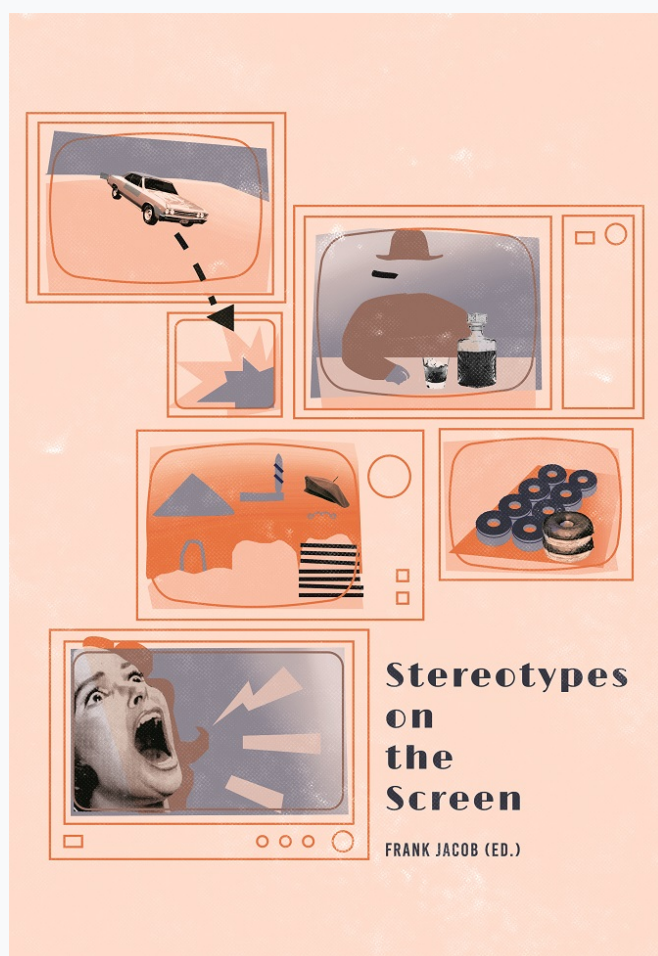


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### “There is More of it in Vietnam” The Role of the Media in an Asymmetric Conflict

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### 3.

## “There is More of it in Vietnam” The Role of the Media in an Asymmetric Conflict

Gloria BÄR

### Introduction

“There was more of it in Vietnam”

This phrase used by American soldiers is descriptive of the terror and the overkill of the Vietnam War. There was more firepower and there were more civil casualties than in previous military conflicts as there were 7 million tons of bombs dropped until 1975 and according to estimations, roughly 627,000 civilians lost their lives during the conflict.<sup>1</sup> However, these are not the only superlatives perceived during this conflict as it is considered the first war with unlimited media coverage. Thus, this war was referred to as “the television war”, “the uncensored war”, and the first “living-room war”.<sup>2</sup> Despite the substance of these attributes, the medial impact on the Vietnam War is unalterable, especially because of innovations, such as the medium TV, which provided the contingency to project the horror of Vietnam in every living room around the world.

The role of the media in the Vietnam War has been discussed on various levels, which is why the state of research focuses on many different details. Those works that offer the

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<sup>1</sup> Bernd Greiner, *Krieg ohne Fronten. Die USA in Vietnam* (Hamburg: Hamburger Ed., 2007), 41-43; Marc Frey, “Das Scheitern des ‘begrenzten Krieges’: Vietnamkrieg und Indochinakonflikt,” *Studies in Contemporary History* 2 (2005), 17, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/1-2005/id=4476>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” *Daedalus* 111 (4) (1982): 157-169, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024822>; Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); Michael Arlen, *Living-room War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).



best overview on the media coverage are Wölfl's *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg* from 2005 and Hallin's *The 'Uncensored War'* (1989), and Wyatt's *Paper Soldiers* (1995), focusing on the American press and how it was influenced by the government's information policy.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there is Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty* (2004), which emphasizes on the American war correspondent and its role in the Vietnam War. Peter Braestrup's *Big Story* (1994) offers the most detailed information on the Tet coverage, by interpreting and depicting the reporting of the American press. His work is of major importance since he was in Vietnam as a correspondent for the *Washington Post* and thus, has the ability to describe many situations in more detail. To portray the Vietnamese media difficulties emerged since the research on this subject seems to have occurred either during the war or shortly afterwards. The most important works to mention are Häggman's *Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung der Kommunisten in Vietnam während des Krieges* (1975), Ngo-Anh's *Vietcong* (1981) as well as Pike's *Vietkong* (1968), which found consensus about the functions and goals of the Vietcong's media coverage.<sup>4</sup> The most remarkable works on the Vietnam War movie are Dittmar's and Michaud's *From Hanoi to*

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Wölfl, *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg*, Krieg der Medien - Medien im Krieg 2 (Münster: Lit. Verlag, 2005); Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"*; Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television reported and interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Novato: Presidio, 1994); Bertil Häggman, "Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung der Kommunisten in Vietnam während des Krieges," *Beiträge zur Konfliktforschung* 3 (1975), 69-97; Cuong Ngo-Anh, *Der Vietcong: Anatomie einer Streitmacht im Guerillakrieg* (München: Bernard & Graefe, 1981); Douglas Pike, *Vietkong: Organisation und Technik des revolutionären Befreiungskampfes* (München: Oldenbourg, 1968).



*Hollywood* (1990) and O’Nan’s *Vietnam Reader* (1998).<sup>5</sup> The newest research does not show a certain trend, however, it does include discussion about the asymmetry in the Vietnam War. As an example Bernd Greiner’s *Krieg ohne Fronten* (2007) and Frey’s *Scheitern des ‘begrenzten Krieges’* (2005) are to mention, both analyzing the conflict in Vietnam within the context of the asymmetric warfare debate. On the background of the role of the media in the Vietnam War Paul Gerhard published two articles, “Die aufscheinende Apokalypse des Krieges in Vietnam und der Vietnam Film als Verarbeitungsform des amerikanischen ‘Traumas’” (2006), concerning the Vietnam movie as a medium to process the events during the conflict, and “Living-Room War” (2009), portraying the importance of the medium TV. Yen Le Espiritu’s essay on “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome” deals similarly with a subsequent view of how the American press handles the loss in Vietnam. Finally, Jacqueline Phinney’s “And that’s the way it is: The media’s role in ending the Vietnam War” (2011) briefly summarizes the impact of the media coverage on the conflict in Indochina.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Dittmar and Michaud Gene, ed., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Stewart O’Nan, ed., *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Greiner, *Krieg ohne Fronten*; Frey, “Das Scheitern des ‘begrenzten Krieges’”; Gerhard Paul, “Die aufscheinende Apokalypse des Krieges in Vietnam und der Vietnam Film als Verarbeitungsform des amerikanischen ‘Traumas,’” In *Medien und Krieg – verbinden, dulden oder rechtfertigen?* Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte und Militärpolitik 8, ed. Lothar Schröter and Frank Schubert (Schkeuditz: Schkeuditzer Buchverlag, 2006), 91-102; Gerhard Paul, “‘Living-room war’: Vom exklusiven Scherlebnis zum ersten Fernsehkrieg der Geschichte,” In *Bilderschlachten: 2000 Jahre Nachrichten aus dem Krieg. Technik – Medien – Kunst*, ed. Hermann Nöring, et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009): 342-49; Yen Le Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘fall of Saigon,’” *American Quarterly* 58 (2) (2006), 329-52, accessed August 29, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068366>; Jacqueline Phinney, “And that’s the way it is: The media’s role in ending the Vietnam War,” *Dalhousie*



It is apparent that the current state of research mostly solely describes the American point of view, due to factors of accessibility and language; it logically provides a wider scope for investigation. Consequently, a unilateral perception of the media's impact on the Vietnam War is provided, which forecloses a farsightedness on the issue. In order to determine the role of the media in the Vietnam War, both the influence of the American and the Vietnamese side will be investigated and discussed until the end of Johnson's presidency. The intention behind this approach is to specify, whether the media played a role in ending this conflict, or just contributed to forming opinions on a war which just could not be won. Therefore, the medial asymmetry, meaning the imbalance which was produced by the coverage, will be portrayed and analyzed.

