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Vietnam War

Fake News On a True War Story

“Fake News” has been a term popularized in the current political climate, particularly by United States president Donald Trump. Its common purpose has been to accuse news sources such as *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and more of spreading false information about his presidency, and encouraging his followers to partake in these suspicions. Of note, fake news is not a concept started by Trump, and it has been used and thought of much differently depending on the time and perspective of those using the term. Interviewees Nguyễn Tường Thuộc and Tom Buckley, for example, used the term “fake news” several times to describe how the U.S. media portrayed the South Vietnamese army, American troops, and the Vietnam war in general. The opposition and skewed information towards the American and South Vietnamese side stem from the anti-war movement, which controlled the U.S media. This went from General reporting of the Vietnam war skewed from biased information to, according to Thuộc and Buckley, full on lies motivated by an anti-war agenda.

According to Joe Allen, author of *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost*, H. Bruce Franklin said it best in his essay “The Antiwar movement we are supposed to forget” stating “The first American Opposition came as soon as Washington began warfare against the Vietnamese people by equipping, and transporting a foreign army to invade their country.”(Allen: 61) Just after World War Two, eight to twelve U.S. troopships were sent over to the French in order to help re-colonize Vietnam. Many of the troops were against being sent over to Vietnam because these soldiers still weren’t being

sent home even after World War Two was over, and because they were against with the colonization of Vietnam. It was between World War II and the Cold War, where the opposition of America's relationship with Vietnam was growing because the U.S. was defining itself as "anti- colonial," which in itself was hypocritical because of their aid to the French. The U.S. government's motivation for helping the French was of course anti-communism, believing that they needed to prevent the "Domino Effect" of communism, which was being threatened by the Viet Cong. As President Harry Truman put it, "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside forces."(Allen: 64) For the most part, there was not much pushback or protest; the critics who did exist were still in the minority. Anti Communism had been popular since the 1910s and this sentiment was only getting stronger in the 1950s, with McCarthyism and the red scare in play. From 1954-1963 the United States presence in Vietnam grew, but the American citizen's stance on this involvement only began to change in the 60s (Allen).

Before the U.S. media became motivated by an anti-war agenda, they were pushed by the government to report in a particular way, and in effect skewing information. Whether it be through comparing the Vietnam War to World War Two, or seeing the it through the lens of the Cold War, each administration attempted to gain control over the media. Many news reports had a "Washington official" explaining how complicated the war was through statistics and charts, but also reassuring the American people by telling them that "their government had everything under control." Another tactic was war correspondents interviewing a clean- cut, confident looking soldier (known as the "citizen soldier") about the war and their particular job. When the correspondent would ask the soldier their purpose in fighting, the soldier would respond

with something safe, usually alluding to fighting communism off in Vietnam before it gets to the United States. Viewers would believe the soldiers, this being the only truth they knew. From 1965 until 1970 less than 5% of news coverage on the Vietnam war was graphic; the American people was not exposed to the horrific violence, and devastating casualties produced from the war. When Thurōc and Buckley alluded to the term “fake news” they expressed their disdain for the left wing’s part in inserting their own anti-war agenda into the media, which is a legitimate reason to be upset. However, from the very beginning of America’s involvement in the conflict the news was skewing information to satisfy whatever agenda was popular at the time (Brewer).

A new generation was questioning America’s stance on Communism, and on other political stances too, for example civil rights and Jim Crow laws. When President Lyndon Johnson took office in 1963, he began passing progressive legislation (e.g. Medicare, the immigration law, the higher education act, the water quality act, etc.) in order to get the American people on his side, He thought the Vietnam War would be short, and easily swept under the rug, but with troop levels escalating from 17,000 soldiers to 35,000 this war was not going to be as “invisible” as he planned. Even with the legislation he passed, Johnson’s popularity dwindled as more troops were sent over to Vietnam. Soon after Nixon was elected into office in 1969 making promises of ending the war quickly during his term. Why would Nixon be elected when the country had become engulfed in the anti-war movement? Joe Allen explains that voters had few options when it came to politicians who supported the movement, and Nixon looked like the best option when it came to ending the war. The aftermath of his election, only increased protests, and by October of that year 2 million people came together to protest the Vietnam War, the biggest anti-war protest in history. It was known as the

“Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam,” a response to the death toll and overall devastation of the war so far, which was over 33,000 U.S. soldiers, and would soon increase to 58,000. By 1973, the last few combat troops left Vietnam, with the War finally ending for the United States. The Vietnam War lasted from 1955 until 1975, making it the longest war in U.S. history. The United States and even the South Vietnamese army were not losing; they had far less casualties compared the North Vietnamese (1.1 million dead). What finally ended the war? What was the cause and how might did it connect back to the anti-war movement (Allen)?

