momentous events—from presidential elections and space launches to the Kennedy assassination. The anchor of the country’s most-watched news program, Cronkite had been, in the early and mid-1960s, a committed supporter of the American military’s effort in Vietnam. President Johnson, fully aware of Cronkite’s prestige and power, called him to the White House three times during 1966 and 1967 for private meetings.
And then came Tet. Like other Americans, Cronkite was shocked by the first news reports of the communist offensive. On that fateful night, he was in the CBS newsroom in New York. As the news flashed from Saigon came clattering across the teletype, Cronkite ripped a page from the machine and screamed incredulously, "What the hell is going on?" Reading on to discover that communist forces had penetrated the sanctity of the American Embassy compound, he cried out the same refrain that people all across America would soon echo: "I thought we were winning this war!"

Cronkite decided that he owed it to the people who watched him every night to find out what, indeed, was going on in Vietnam. It was a risky step, as it meant shedding his mantle of impartiality and sharing his personal impressions about the most important story of the era. But at this moment when the entire nation was utterly confused, Cronkite concluded, it was his duty as the signature figure in the country's oldest and largest network news operation—Edward R. Murrow's network—to clarify the situation for his viewers.

By the third week of the offensive, Cronkite was in Southeast Asia interviewing soldiers and visiting battle sites. Two weeks later, Cronkite—the man polls identified as the most trusted man in America—was poised to broadcast the most influential program of his life. Footage on Report from Vietnam by Walter Cronkite showed him wearing a steel helmet and flak jacket as he walked through the rubble of Saigon.

In the assessment that the whole country was waiting for, Cronkite began, "Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Viet Cong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we." He went on to predict other standoffs in the fighting: "It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."

With no trace of the reassuring smile that had become his trademark, the usually benevolent Cronkite spoke somberly. Every word and subtle change in his facial expression communicated one emotion: grave concern. America's revered uncle was worried about the future of his nation: "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. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic conclusion."

Cronkite then told America exactly where he, personally, stood on the future of the war: "It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out, then, will be to negotiate—not as victor, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could." His final expression that lingered on the screen combined pained acceptance with solid resolve.

The country's most influential newscaster had determined that for the first time in 200 years, the United States was unable to win a foreign war. Rather than continue to sacrifice human lives, he posited, American officials should negotiate a peace settlement and leave Vietnam.

Cronkite's assessment had unprecedented impact. For among the millions of sap American who were glued to their television sets that night, it was Lyndon Johnson. And when the program ended, Johnson said sadly, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost the war." Opinion polls confirmed Johnson's fear. In one of the most dramatic shifts of public opinion in history, within six weeks after the Tet Offensive began, one American in five switched from supporting the Vietnam War to not supporting it. So for the first time in fifteen years of involvement, a majority of Americans opposed the war.

A month after Cronkite's special, Johnson shocked the nation with a double-barreled announcement: He would not run for reelection, and he would begin reducing America's participation in the war. The public clearly agreed with Johnson's decision; his approval rating jumped up sharply, as did support for bringing the GIs home.

Observers have lauded Cronkite's program and Johnson's subsequent decision to downscale the war as a clear example of the news media's mighty power in shaping history. David Halberstam of The New York Times wrote, "Cronkite's reporting changed the balance; it was the first time in American history a war had been declared over by an anchorman." Frank Stanton, president of CBS News, agreed, "It [Cronkite's special] had a lot to do with Lyndon Johnson deciding he wasn't going to run for re-election. He thought that Walter's broadcast had really cut the ground right out from under him."

Because Cronkite's assessment coincided with the news media's portrayal of the Tet Offensive as a Viet Cong victory, the impact of the two events cannot be separated. What is clear, though, is that coverage changed radically. War began being portrayed not merely as Hell but as senseless Hell. Before January 1968, editorial comments by television journalists had run four to one in favor of American government policy; after that point, comments ran two to one against government policy.

Typical of the new tone was Frank McGee's gloomy special report, Vietnam: A New Year, A New War. While showing action film of gunfire, destruction, wounded American soldiers, and the street-execution, the NBC newscaster said gravely, "It is a new war in Vietnam. The enemy now has the initiative." McGee ended with the bleak summation, "The war, as the administration has defined it, is being lost."
The new skepticism infected nightly news stories as well. One way the tone changed was that the networks paid more attention to the human cost of the war. When reporting weekly casualty figures, NBC's David Brinkley commented morosely, "Today in Saigon they announced the casualty figures for the week, and though they came out in the form of numbers, each one of them was a man, most of them quite young, each with hopes he will never realize, each with family and friends who will never see him again."

Contributing to the increasingly negative tone of the coverage were two high-profile revelations related to Vietnam. In November 1969, freelance journalist Seymour Hersh reported the My Lai massacre. During that event, which had occurred a year and a half earlier, American soldiers had destroyed an entire Vietnamese village, killing between 300 and 500 civilians. My Lai dealt a devastating blow to the American military, with Lieutenant William Calley ultimately being convicted, in 1971, of mass murder. The second revelation exposed the shocking realities of what forces had driven American policy toward Vietnam. In June 1971, the New York Times and Washington Post began reporting on secret government documents, known as the Pentagon Papers, that showed American military action often had been guided not by humanitarian concern but by political benefit. Although the government attempted to block publication of the material, the United States Supreme Court sided with the newspapers, saying the material did not endanger national security—it merely embarrassed the government.

As more and more troops were withdrawn from Vietnam and the war ground toward its eventual end, the critical comments by television correspondents became both more frequent and more direct. In 1972, a piece by ABC's Jim Bennett included film of an officer struggling to motivate his reluctant troops to go on a mission by assuring them that the operation was not an offensive one but was necessary to protect other soldiers. Bennett's commentary: "The average American soldier no longer wants any part of this war—even in a defensive posture."