Hereinafter, the basis of investigation will be established by providing an overview of the most important media used during the Vietnam War. The range includes various forms of mass media, such as the print media, radio and the "new" medium TV. Afterwards, the asymmetry of media coverage will be reflected upon, particularly concerning the negative public perception, which was impelled after the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the conclusions drawn from this perception. Then, the American perception, more precisely Hollywood's perception of this asymmetric conflict will be depicted by analyzing and comparing four major Vietnam War movies produced in different periods of reappraisal. Representative for the first wave of major movies are Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), whereas *Platoon* (1986) directed by Oliver Stone and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) are exemplary for the second one. Thus, the re-processing of



America's lost war will be set forth on the basis of this probe, especially regarding how the Americans and their opponents are portrayed.

### **Media Coverage of the Vietnam War**

As already indicated media coverage during the Vietnam War plays an essential role in the history of war reporting and is influenced by several factors. A censorship by the U.S. government was never officially imposed, since the armed conflict arose out of a situation, in which the Americans were initially sent to South Vietnam to provide assistance. This aspect also entailed a relatively late interest in the American engagement in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the extraordinary novelty of this war was the ability for the press to report nigh on freely about the events that took place.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, both the American and North Vietnamese press were driven by diverse convictions due to the discrepancy of their purpose. Adding to that, the opponent sides differ in quantity, quality, and partiality. The prominence of these aspects will be exemplified in the further, right after the spectrum of media utilized in this confrontation has been examined. Media focused on in the following ranges from the radio, the print media to the new medium TV, and film productions. First of all, the coverage of the Vietnam War in the U.S. did not remain on a consistent level throughout the conflict; therefore, an overall impression of the media used is given. Moreover, one has to distinguish between the "independent" media, meaning not directly controlled by the U.S. government, and the media used by the military to support their propaganda campaigns. Thus, the addressees for this media coverage are military service members and their families, the American and the world public. The major news agencies present in Vietnam were *AP*,

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<sup>7</sup> William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Kristina Isabel Schwarte, *Embedded Journalists: Kriegsberichterstattung im Wandel* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2007), 13.



UPI, Reuters and the *Agence France Press (AFP)*, which researched for a vast amount of newspapers and TV as well as radio stations. Each of them had representatives in Vietnam, although there was only a small press corps on-site at the outset of American intervention.<sup>9</sup> U.S. radio and television in Vietnam were represented by six reporters for the *NBC* and *CBS* – both had around 15.000.000 viewers –, and four for the *ABC* (ca. 1.580.00 viewers). Since the amount of television sets rose to 100 million devices during the Vietnam War, *NBC*, *CBS*, and *ABC* broadcasted 184 hours on the events in Vietnam between 1965 and 1970.<sup>10</sup> The major newspapers on-site which reported about the war were the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, joined by the journals *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News* and *World Report*. Furthermore to mention are the *Minneapolis Papers*, the *Scripps-Howard Group*, the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Star*, the *Detroit News*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Newsday*, each represented by one reporter.<sup>11</sup> However, many newspapers abstained from sending their own correspondent to Vietnam and consequently had to rely on information delivered by the government or other news agencies and reporters. Since it functions as a source of information for the soldiers in Vietnam the military media the *AFVN (Armed Forces Vietnam Network)* has to be mentioned as well. The network comprises radio stations and TV stations to directly report to the active duty service members overseas.<sup>12</sup> The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper accounted for the press media, a newspaper which had its beginnings during the American Civil War.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Paul, “Living-room war,” 345.

<sup>11</sup> Wölfl, *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Randall J. Moody, “The Armed Forces Broadcast News System: Vietnam Version,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 47(1) (1970): 28, accessed September 9, 2015, doi: 10.1177/1077699070 04700104.

<sup>13</sup> *Stars and Stripes*, “About Stars and Stripes,” published December 7, 2015, <http://www.strips.com/customer-service/about-us>.



In contrast to the American press, which is except for the military media not directly controlled by the government, the media are utilized by the Vietcong functions as a projection surface of their ideas. Hence, what is presented in the following has to be assigned to the National Liberation Front (NLF) and their *Liberation Press Agency*, which was founded in February of 1961.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the media are embedded in the propaganda organization of the Vietcong, which was introduced to address three different parties: the population and soldiers of the “liberated areas” and North Vietnam, the population and soldiers of South Vietnam and the world public. Therefore, several newspapers were solely published for the locals in Vietnamese. The most important newspaper was *Nhan Dan* (The People), because it functions as the voice for the Lao Dong Party. In addition, Hanoi released the *Quen Doi Nhan Dhan* (The People’s Army) and *Thoi Noi* (The New Time). Other significant papers are *Cuu Quoc* (National Rescue), the oldest North Vietnamese newspaper, and *Lao Dong* (The Laborer).<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the NLF issued journals for the international audience, to justify and advocate their revolution. The most prominent ones are the quarterly issued journal *Vietnamese Studies*, with an English and a French issue. Whereas the monthly journal *Viet-Nam*, released in English, French, Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese, deals with political and cultural subjects, the *Viet-Nam Youth*, as implied by the name directly addressed a younger audience. The most significant propaganda journal for the North Vietnamese was the *Viet-Nam Courier*; it was issued every two weeks in both English and French.

Due to the fact that the new medium TV was in the ascendant the application was still costly and time-consuming, for that reason it was hardly used by the North Vietnamese to present their opinion. To compensate this issue, radio coverage had a vital role. *Radio Hanoi* or the “Voice of

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<sup>14</sup> Ngo-Anh, *Der Vietcong*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Häggman, “Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung,” 75.



Vietnam” aimed at the people of Vietnam as well as the American soldiers and the global public. Even though the radio started as a clandestine station at the end of the 1950s, its importance grew over the following years.<sup>16</sup> Eleven shortwave and three medium wave transmitters sent the NLF’s broadcasts throughout the world, while using nine different languages and 150 hours of broadcasting time.<sup>17</sup> The English broadcast included a show directly geared to the American soldiers, *Hanoi Hannah*, which played 30 minutes every day.<sup>18</sup> With her paroles she tried to break the morale of the opposing soldiers:

American GIs don’t fight this unjust immoral and illegal war of Johnson’s. Get out of Vietnam now and alive. This is the voice of Vietnam Broadcasting from Hanoi, capitol of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Our program for American GIs can be heard at 1630 hours. (Hanoi Hannah, 12 August 1967)<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the North Vietnamese also produced several movies, mostly documentaries, supporting the propaganda for foreign countries. Up until 1963 already 91 movies were produced and the number grew steadily.<sup>20</sup> After listing the media both opponents employed, it is inevitable to examine how the asymmetry between these two parties emerged. Through differences in motivation, firepower and troop structure, the Vietnam conflict itself showed signs of asymmetry; this imbalance is portrayed by the media in different ways. In order to present the discrepancies evolved, the press coverage on the Tet Offensive serves as an example.

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<sup>16</sup> Willi A. Boelcke, *Die Macht des Radios: Weltpolitik und Auslandsrundfunk 1924-1976* (Darmstadt: Ullstein Verlag, 1977), 548.

<sup>17</sup> Häggman, “Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung,” 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ngo-Anh, *Der Vietcong*, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Don North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah,” Viet Nam Generation Inc. 1991, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://www.psywarrior.com/hannah.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Häggman, “Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung,” 77.



The media coverage during the Vietnam War, especially the American attitude towards it, changes significantly during the conflict, because the political background changed as well. For instance, since the war lasted for a comparatively long time, the media were influenced by three different administrations. Due to the fact that there has not been an official declaration of war, the American government did not have a reason to justify a censorship on the media coverage. This, however, does not imply that the correspondents had the ability to do as they pleased. They had to confer with their editors – and even more importantly had to make sure not to offend the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), led by General William Westmoreland (1914 – 2005), as they had to be approved by them.<sup>21</sup> The process to receive this accreditation was fairly easy. As soon as the correspondents obtained a visa they had to submit a letter to the MACV, in which the newspaper states to take “full responsibilities for [their] professional actions, including financial responsibility and personal conduct as they affect [their] professional action”.<sup>22</sup> Free-lancers had to deliver two letters of different organizations, in order to proof the coverage of costs. After managing these steps the correspondents received an accreditation card, which stated that

[t]he bearer of this card should be accorded full co-operation and assistance ... to assure the successful completion of his mission. Bearer is authorized rations and quarters on a reimbursable basis. Upon presentation of this card, the bearer is entitled to air, water and ground transportation under a priority of 3.<sup>23</sup>

Since the constraints on the media coverage were minor, due to the reasons already mentioned, it could be expected that the American correspondents in Vietnam used

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<sup>21</sup> Wölfl, *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 142.