Lam Quang Thi, a senior officer in the South Vietnamese army and author of *The Twenty-Five Year Century*, explains there were a series of “rules” the U.S. media would stand by when reporting on the Vietnam War; “1 – When comparing the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese with the Allied Forces, praise the first and criticize the latter. 2 – When comparing the U.S. forces with ARVN, praise the first and criticize the latter. 3 – When reporting on ARVN or GVN, use the following epithets and, if possible, in the same order: a) corrupt; b) repressive and c) inefficient.”(Lam: 192) Like Thước, Lam did not feel properly represented by the U.S. Media as a South Vietnamese soldier.

Compared to the North Vietnamese army, and even their own allies, they both felt as though they were vilified or that the atrocities they experienced weren’t covered. While explaining the battle of Ap Bac he participated in, Thước began speaking on the media’s portrayal on these events; “We killed a lot of people. [Vietnamese] Nothing, nobody said nothing. No paper.” Despite the deaths of many people during this battle, there was barely and news coverage, with Buckley adding “And again, there comes out that point again, this wasn’t part of the overall narrative coming in the news or anything else, there was nothing made of it. The news is, is fairly on the left wing in a lot of ways, a lot of

folks are.” 80 soldiers were killed and 100 injured, and yet the Media failed to report the devastation of this battle because it did not support their current agenda. As Lam stated, the reporters would constantly criticize the allied forces, particularly the ARVN or GVN, so why would they report on a battle that might paint the South Vietnamese as sympathetic while the North Vietnamese in the opposite view?

When Walter Cronkite gave his infamous Vietnam War broadcast on February 27, 1968 in which he told the public “Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Vietcong did not win by a knockout but neither did we.”(PBS) However, the information he gave was false and, in fact, the ARVN and American troops won the Tet offensive, despite being unprepared for this attack by the VC. He added “Both in Vietnam and Washington to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. 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.”(PBS) He tells the American people the Vietnam war is going to the direction of a draw, and that the Americans have no moves to make anymore. Why would he tell the American people an outright lie? Thuợc even said himself “But we did not lost the war. Even when we were surprise-attacked.” Interestingly enough, *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost*, also has a chapter on the Tet offensive, and skews some information about the outcome. Although, unlike Walter Cronkite who lied about the outcome, Joe Allen puts more emphasis on some facts than others. “While American firepower pushed back the Tet offensive, the costs were high. During the tet offensive, South Vietnamese (AVRN) forces were severely mauled at the hands of the NVA and NFL. The Americans suffered nearly four thousand casualties between January 30 and March 31. American

military forces were clearly demoralized after Tet, beginning the process of decay and rebellion that would reach crisis proportions in the remaining years of the war.”(Allen: 57) Allen states the allied forces won, but puts emphasis on the negative effects of the tet offensive towards their side more than anything. Even when telling the truth of who won, the author still manages to write the Tet offensive as more of a loss than a win for the allied forces. “Fake News” can be more than just telling an outright lie, but adjusting the facts to fit a preferred narrative.

The actions of reporters like Walter Cronkite might appear to be harmless, just more lies spread across the news to the American people, but Lam Quang Thi explains that the consequences were much more dire. “Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap stated in a French television broadcast that his most important guerrilla during the Vietnam War was the American press. This was a tragic compliment.”(Lam: 181) Much like Thuoc, he explains his anger towards the U.S. media, although believes that the U.S. Media’s actions directly lead to the downfall of the ARVN. He quotes a former communist sympathizer and Vietnamese journalists, “A physician who makes an error kills his patient; a general who makes an error kills one division; a journalist who makes an error kills an entire country.”(Lam:181) Buckley had input on this theory as well; “General Giap, North Vietnamese, he was their top guy, and he said “this is a disaster.” But it actually, tactically it was a disaster. Strategically, they won the war.” He then adds “Well because the way the media spun it, the way the media put it out in the world, the way they reported it. And you’d say well maybe the media had a misperception, Cronkite was actually there, and even came out and said, you know, ‘the VC and the NVA lost very very badly, the ARVN performed, performed decently,’ you know, and then it went from there” The anti-war movement was not a communist movement, and didn’t support the