**Anti-War Protesters Fight for the Spotlight**

Protests against United States involvement in Vietnam began as soon as the first troops were sent to Indochina, and their number swelled as the war escalated. Seeing the new medium of television as a potential avenue for changing the social order, the protesters played to the cameras. And because the anti-war movement's colorful marches and vo-ciferous leaders translated into novel images, TV news accommodated and helped the protesters succeed in grabbing the media spotlight—prompting military brass to refer to CBS as the "Communist Broadcasting System."

By no means, however, did securing air time guarantee positive—or even fair—coverage. As a forum for social and political debate, television remained the province of established, establishment, institutions. In the heady days early in the war when American correspondents doubted as government handmaidens, they openly condemned anti-war protesters as traitors—unwashed traitors, at that. Typical was Peter Jennings's choice of words in introducing a 1965 ABC report on one anti-war group. "While Americans fight and die in Vietnam, there are those in this country who sympathize with the Viet Cong." In fact, most such groups opposed the war but did not sympathize with the enemy.

Journalists also took proactive steps to solicit negative reaction to the protesters. The day before the first nationwide anti-draft rallies, CBS aired a piece from Vietnam in which Morley Safer showed a group of GIs a draft-resistance film produced by an anti-war organization and then asked for reaction. Safer said to one soldier, "You're getting shot at. Five of your buddies were killed down the road the other day. How did you feel watching that film?" The leading question netted Safer precisely the kind of emotional outburst he was hoping for, with the young GI saying he wished the protesters in the movie, not his buddies, had been going down that road.

Anti-war coverage changed radically by mid-1968. In addition to the Tet Offensive and Cronkite's pessimistic assessment of the war, both of which made journalists more skeptical of government policies, the anti-war stances of presidential hopefuls Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy moved the protests onto the mainstream political stage. Police brutally clubbing protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—in front of television cameras—also made journalists more sympathetic to the dissidents.

By the mammoth Anti-War Moratorium in the fall of 1969, protesters were no longer treated with total disdain. Cronkite said, "The Moratorium demonstration was historic in scope. Never before had so many demonstrated their hope for peace. The Moratorium was a dignified, responsible protest that appealed to the conscience of the American people."

Six months later when the American people learned that President Richard Nixon had, despite his pledge not to expand the war beyond Vietnam, sent troops into Cambodia, the protests exploded. In May 1970, National Guardsmen opened fire on the Kent State University
campus in Ohio, killing four students and transforming one and a half million more students into angry dissidents. When half the college campuses in the country became protest sites, television news rushed to capture the headlines.

**Television News Helps End a War**

The many journalists and scholars who argue that grisly television images were a major force in turning the American people against the war in Vietnam are on solid ground. The process began in the mid-1960s when the blood of dead and wounded American GIs, as well as Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, first began to flow across the television screen—night after night, week after week, month after month, year after year. As they sat in the comfort of their living rooms, viewers also were repelled by the inhumanity of American soldiers as depicted, for example, in marines casually pulling Zippo cigarette lighters out of their pockets to torch a Vietnamese village and kill innocent civilians.

Then came Tet. Television images of Viet Cong penetrating the American Embassy compound, with bodies of American soldiers lying in the streets, showed the American people that—regardless of what the politicians and military brass had been saying and despite the many years of human suffering America had endured—the United States was not winning the war. And then the American people witnessed, in living color, a South Vietnamese officer—one of the men who was fighting on our side—shoot an untried prisoner in cold blood on a Saigon street. The American people, including Walter Cronkite, realized that perhaps those crowds of long-haired young people who had been protesting the war actually made some sense after all. The hearts and minds of the American public had shifted. People were finally willing to say out loud that they had been supporting a hideous and inhuman war for too many years. And they refused to continue.

For a book whose goal is to document the impact that the news media have had on American history, it should be sufficient to establish that television coverage of the Vietnam War played a key role in bringing that war to an end. When the discussion includes not only the most divisive war in the nation's history but also the role of the news media in covering future armed conflicts, however, that discussion seems incomplete without going the final precocious step of suggesting whether television hastening the end of the Vietnam War was a positive or a negative contribution to history.

Journalists and government officials have both identified the central issue. Nationally syndicated columnist Bob Greene wrote, "The argument can be made that any war—even World War II—shown in the gory, close-up way in which television showed Vietnam is destined to lose the public's support; that once they have seen the videotape, all they will want is out." Dean Rusk, who served as Secretary of State in the 1960s, made the same point, saying that war is the principal obscenity on the face of the Earth, and the impact of Vietnam battle scenes on the ordinary citizen every day was powerful. Rusk said, "One can reflect upon what might have happened in World War II if Dunkirk had been on television and the other side was not using it. So I think we need to do a good deal of thinking about whether or not an armed conflict can be sustained for very long if the worst aspects of it are going to be reflected on television every day. There may have to be certain kinds of censorship."

When television news brought the worst aspects of the Vietnam War into the American living room, it was doing its job—and doing it well. As long as a free press remains fundamental to the democratic form of government, the news media's accurate depiction of reality—no matter how vivid or horrifying that reality may be—is a positive contribution to that country. Television news showed the American people exactly what their military forces were doing halfway around the world, and, armed with that information, the people chose not to continue.

Until the loathsome day that the men and women elected to positions of national leadership in this country succeed—as Rusk suggested may be necessary—in limiting what freedom of the press means, there can be no question that reporting the realities of war is both the duty and the responsibility of the American news media. If the people of the United States are willing to send their young men and women into battle, they also must be willing to acknowledge that death, destruction, and human suffering are byproducts of that decision.