<sup>23</sup> “MACV,” 1966, Office of Information, Correspondent Accreditation Files, boxes 15-22, RG 334-74-593, Adjutant General’s Office, Department of the Army, Washington National Records Center.



this opportunity to report as freely and truthfully as possible about the events in Vietnam. The only presses impaired by censorship were the newspaper *Stars and Stripes* and the *Armed Forces Vietnam Network*, which primarily addressed the troops.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the press had to sign a commitment to respect a few rules concerning the release of information, whether it is classified or not.<sup>25</sup> For instance, the press cannot publish “future plans, operations, or strikes ..., exact number and type or identification of casualties suffered by friendly units,... [or] tactical specifics, such as altitudes, course, speeds, or angle of attack”.<sup>26</sup>

On the contrary, the North Vietnamese did not need any sort of accreditation out of several reasons. First of all, their media were domestic and controlled by the NLF, consequently there were no freelance reporters or correspondents sent by foreign press agencies, who needed to be accredited. Furthermore, the NLF put emphasis on being considered as a member of the world diplomacy, therefore, they sent representatives to international meetings to act in place of both South and North Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> In 1970, the *Vietnam Courier* stated that the NLF maintained diplomatic relations with 25 countries, such as the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Thereby, they consider themselves superior to the South Vietnamese government and did not have to follow any of the set regulations. Consequently, they did not have to give account of which information they are releasing, or the substance of this information. For instance, casualties,

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<sup>24</sup> Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 547.

<sup>25</sup> Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 159-160.

<sup>26</sup> “Memorandum for Correspondents: Rules Governing Public Release of Military Information in Vietnam,” October 31, 1966, Discreditation File, MACV Office for Information, box 14, RG 334-74-593, Adjutant General’s Office, Department of the Army, Washington National Records Center.

<sup>27</sup> Pike, *Vietkong: Organisation und Technik des revolutionären Befreiungskampfes*, 214.

<sup>28</sup> Häggman, “Propaganda und psychologische Kriegsführung,” 95.



troop movement, and battle outcomes are no longer classified information, but details that can be used to the disfavor of their opponent. As a result, the Vietcong were able to regulate information in order to represent a picture of the Vietnam War that was favorable for them. Moreover, since the NLF's press was already on-site, indigenous, and stronger connected to the Vietnamese people, they had an advantage over the American correspondents, who had to find ways to receive credible and presentable information. Resulting, the NLF has a tactical asset over the U.S., because they had the entire surveillance and control of their media. This aspect will be further illustrated in the media coverage of the Tet Offensive in the following.

Despite the possibility for a relatively open coverage throughout the war, the American media did not take the opportunity to report as freely as they could have and as soon as they should have. Engaged with the cold war and influenced by Kennedy's information policy, most American media forfeited the chance to provide a seamless coverage on the Vietnam War. Those correspondents who did try to deliver a continuous and reliable report were challenged with restricted, wrong or propagandistic information.<sup>29</sup> Relating to this subject, Hallin applies the concept of *objective journalism*, which generally describes a form of coverage that lives of the facts that are presented and that the journalist abstains from subjectivity, personal opinion or judgement.<sup>30</sup> However, the American media has the best requisite to not remain objective in political affairs, as it is independent of the government's influence. Freedom of press is not only rooted in the constitution, but also provided since most media agency is owned by private persons.<sup>31</sup> As already stated, the American press during the Vietnam War did not take up the full extent of their abilities to transport a critical coverage of this military

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<sup>29</sup> Schwarte, *Embedded Journalists*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Hallin, *The "Uncensored War,"* 68.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



conflict. Superficially, a divergence from the objective journalism can be portrayed during the Vietnam War, but investigating this aspect on a deeper scale it becomes apparent that the media rather abstained from forming an actual opposition.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, John F. Kennedy (1917 – 1963), one of the most favored presidents, knew how to use the media in his favor and thus, understood to pull the strings in the background. His speech in front of the American Newspaper Publisher's Association promoted a silent solidarity or secrecy from the journalist, in order to stand united against a common enemy:

The very word "secrecy" is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it ... But I do ask every publisher, every editor, and every newsman in the nation to reexamine his own standards, and to recognize the nature of our country's peril. In time of war, the government and the press have customarily joined in an effort, based largely on self-discipline, to prevent unauthorized disclosures to the enemy. In time of "clear and present danger," the courts have held that even the privileged rights of the First Amendment must yield to the public's need for national security.<sup>33</sup>

After the speech, it seems that the American press was divided into two fractions. Those loyal to the government and the press corps on-site in Vietnam, who perceived what was going on and noticed that the American involvement slowly

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel C. Hallin<sup>2</sup>, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," *The Journal of Politics* 46 (1) 1984). 11, accessed August 8, 2015, doi: 10.2307/2130432.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, John F: "Address 'The President and the Press' Before the American Newspaper Publisher Association, New York City," April 27, 1961. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed September 28, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8093>.



but steadily turned into a war.<sup>34</sup> With the change of government, a change of the attitude towards the media was inevitable, especially since the conflict escalated incessantly under Lyndon B. Johnson. The new President, who hoped to pursue with the same information policy his predecessor used, was not successful with this attempt. Instead of cooperating with the media, he tried to deliver them false information to influence them towards his opinion. Consequently, an increase of the credibility gap, meaning the loss of plausibility, was unavoidable.<sup>35</sup> By trying to direct which information should be released they tried to use the correspondents in Vietnam as a means to an end.<sup>36</sup> With the increasing proliferation of the war while Lyndon B. Johnson (1908 – 1973) was president, the media presence in Vietnam grew from a small corps of correspondent, reaching its peak in 1968 with 464 accredited correspondents in Vietnam, although it has to be taken into account that only 60 of them were considered “fact-finding” and actually delivered information to an American audience.<sup>37</sup>

Contrary to the U.S., the North Vietnamese did not have to face these difficulties, since their information policy has mostly remained the same throughout the Vietnam War and because this policy was formed for a special purpose. With their excessive propaganda attempt, they directly addressed the countries abroad in order to receive support for their revolution, reduce the empathy towards South Vietnam, and to impair the perception of the U.S. involvement in

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<sup>34</sup> Wölfl, *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 411.

<sup>37</sup> “Press List: Correspondents accredited by the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, April 1, 196,” *Big Story: How the American Press and Television reported and interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1966 in Vietnam and Washington*, Vol.2 ed. Peter Braestrup (Colorado: Westview, 1977), 245-54; Braestrup, *Big Story*, 10; Steve Hallock, *The press march to war: Newspapers set the stage for military intervention in Post-World War II America*, *Mediating American History* 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 103-104.



Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> The importance of the propaganda campaign abroad was stressed in an article in *Nhan Dan*: “The more our just struggle wins the support of the people of the world, the better able we will be to demand the implementation of the Geneva Accords, including the most important clause, on reunification.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, following their set idea of media coverage and foreign diplomacy the North Vietnamese were not in the unfavorable situation that they had to adjust to current political events, just like the American press had to. Even beyond that, it was easier for the North Vietnamese to manipulate the media to reach their goals as they are not under public pressure, such as the Americans who had to uphold the impression of a fair, democratic, and just nation.

The coverage of the Tet Offensive introduces a mood swing in the American media coverage and more importantly, it changes the public opinion of the war in Vietnam. This event shows asymmetry in many factors. First of all, the battle itself, as it was a surprise attack by the Vietcong who used the ceasefire over Tet, the celebration of the lunar New Year to attack their enemies.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the overall asymmetry was determined by troop numbers, firepower, and motivation. With its launch in the night of January 31, 1968 a long fight between the Vietcong on one side and the South Vietnamese supported by the Americans on the other side broke out.<sup>41</sup> The Tet Offensive was considered “a ‘last gasp,’ a failed all or nothing bid to win the Vietnam War on the ground, which, tough stymied in the field, succeeded, largely by accident, in

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<sup>38</sup> Rolph Hammond, and Rodger Swearingen, *Communism in Vietnam: A Documentary Study of Theory, Strategy and Operational Practices* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 1967), 130.

<sup>39</sup> Robert K. Brigham, *Guerilla diplomacy: The NLF's foreign relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>40</sup> This cease-fire was agreed upon for several years already, as it is an important holiday for the Vietnamese. A condition the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese used hoping that their enemies were not ready to counter their offensive; Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 180-181.