North Vietnamese and their beliefs. However, the anti-war movement was against U.S. troops being in Vietnam, which made it their main goal to end the U.S.'s involvement over there. The U.S. media in particular would support this goal, to the extent where their reporting would be skewed to show their sympathies for the other side. Although, they the anti-war movement won in the end, with Troops coming home in 1973, so did the North Vietnamese which was not a positive outcome for Vietnam.

The U.S. media seemed to have a general belief that the Vietnamese people supported the VC, rather than the South Vietnamese Army, but this was not true. The Majority of Vietnamese citizens supported their government and the ARVN, but this didn't stop U.S. news reporters from spreading false information. Lam gives some examples of news reports made directly after the Tet offensive; "Yet, according to the *Washington Post*, if the VC were able to enter Saigon, this was because they had the support of the population and even the support of some sympathetic elements in the ARVN. To my knowledge, there was not a single ARVN unit defecting to the enemy during the Tet Offensive. Also according to *Newsweek*, the VC could not have attacked Saigon and other cities without at least the passive support of the population."(Lam: 212) This does make one question whether or not these U.S. newspapers and magazines actually understood what was going on in Vietnam, or if this was another example of intersecting their own agenda. It could've been both, seeing as the U.S. media would praise the North Vietnamese and portray them as victims of the allied forces, even though both sides participated in a similar amount of violence.

In the Memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly Hayslip describes her role in the Viet Cong army as a "watchdog" when she was child living in Ka Ly. She had hated the South Vietnamese army (or as she called them "republicans")

all her life, and supporting Viet Cong meant everything to her because it would lead to the liberation of her people. She is tortured many times by the ARVN, until during one particular capture she is let out “too early” and is accused by the Viet Cong of giving information to the enemy. Although, it’s actually because of her ties with her ARVN brother- in-law, she can’t tell anyone this or it could hurt her family. At first, the village people just shunned her, but then two of her friends who were Viet Cong soldiers captured her and almost executed her. The both decided to rape her instead. After the rape she says this; “I might be arrested again by the Viet Cong, or perhaps the republicans - but what did it matter? The bullets of one would just save bullets for the other. I no longer cared even for vengeance. Both sides in this terrible, endless, stupid war had finally found the perfect enemy: a terrified peasant girl who would endlessly and stupidly consent to be there victim- as all Vietnam's peasants consented to be victims, from creation to the end of time!”(Hayslip: 97) It is here that Hayslip learns that neither side is going to benefit her, specifically as a girl and someone of lower class. The Viet Cong had raped her while the ARVN had tortured her, all because of information she wouldn’t give out or false accusations of being a traitor. What this memoir shows, which the anti- war movement and the U.S. media failed to understand, was how hopelessly complicated this war really was. Americans were so used to thinking in the mindset of World War Two or the Cold war, that they weren’t able to understand there was no “good guy” or “bad guy”, just two sides killing each other, in the hopes of liberating the Vietnamese people in their own way.

At the end of the interview, Thuợc told us about one request he had when writing and reporting back on this interview; “Okay, I am very happy. But, please, the last question: I would like you, you to write something about American soldier and

Vietnamese soldier. They did very, very well their job. To serve his country. Now whole my family, they US citizen. We like to serve the country. Even as before. But now, a lot of fake news insult the American soldier, I'm unhappy. You, please, today, you got information from me, okay, write something about our friend. American friend. Okay. He served very, he did very good job. Okay?" Throughout the entire interview he had expressed his disdain for the U.S. media's portrayal of ARVN, but he made it especially clear here how unhappy he was about the U.S soldier's portal. His sympathetic view of the U.S. soldier in Vietnam wasn't a popular portrayal, and in some ways it still isn't. When it comes to the Vietnam war everyone has a different perspective and way of telling their story. There isn't just one narrative like the U.S. media attempted to portray, and even they changed their views as the anti-war movement became more popular. It begs the question, what is really true when it comes to war? War Veteran, Tim O'Brien, speaking on this; "For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is absolute ambiguity. In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing much is ever very true." (O'Brien; 78)

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