<sup>41</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 109.



persuading America to throw away the fruits of a major allied victory and start down the road to defeat and humiliation.”<sup>42</sup> The portrayal of Tet in the media, however, showed a different reception, because de-facto a victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese the offensive showed that the two allies are not superior to the Vietcong like the American media and the president lead to believe. This can be directly depicted by looking at the reactions on the Tet Offensive in the news.

To begin with the peculiarities of the Tet Offensive have to be stated, since the conditions the American correspondents had to face, had an impact on the immediate coverage of this battle. Although, the number of accredited correspondents was the highest in 1968, there were not enough researching reporters to cover the surprise attack. Consequently, stories on the alleged occupation of the U.S. embassy in Saigon prevailed during the early reports of the Tet Offensive, as “(1) it was American, (2) it was close at hand, and (3) it was dramatic.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to the lack of personnel to cover the events, other difficulties restricted the possibility of an exact and sudden coverage. Logistically the American press corps was too unstable in order to cope with the circumstances the attack exerted. The communication system disintegrated due to an overload of the phone system, which made it difficult for the correspondents to communicate, to receive, and to confirm information. It was not only hard to exchange news within Vietnam, but also to deliver new stories abroad, due to the outage of air traffic on the outset of the offensive, and the dependence of some news organizations on a dissatisfying wire. Taking all of these factors into account, it becomes obvious that the competing journalists put emphasis on exceling each other to issue new reports. Furthermore, it has to be stated that “[t]he Tet

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<sup>42</sup> Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, introduction to *The Tet Offensive*, by Marc Jason Gilbert, and William Head (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Braestrup, *Big Story*, 118.



Offensive was the war in microcosm – superior American firepower against superior North Vietnamese political will.” Thus, the weeks during the Tet Offensive also mirrored the relationship the American press had with the U.S. government since the conflict started, and especially under President Johnson.<sup>44</sup>

Now, it is time to take a closer look on the newspaper coverage of the Tet Offensive. Through the above described haste, the reporters were rushed to issue a story on the attack, therefore, the first American reports of the offensive showed a distorted image of the actual events. For instance, the fight at the U.S. embassy was presented more dramatically, because *AP* as well as *UPI* simply did not have or use the time to verify the information by the military police that also did not exactly see the fight happening. Since the newspaper reporter in Saigon knew, that the U.S. will soon be informed through the wire services, they felt compelled to make a move. Consequently, most stories were written in a great haste, with sparse information, and published before an official report on the events was released.<sup>45</sup> On the outset of the Tet Offensive, a group of 19 Vietcong attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon that was poorly guarded. By bombing it – the wall was holed – the Vietcong were able to attack the front of the building, and tried to invade. Six hours later, the fight in the compound was over and the Vietcong were dead.<sup>46</sup> The American newspapers reported about the event in Vietnam:

The *New York Times*’ headline on January 30<sup>th</sup> was more than an overemphasis of the events: “Vietcong Attack 7 Cities; Allies Call Off Tet Truce.” Tom Buckley, who wrote the article presented the information rather vaguely as he reported that “Vietcong raiders drove into the center of seven major Vietnamese cities ... burning Government buildings, freeing prisoners from provincial jails and blasting military

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<sup>44</sup> Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 183-184; Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 412.

<sup>45</sup> Braestrup, *Big Story*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



installations and airfields with rockets and mortars.”<sup>47</sup> In the Late City edition of the *New York Times* on January 31<sup>st</sup>, the attack on the U.S. embassy in Saigon was thematized, however, it remained unclear whether the Vietcong invaded the building or just attacked it. Charles Mohr wrote that “[m]any details of the embassy battle were unclear for the time being, even though newsmen ran crouching with military policemen when the grounds were retaken.” This statement comprises both problems of the coverage on the attack of the embassy. The information provided was uncertain, which consequently lead to wondering whether the embassy really had to be “retaken.” Under Buckley’s headline “Foe invades U.S. Saigon embassy raiders wiped out after 6 hours Vietcong widen attack on cities,” he presented the fight involving the embassy. He also indicates that “[e]leven hours later, only fragmentary reports could be obtained of many of the guerrillas’ assaults that turned Saigon, a relatively secure island in a widening sea of war for the past two-and-a-half years, into a battleground.” Therefore, the *New York Times* reporters truthfully admitted that the information provided is doubtful and ambiguous – an aspect neglected by many wire services.<sup>48</sup>

The *Washington Post*’s first story on the occurrences in Vietnam was a rewrite from the wire services titled: “Vietcong seize part of U.S. embassy – Building retaken in fight.” It was maintained that “[p]arts of the building had been held by the enemy for six hours ... [including] part of the first floor of the building itself.” The first reworked edition had the same title but conceded that not the building but the embassy complex was seized. The last edition completed at two o’clock in the morning Eastern Time declared under the title “Vietcong

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Buckley, “Vietcong Attack 7 Cities; Allies Call of Tet Truce,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1968.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Mohr, “Foe Invades U.S. Saigon Embassy,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 1968; Braestrup, *Big Story*, 98.



invade U.S. embassy – assault crushed by GIs” that the “fight raged in the garden of the embassy compound.”<sup>49</sup>

However, it is remarkable that both the *Times* and the *Post* managed to cover the attack on the embassy more precisely than most wire services, although they were slowed down by various factors. Striking about both reports is that Westmoreland’s interview was not taken into account, even though *CBS News* aired it on January 31<sup>st</sup> as a special report. The newspapers coincided on most accounts, such as the dilatoriness of the troops in Saigon, but showed a discrepancy concerning the severity of the attack in Da Nang, or the substance of the information delivered.<sup>50</sup>

This story prevailed on TV, in the press, and the wire services, because “[t]he ‘terrorist-proof’ embassy was ‘symbolic’ ..., the battle was dramatic (Colonel Jacobsen was good copy), and, most important, the newsmen were around to watch the action (or part of it).” Not to forget, the story was spectacular and thus, sold well, an aspect which cannot be neglected when talking about the press. Although they function as a medium of information, newspapers also have their focus on the finances, which influences the nature of media coverage. Considering this aspect, the reports of both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* have a far more patriotic tone, than perceived in the *Post* and the *Times*. Moreover, a Cold War mentality can be observed by looking at their headlines. The *L.A. Times* wrote on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968: “Reds open up. Da Nang, 7 capitals attacked. Allies cancel cease-fire as communists start offensive.”<sup>51</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* asserts: “Recapture U.S. Embassy. GIs land in copters on Saigon roof, wipe out Viet Cong in 6-hour battle. Reds blast hole in wall to gain entry.”<sup>52</sup> Not only the

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<sup>49</sup> “Vietcong Seize Part of the U.S. Embassy,” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 1968; Braestrup, *Big Story*, 103-104.

<sup>50</sup> Braestrup, *Big Story*, 107-108.

<sup>51</sup> AP, “Reds Open Up: Da Nang, 7 Capitals Attacked,” *Los Angeles times*, January 30, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> “Recapture U.S. Embassy,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1968.



terminology is distinctively different from that of the other reports in the *Times* and the *Post*, but also the tone the reporters used. The accounts are not geared towards a neutral and informative coverage, but show a rather sensationalist approach. Both articles talk about communist attacks that were “wiped out” by American GIs. On top of it, the *L.A. Times* provide a picture which shows a marine with the caption “beleaguered Khe Sanh – A lone U.S. marine, center, [and] stands atop sandbags that protect huts at Khe Sanh.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the Tet Offensive and the fight at the embassy are presented in a very drastic way, as a devious attack on the American and South Vietnamese. The fact that the Vietnam War, and especially the U.S. involvement in this conflict degenerated a while ago seems of no importance.

Naturally, the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, which directly wrote for the American GIs, reported the events in a different manner. According to their report on February 1<sup>st</sup> “Viet Cong forces launched heavy attacks against Saigon” and that “Guerillas fought their way into the U.S. Embassy and occupied five floors of it for several hours.” This aspect has already been proven to be false, since the Vietcong were not able to invade the building. Moreover, it is stated that “Helicopters dropped troops onto a roof-top pad to help rout the Communist suicide squad.”<sup>54</sup> In contrast to this, Braestrup describes the same event as follows: “One by one, the sappers died in the yard. After sunrise, MPs rushed the gate, ending the fight, just as a platoon of airborne troops landed by helicopter on the chancery roof to ensure the embassy’s security.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the attack on the embassy was not presented as the six hour battle on the compound that it was, but as a fierce fight, during which the Vietcong invaded the building and had to be chased out by American troops. Two

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<sup>53</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1968.

<sup>54</sup> UPI, “VC Hit Saigon. Red Invade Embassy, Air Base,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Vol.24, No.31, February 1, 1968.

<sup>55</sup> Braestrup, *Big Story*, 75.



days later, the headline of the newspaper reports: “Red Death Toll for 3 days: 10,553.” The matching article proffers that the Vietcong were not able to upscale their impact, which therefore implies, that the Tet Offensive proved to be a failure for Hanoi.<sup>56</sup>

Since the asymmetry of the coverage shall be presented, it is now striking to reflect the NLF’s press coverage on the Tet Offensive. The *Vietnam Courier*, the weekly published newspaper, directly addresses foreign countries and is therefore the best example to portray the desired perception of the offensive outside of Vietnam. Five days after the launch of the attack, the newspaper offered a positive summary of its alleged result by delivering the headline: “The whole of South Viet Nam in effervescence.” Thus, the major successes are that “[i]n 3 days, Saigon, Da Nang, Hue, 60 other urban centers and more than 20 U.S. and puppet bases [were] attacked,” which led to “successive uprisings of the urban and rural populations” and to the fact that “[t]he People’s Forces control many cities and towns including Hue, Nha Trang, Da Lat, Ben Tre and Saigon main wards.”<sup>57</sup> In their next issue, these achievements were numbered, stating that “50,000 Enemies, including 10,000 Yankees, killed, wounded or captured” and “200,000 Soldiers of [the] puppet army routed.”<sup>58</sup> It is needless to say that those results are utopian, since the Americans and the South Vietnamese technically sustained fewer casualties. Hammond and Swearingen, however, referred to the reason why the NLF’s information policy still had an influence on the notion of the Tet Offensive: “North Vietnam pursues its course with a rigidly austere determination born of confidence in its excellent political organization, in the fighting qualities of its army, and in the ‘immutable’ laws of history and of

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<sup>56</sup> UPI, “Red Death Toll for 3 Days: 10,553,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Vol.24, No.33, February 3, 1968.

<sup>57</sup> *Vietnam Courier*, No.149, February 5, 1968.

<sup>58</sup> *Vietnam Courier*, No.150, February 10, 1968.



revolutionary war, buoyed by hope that disunity and frustration in the United States will undermine the American effort.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the NLF’s diplomatic groundwork laid the basis for a successful completion of the offensive, since it did not only weaken the South Vietnamese government but also guaranteed that both Saigon and the U.S. troops were not primed for the attack.<sup>60</sup>

Concluding, what does the snapshot of the Tet coverage comprise and effect and moreover, how do these findings compare to the actual outcome of the offensive? The Vietcong’s charge on South Vietnam and the Americans and the consequent press coverage on the events contributed to a sustainable change on the perception of the war throughout the U.S. and the world. Therefore, a change of mood towards the war was inevitable, which especially derived from the inability of the U.S. government to generate a euphoric sentiment about the involvement in Vietnam. One reason for this development is the new medium TV and the inexperience with its effects. Considering that from 1965 until 1970 out of 2,300 reports only 76 actual showed combat operations, and thus the depiction of the American soldiers were rather heroic and Hollywood-like, it is not surprising that the coverage of the Tet Offensive lead to a confusion in the USA. Hanoi’s attack clearly showed the shocking reality of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, that it was indeed a war.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the Vietcong’s charge is remembered as the starting point of battered morale among the American citizens and it does reveal the importance of the media. According to David Halberstam, “[i]t was the first time in history a war had been declared over by an anchorman,” hinting at significance of Cronkite’s report on the events in Vietnam. Although, the offensive is portrayed as a “disastrous turn of events,” the

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<sup>59</sup> Hammond and Swearingen, *Communism in Vietnam*, 185.

<sup>60</sup> Brigham, *Guerilla diplomacy*, 74.

<sup>61</sup> Mira Beham, *Kriegstromeeln: Medien, Krieg und Politik* (München: Dtv, 1996), 86-89.



influence on America's public opinion is more intricate and not as sweeping.<sup>62</sup> One can rather assess the attack's aftermath as the inception for the already formed opposition to raise their voice. Lastly, whether the Tet Offensive was a victory or a loss for the U.S. was not the most important issue, because regardless of the result the war was simply not under control. Moreover, the palm they bore was a pyrrhic victory, the price they paid for the involvement in Vietnam was simply too high.<sup>63</sup>

In a secret North Vietnam politburo cable the effects the Vietcong wanted and did achieve with their information policy are clearly named:

As a result of our massive victories in all areas, military, political, and diplomatic, especially the victories we won in the general offensive and uprisings during the Tet Lunar New Year, the situation on the battlefield in South Vietnam and the situation in the U.S. and throughout the world is developing in directions that are very favorable to us and very unfavorable for the enemy. Because of major political, social, and economic problems, because of the ferocious struggles going on within American leadership circles, especially during the primary elections in the U.S., and because of powerful pressure from world public opinion and from U.S. public opinion, Johnson has been forced to "restrict the bombing" of North Vietnam.<sup>64</sup>

With the severity of the Tet Offensive being an unpleased surprise, both the press coverage and the prevalent political and military shortcomings lead to an establishment of an Anti-war movement in the USA. Although, the media alone cannot be faulted for the rejection of Johnson's policy, it had a large share by contributing to the widening of the credibility gap.

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<sup>62</sup> Hallin, *The "Uncensored War,"* 168.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 170-173.

<sup>64</sup> "Secret North Vietnam Politburo Cable," April 03, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Party Central Committee, Hanoi. Translated for CWIHP by Merle Pribbenow, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113977>.



Therefore, public opinion resulted to be the “essential domino” which eventuated in the downfall of the Johnson administration and ultimately the loss of support for the Vietnam War itself.<sup>65</sup>

### **From Vietnam to Hollywood**

In the following part of the chapter, the perception of the Vietnam War in the American cinema will be discussed by looking at four highly representative war films: *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*. Movies and war have a strong and complex connection. Therefore, movies function as a medial sounding board, and with analyzing them, one cannot only gain insight on the actuality of an historic event, but also receive an impression of the political and temporal context the movie is embedded in.<sup>66</sup> The genre these movies are assigned to had its beginnings in 1915 with the release of the *Birth of a Nation*, a movie which unifies themes and motifs that are still copied and reused today, such as marching armies, horrifying pictures of casualties, and the creation of an heroic protagonist.<sup>67</sup> By adding *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) as an example of the subsequent movies, it becomes apparent that war films can either depict a pro- or an anti-war position, or alternatively both at the same time. This movie delivers a highly pacifistic message to the audience, since it revolves around the futility of the positional warfare in the First World War. The images depicted neither reflect a pride to serve for one's country, nor are they glorious or heroic. In the course of time the genre developed steadily towards a vehicle to mirror criticism, as well as approval of past or present political events. In contrast to the Second World War in which the Americans functioned as the “savior” of Europe, contributing

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<sup>65</sup> Wölfl, *Kriegsberichterstattung im Vietnamkrieg*, 112-113.

<sup>66</sup> Waltraud >Wara< Wende, *Filme, die Geschichte(n) erzählen: Filmanalyse als Medienkulturanalyse* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 112.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Auster and Quart Leonard, *How the war was remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 2.



tremendously to defeat the Nazi regime, the public perception of the American intervention in Vietnam was rather negative. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Keller remarked, “Hollywood military movies of the seventies and eighties need to be read, first, in the context of the ‘post-Vietnam syndrome,’ which was characterized by the desire of withdrawal from ‘foreign involvement’ after the debacle in Vietnam and epitomized by the Clark Amendment forbidding intervention in Angola.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, by scrutinizing the movies in the following it can be ascertained whether Hollywood remained with this trend or whether a more critical approach is used in order to depict the public American opinion and the digestion of this doubtful operation.

Even though the audiovisual media improved throughout the Vietnam War, it is remarkable that Hollywood completely discounted productions on this subject until 1973 when *The Green Berets* was released. However, this movie did not contain any sort of criticism it solely vindicates the U.S. intervention. Therefore, the overall impression is that “[t]he American soldiers are tough, gutsy, and heroic, the South Vietnamese incompetents and victims, the Communists vicious, good only for cannon fodder.”<sup>69</sup> It seems that this theme prevailed and that Hollywood did not dare to release a movie which criticizes it directly as it still lasted. *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* both show a rather heroic depiction of the American troops in combat and contrasting an evil and vicious one of the Vietcong as the stereotypic enemy. Despite of this portrayal, the horror of Vietnam prevails as a constant companion.

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, “From *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*,” In *Movies and American Society*, ed. Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 282; Yen Le Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome,” 331.

<sup>69</sup> Stewart O’Nan, “First Wave of Major Films,” In *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War*, ed. Stewart O’Nan (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 259.



*The Deer Hunter* emerged as the first movie which was directly related to the Vietnam War, although the production of *Apocalypse Now* had already started before. With its tripartite structure, Cimino's work shows the journey of a group of three friends who leave from their hometown Clairton in Pennsylvania to fight in the Vietnam War and their struggle after ending their duty there. Michael (Robert de Niro), Nick (Christopher Walkin), and Steven (John Savage) and their community are of Eastern European origin, which is especially striking considering the cold war background of the intervention in Vietnam. Nevertheless, those three – and above all Michael – represent the stereotypic American soldier. By dividing the story into three parts, the audience has the possibility to perceive the direct effect of the war on a small group who already had their problems before joining the military. The other movies presented do not share this back-story although they involve a collective as well. Their members were foregathered not by friendship but through the brotherhood of the military. Instead of just showing a glance of the community's life, the events are described very detailed, such as Steven's wedding and the deer hunt the group undertakes.<sup>70</sup> The sudden transition from Clairton to Vietnam appears to be as rapidly and dramatically as the rupture the soldiers must have experienced as they found themselves fighting in the war: napalm, flamethrowers, and death set the tone of the first images of the war and the impression persists as the three friends, who recently reunited, are held captive by the Vietcong. The following scenes expose the most horrific moments of this movie, since it does not concentrate on the guerilla war and overwhelming American firepower, but on the personal drama of this group. The Vietcong force their prisoners to play Russian roulette against each other, once again a portrayal of the malicious enemy, who is entertained by their ailing captives. Nick accomplishes to liberate the friends, thereupon the group is separated, and each member is

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<sup>70</sup> O'Nan, "First Wave of Major Films," 262.



left to his own fate. Consequently, *The Deer Hunter* shows the long term impact on veterans by exemplifying it on Michael, who survived the war without any visible injuries, but still struggles to integrate into his old community, Nick, who suffered from PTSD, remained in Vietnam and continued to risk his life playing Russian roulette, and at last Steven, who lost his legs in the war and was not willing to return to his wife. In contrast to the other movies, Cimino's work mainly concentrates on the emotional effect of the war rather than the military importance, an aspect also shared by *Apocalypse Now* discussed in the following.

Therefore, it appears that Vietnam merely functions as a mirror which reflects more serious obscurities than just political ones. "The veteran protagonist struggles to interpret and understand what Vietnam has come to represent, struggles to interpret its mystery, and America perhaps more than Vietnam is the landscape against which the cost of his failure of interpretation indelibly etched."<sup>71</sup> The particularity about *The Deer Hunter* is especially the representation of the veteran's strain. As Michael returns to his home town without knowing what happened to his friends, he is not even willing to go to his own homecoming party. The only person he opens up to is Linda (Meryl Streep), Nick's girlfriend, who he already fancied before they left to go to Vietnam. Through talking to her, he finds out that Nick went AWOL.<sup>72</sup> As Linda asks him about his wounds, he replies: "It was nothin'. Just the usual complications,"<sup>73</sup> and he tries to cover the fact that the war also left marks on him. This aspect is stressed later on when he states: "Linda, I just want to say how sorry I am about Nick. And how, I know how much you loved him and

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<sup>71</sup> Kevin Bowen, "'Strange Hells': Hollywood on Search of America's Lost War," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood. The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Michaud Gene (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 231.

<sup>72</sup> Military acronym: absent without official leave.

<sup>73</sup> Barry Spikings, *The Deer Hunter*. Film. Directed by Michael Cimino. Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 1978.



... I know that it'll never be the same."<sup>74</sup> Not only does this show the impact Vietnam had on the soldiers, but also the mental overload that the families at home had to deal with. This is most of all noticeable looking at Steven's family. He returned from the war as an amputee, so he decides to stay in a veteran's hospital, leaving his depressed wife in town because he thought he does not fit in anymore.

Not only the family relations change, but also the dynamics within the group of friends. For instance, the deer hunt the group participates in takes on more drastic traits, as the group reunites for this activity, after Michael comes home. What is striking is that Michael, who beforehand was the best shooter of the group, is now not able to shoot the deer having lived through the horror of Vietnam. The situation escalates when Stan (John Cazale) points his gun at the friends, whereupon Michael, who remembers the Russian roulette tragedy during their captivity, loses his mind. He empties the cylinder except for one round, spins it before engaging it, holds the gun to Stan's temple and pulls the trigger. However, not only Michael suffers from this condition. Nick, who does not even return to the U.S., is driven into madness and is found playing Russian roulette in the jungle of Vietnam, while Saigon is falling. The tragic end of this movie was Nick's death during the game of Russian roulette, he was challenged to by Michael in order to convince him to come back home.

Finally, can *The Deer Hunter* be evaluated as a prowar or an anti-war movie? Cimino's film combines both positions to some extent. As shown, the movie clearly criticizes the handling of the veteran situation, the psychological strain and horror of war. Moreover, to be representative for a prowar movie, the depiction of the war is not significant enough, since combat situations are reduced to a minimum. As the movie was released, it was considered as pro-war and idealistic for the American hero who returns home after successfully saving his friends' life. In fact, Cimino's criticism is more

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



profound, above all looking at the home the three friends are supposed to return to. The pathetic picture of the American home front that is determined by alcoholism, violence towards women, broken relationships, and feigned piety is presented with all its harshness.<sup>75</sup>

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* shares certain features with *The Deer Hunter*, especially concerning the emotional impact of war. Nevertheless, it also sets a major focus on the military aspect of this war. Based on Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, it remained as one of the most significant movies on the Vietnam War. The picture painted prods to an ambiguity which runs through the movie like a common thread. "For instance, the title, *Apocalypse Now*, seems to emphasize the destructive, prowar side of the film, derived as it was from the antiwar slogan 'Peace Now!' Yet it is also possible that the title is an ironic warning of the ultimate dangers of extended conflict."<sup>76</sup> The movie lives of exaggeration, violence, and insanity, but at the same time it portrays mental illness, weakness, and fear. Through this ambiguous depiction, one constantly wonders about the message the film conveys, and whether it is pro- or anti-war. The opening sequence sets the tone for this movie: Napalm bombs are dropping on the Vietnamese jungle while the Doors' song "The End" is playing. The picture changes and shows Cpt. Benjamin L. Willard (Martin Sheen) in his hotel room in Saigon reflecting upon the damages the war had on his life:

Saigon. Shit. I'm still only in Saigon. Every time, I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after my first tour, it was worse. I'd wake up, and there'd be nothing. I hardly said a word to my wife, until I said yes to a

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<sup>75</sup> Burkhard Röwekamp, *Antikriegsfilm: Zur Ästhetik, Geschichte und Theorie einer filmhistorischen Praxis* (München: Edition Text + Kritik, 2011), 145.

<sup>76</sup> Frank P. Tomasulo, "The politics of ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as prowar and antiwar film," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood. The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Michael Gene (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 149.



divorce. When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I'm here a week now ... waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room, I get weaker.<sup>77</sup>

As soldiers pick him up for the mission he is waiting for they find him disoriented, drunk, and covered in blood, just a hint of the insanity to expect. Willard is sent on a mission to terminate Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a highly decorated Colonel, who apparently lost track of his command and is about to be arrested for murder. While following the Captain on his operation, Coppola leads the audience deeper into the jungle and the horror of Vietnam. As Willard begins his trip, he receives help from the U.S. navy and the air cavalry. Thus, the immense firepower of the U.S. military is portrayed with helicopters, tanks, boats, and ocean tanks; there is nothing the superpower does not have. Coppola even criticizes the media itself by showing a camera team<sup>78</sup> which tells the soldiers “keep moving don’t look at the camera. Just go by like you’re fighting. It’s for television. Just go through,” and thereby showing that the media representatives are trying to provide impressive pictures.<sup>79</sup> Seizing on the common theme, Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) is introduced, a Lieutenant Colonel who helps to bring Willard downriver. He is leading the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division and is the perfect example for both intrepidity and madness. For instance, he throws play cards with the company emblem on the dead Vietnamese bodies. On asking what he is doing, the Lieutenant answers: “Death cards. Lets Charlie know who did this.”<sup>80</sup> Although he clearly opposes himself to the enemy by this action he also shows appreciation of their will to combat: “Any man

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<sup>77</sup> Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*. Film. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Beverly Hills: United Artists, 1979.

<sup>78</sup> Coppola himself has a cameo appearance, playing the correspondent who instructs the soldiers.

<sup>79</sup> *Apocalypse Now*, 1979.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



brave enough to fight with his guts hanging out can drink from my canteen any day.”<sup>81</sup> The absurdity of the situation is enhanced when Kilgore spotted that one member of the boat crew, who brought Willard to the Lieutenant, is a famous surfer. Consequently, he decides to clear a beach located in Charlie territory to surf there. To greet their opponent appropriately they launch a psywar operation by blasting Wagner’s *Valkyrie* out of the helicopter’s loudspeaker system. On arrival, the situation is not as easily manageable as Kilgore presented it and even though they were peppered by the VC he insists on surfing there. This clearly shows war fever at its best and the blunted effect the war has on the soldiers there. Underlined by Kilgore’s statement “Do you smell that? ... Napalm, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”<sup>82</sup> After escaping from the preliminary stage of the apocalypse, their trip leads them to the Do Lung Bridge where a new level of anarchy is illustrated.<sup>83</sup> Nobody knows who is in command, the soldiers swim towards the boat hoping they can go home, and rock music sounds through the trenches. It seems as if the crew reached the precursor of the hell they still have to expect. Therefore, the movie reaches its climax when Willard and the few members left of his crew find Kurtz. They are greeted by a benighted photojournalist (Dennis Hopper), who seems to have fallen under Kurtz’s spell, just like the Russian in the *Heart of Darkness*. Heads on pikes, bodies hanging from the trees, and obsequious natives introduce the audience to Kurtz’s “kingdom.” He himself carries an ambiguity: On the one hand he is representative for the ultimate madness produced by the war; on the other hand Kurtz is seemingly the only one who figured it all out. Just as the photojournalist states: “The man is clear in his mind,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Röwekamp, *Antikriegsfilm*, 154.



but his soul is mad.”<sup>84</sup> The movie ends with The Door’s song “The End,” just like it has started, and seeing Willard who fulfills his mission by slaughtering Kurtz with a machete, hearing the word “the horror” echoing until it fades out.

Ultimately, what message does Coppola’s masterpiece convey and what position does it take? The director explains:

The story is metaphorical: Willard’s Journey up the river is also a journey into himself, and the strange and savage men he finds at the end is also an aspect of himself. Clearly, although the film is certainly ‘anti-war,’ its focus is not on recent politics. The intention is to make a film that is of much broader scope: and provide the audience with an exhilarated [sic!] journey into the nature of men, and his relationship to the Creation. It is the hope of the film-makers to tell his story using the unique imagery of the recent Vietnamese War; its helicopters, disposable weaponry; as well as the Rock music, the drugs and psychedelic sensibilities.<sup>85</sup>

Hence, Coppola answers the question and states that *Apocalypse Now* is meant to be anti-war. However, whether or not the perception of this movie points towards the same conclusion is a matter of interpretation. Furthermore, he disassociates himself from the political background of the war and, just as *The Deer Hunter*, uses Vietnam as expedient. Regardless of this usage, the question has to be raised if it is possible to produce a war movie without considering its political aspects as well.

After creating *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, Hollywood returns to its conservative form, by presenting the veteran in a less complex way and consequently a more simple depiction of the war. The years between the release of the movies

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<sup>84</sup> *Apocalypse Now*, 1979.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Cowie, *The Apocalypse Now Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 35-36.



mentioned and Stone's and Kubrick's works were traversed by films like *Rambo* (1982) and "prisoner-of-war adventure film[s]," until *Platoon* launched in 1986.<sup>86</sup>

The distinctiveness of *Platoon* is definitely the realistic depiction of the war, clearly a consequence of the time Stone served in the Vietnam War for the Army.<sup>87</sup> Right from the beginning on, the movie presents a highly critical view of the war, in contrast to the movies discussed earlier, there is no doubt that *Platoon* is an anti-war movie. The first scene is crucial for the impression prevailed throughout the whole film. The newcomers arrive in Vietnam where they are "welcomed" by tired, exhausted, and desperate soldiers who are sent home after their one year tour in Vietnam and quantities of body bags lined up. The audience follows Chris (Charlie Sheen), after he was assigned to his platoon into the Vietnamese jungle where he finds himself in his own personal hell. Not only is the constant Vietcong threat depicted, but also the dire conditions in Vietnam. There are dangerous animals, insects, mud, tropical rain and heat. On top of this, nobody in the platoon cares to integrate the newcomers, an indifference that can be fatal. Chris states: "It's scary cos nobody tells me how to do anything, cos I'm new. Nobody cares about new guys. They don't even wanna know your name. A new guy's life isn't worth as much cos he hasn't put his time in yet."<sup>88</sup> The movie combines many aspects of the war's reality, which are not incorporated as intensively in the two earlier movies. One would be the consumption of drugs although they are in combat situation; it seems as if the soldiers could not handle the war without them. Concerning the military structure, the criticism on the newcomer situation has already been given, however, Stone also criticizes the

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<sup>86</sup> Stewart O'Nan, "Second Wave of Major Films," In *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War*, ed.

Stewart O'Nan (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 441.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>88</sup> Arnold Kopelson, *Platoon*. Film. Directed by Oliver Stone. Los Angeles. Orion Pictures, 1986.



inconsistency of the chain of command. Lt. Wolfe (Mark Moses) who officially leads the platoon, which Chris is assigned to, is preempted by Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe) whose orders are actually obeyed. This causes a condition which aggravates into a rivalry between these two leaders as they have different attitudes on proceeding with their mission. Especially striking about Stone's work is that the war crimes committed by Americans play a vital role in his depiction of the Vietnam War. He does not sugarcoat anything in his film but presents the madness and horror of the war like many soldiers have experienced it. Watching the village massacre scene, inevitably pictures of the My Lai Massacre cross one's mind, and they clearly show the prevalent escalation. A proliferation takes place once it doesn't matter anymore who is a Vietcong and who is a civilian, consequently violence gets out of hand when Bunny (Kevin Dillon) shouts out: "Holy Shit, you've seen that fucking head come apart? ... Let's do the whole fucking village!"<sup>89</sup> Once again there is an uncertainty about who is in command, since the lieutenant just observes the situation but doesn't interrupt Sgt. Barnes who even threatens to kill a little girl. Stone does not strive to create a heroic protagonist, but rather describes the soldiers' attempt to survive and cope with the situation.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he tries to convey a message throughout the whole movie: "In the end, good wins out over evil." Chris and his stoner buddies survive, Barnes is dead and his copycat O'Neill (John C. McGinley) remains in the jungle, leading a second platoon.<sup>91</sup> Chris' monologue flying out of the battle zone underlines this idea:

I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there the rest of my days, as I'm sure Elias will be, fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called the possession of my soul. There are times I've felt

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<sup>89</sup> *Platoon*, 1986.

<sup>90</sup> Auster and Leonard, *How the war was remembered*, 137.

<sup>91</sup> O'Nan, "Second Wave of Major Films," 447.



like a child born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us, who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness, and meaning, to this life.<sup>92</sup>

Oliver Stone's *Platoon* differs from *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Full Metal Jacket*, because there is no ambiguity, the good remain good and the evil remain evil. Furthermore, with Chris's last statement the director conveys his criticism of the Vietnam War. He does not consider the war pointless, but vital to America's past.<sup>93</sup> Stone argues that the war will always be present in American hearts and minds, particularly for the veterans. The last part directly concerns those who survived the war and, thus, urges the Vietnam War veterans to "try with what's left of [their] lives to find goodness, and meaning to this life".<sup>94</sup>

To complete Hollywood's depiction of the Vietnam War, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* will be analyzed. Although, it was issued just a year after Stone's *Platoon*, it imparts new aspects of the Hollywood war movie. The particularity is that in contrast to the other movies there is a bipartite structure, which shows the journey of a group who meets at basic training and reunites in Vietnam. The first section which evolves around the basic training of these young recruits critically implies the importance of the U.S. war machinery.<sup>95</sup> The recruits have to be assimilated to form one unit; personal peculiarities and weakness have no place in the military. They are taken out of their normal lives, receive new names, and have to

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<sup>92</sup> *Platoon*, 1986.

<sup>93</sup> Röwekamp, *Antikriegsfilm*, 173.

<sup>94</sup> *Platoon*, 1986.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood. The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. by Linda Dittmar and Michaud Gene (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 29.



comply with the drill instructor Gunnery Sergeant Hartman's (R. Lee Ermy) measures. Consequently, everyone who protrudes, such as Private Leonard 'Gomer Pyle' Lawrence (Vincent D'Onofrio), has to be homogenized to fit the community. Private J.T. 'Joker' Davis (Matthew Modine) is instructed to help Pyle to do better in his training, but even Joker cannot accept that he is constantly getting the group in trouble. Therefore, the other privates exact their revenge on Pyle with a blanket party.<sup>96</sup> However, through the constant animosity by the other privates and the drill sergeant he seems to be slipping, a process culminating in his suicide and the murder of the drill instructor the night he found out he successfully finished basic training. In the second section of the movie, the concept of the perfect American soldier generated by the unsympathetic drill sergeant is dismantled starting with a drastic change of setting, when we see Joker who's working as a combat correspondent for the *Stars and Stripes* magazine in Saigon.<sup>97</sup> Hence, Kubrick does not only offer his impression of the Vietnam War, but also his opinion on the media coverage of this conflict. For instance the meeting of the *Stars and Stripes* correspondents comprises many different aspects. When Joker points out that there might happen something during the Tet ceasefire, which clearly hints at the failure of American intelligence service to predict the Tet Offensive. Furthermore, Kubrick addresses censorship and terminology by integrating a directive which states that "search and destroy" should now be replaced with "sweep and clear" to make it more catchy.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Joker's last story was not fascinating enough and he is told to rewrite

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<sup>96</sup> Especially in the military a community punishment where the victim is fixed to his bed and the other members of the group hit him with flails made out of, e.g. soap bar in a towel.

<sup>97</sup> Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 29.

<sup>98</sup> Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*. Film. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Burbank: Warner Bros., 1987.



it: "Winning of hearts and minds. ... That's why God passed the law of probability. Rewrite it with a happy ending, say, one kill. A sapper or an officer ... Grunts<sup>99</sup> like reading about dead officers." On Joker's question why not a general Lt. Lockhart (John Terry) responds he gets the following response: "You'd like your guys to read the paper and feel bad? In case you didn't know, this is not a popular war. Our job is to report the news that the 'why-are-we-here' civilian newsman ignore." Kubrick's attitude towards both the military and civilian media coverage is obvious and once more enhanced by the label of the banner on the wall of the newsroom: "First to go, last to know – we will defend to death our right to be misinformed".<sup>100</sup> In the following, Joker's prediction of the Tet Offensive proves to be true, therefore, he is sent to report from a military point of view, to reverse the public opinion on the Vietcong's attack. On his arrival, the audience observes the effect of the offensive, mass graves, an enormous body count, and plenty of reporters and photographers on-site. Joker is sent to Phu Bai, where he retrieves his comrade 'Cowboy,' Sgt. Robert Evans (Arliss Howard) from basic training. Having portrayed the war from a distance, by following Joker's journey, the audience now is confronted with the sad and shocking reality of war.

Once again, the media criticism becomes apparent when Cowboy introduces Joker to his squad: "This is my bro, Joker, from the island. They're from *Stars and Stripes*. You'll be famous," topped with one of the soldiers posing for a picture next to a dead Vietnamese.<sup>101</sup> Pursuing this image TV interviews are held, in order for the soldiers to present their opinion on the war and the need of the American intervention. The soldiers are treated like TV stars and the fact that one member of their squad just died

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<sup>99</sup> Coll. for infantry.

<sup>100</sup> *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



seems to be irrelevant. As the group moves on through Hué, they have to suffer from many casualties as they are attacked by a sniper. As the Lusthog squad also loses Cowboy, they start a counter attack to terminate their enemy, who turns out to be a little girl. While the rest of the squad hesitates on how to proceed, Joker decides to end her suffering. The film ends with the troop heading out on patrol, while singing the Mickey Mouse theme, and Joker's voice over stating: "I am so happy that I am alive ... in one piece, and short. I'm in a world of shit, yes. But I am alive. And I am not afraid."<sup>102</sup>

*Full Metal Jacket* conveys a criticism on the war, the military, and the media coverage of the Vietnam War. Just like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, it plays with a constant ambiguity, which is embodied by Joker, the war correspondent who wears a piece sign on his uniform and has "born to kill" written on his helmet. Moreover, "[w]here Platoon affirms the old romantic idea of war as a crucible that builds men, Kubrick seems to be saying – through Pyle and then Joker and the men of the Lusthog squad – that Vietnam, or simply the war, takes these boys not from innocence to experience but to numbness or madness."<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, there is to mention that since *Full Metal Jacket* was released 12 years after the war has ended, one would expect an incorporation of the antiwar movement, which is neglected in this movie, plainly through its absence.<sup>104</sup>

The Vietnam War movie, no matter in which facet it appears, fulfills an important function for the American society. It was both a way of historical revision and a way to close with the past. Consequently, by using film as a medium a definatory power is retrieved over a war, which

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> O'Nan, "Second Wave of Major Films," 453.

<sup>104</sup> Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 34.



could not be won and was lost after all.<sup>105</sup> The four movies presented seemingly differ from this impression, since they involve several themes close to reality. Those movies are intended to play with exaggeration, overstatement and ambiguity, to address their criticism and to leave room for interpretation and discussion.

## Conclusion

Resuming, what is the role of the media in the Vietnam War? Clearly, the opinions on this question are diverted, however, the overall consensus comprises that, although the media had an influence on the public opinion of the Americans and the people worldwide, it cannot be blamed for ending the Vietnam War. The surrender of the Americans in Vietnam was affected by many factors on top of the media coverage, such as the lack of knowledge of the Vietcong's guerilla techniques, the landscape, and the culture.

Furthermore, the North Vietnamese did not win the war being superior fighters, but being more motivated. The Vietnam War was a prime example that one must be convinced of the cause – it must be worth fighting for. This motivation and thereby the public support of the involvement in Vietnam could not be upheld after events, such as the Tet Offensive or the massacre of My Lai. It is needless to say that after all through the media coverage, and the new medium TV, these pictures found their way into the living rooms worldwide. However, even the TV coverage mostly remained too mellow to achieve a drastic change of opinion. In addition to that, the broadcasted reports initially distorted the image of the war, by presenting only little combat actions and by depicting the American GIs rather as Hollywood actors than soldier. The perception of the war through the TV reports, in fact covered the interests of the politicians to portray the war in a cautious manner.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Paul, "Die aufscheinende Apokalypse des Krieges in Vietnam," 100.

<sup>106</sup> Beham, *Kriegstrommeln*, 86-89.



Nevertheless, the role of the media is both exceptional and unique as depicted by Jacqueline Phinney, who states that “[t]he Vietnam War was a turning point in the management of war reports” and that “media has the power to move people.”<sup>107</sup> It appears that at the end of the Vietnam War a scapegoat had to be found to explain and justify the defeat the U.S. suffered from, as it is the first war in American history that was lost live on TV. “Whether thought of as savior or villain, the press has enjoyed a virtually unanimous reputation as a powerful actor whose adversarial relationship to the United States government and military played a large part in ending American involvement in the war.”<sup>108</sup>

Looking at the way the movies that were scrutinized depicted the Vietnam War, a similar picture is painted. The perception of the conflict in Indochina in the movies is equally diverse than on the role of the media during the Vietnam War. However, it was generally agreed that the conflict exceeded most previous wars in the cruelty, the futility, and the amount of casualties. Although, every movie depicts the horror of Vietnam differently, their overall objective seems to be to come to terms with the loss of the Vietnam War and to erode the blemish it left in its wake.

Finally, the saying that “there was more of it in Vietnam” proved to be true and led to a new assessment on the handling of the war reporting in the future. Consequently, the new mantra of the American information and foreign policy emerged to be: “No more Vietnams,”<sup>109</sup> to prevent a repetition of America’s nightmare.

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<sup>107</sup> Phinney, “And that’s the way it is: The media’s role in ending the Vietnam War,” 2.

<sup>108</sup> Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 216.

<sup>109</sup> Title of Nixon’s analysis of the Vietnam War.