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[Norman Solomon](#)

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[Norman Solomon](#)

## The US left Vietnam 50 years ago today. The media hasn't learned its lesson

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The myth that news coverage turned Americans against the war persists. In fact, it was largely complicit in perpetuating the conflict

The last helicopter liftoff from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon on 30 April 1975 marked the end of the [Vietnam war](#). Fifty years later, mythology about US media coverage of the war is locked into the faulty premise that news outlets were pivotal in causing Americans to turn against it. Some say that mainstream media undermined a noble war effort, while others say that coverage alerted the public to realities of an unjust war. Both assertions are wrong.

Scapegoating the media fits neatly into “stab in the back” theories of Americans who can't stand the fact that their country lost a war to impoverished Vietnamese fighters. And praising the media as catalysts for the nation's roused conscience gives undue credit while fostering illusions about mainstream news coverage of America's wars.

Today, the bulk of the populace remains nearly clueless about what the Pentagon is up to on several continents. Fleeting news reports about US missile strikes on various countries – including Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia since last year – habitually rely on official sources. In addition, the Costs of War project at Brown University [reports](#), the United States has

“military operations and programs run out of civilian departments for military purposes in at least 78 countries”.

When [US military](#) action is involved, the reporting routinely amounts to stenographic services for the White House and Pentagon. The pattern for the Vietnam war was set in early August 1964, when American media credulously reported claims from President Lyndon Johnson and his defense secretary, Robert McNamara, that North Vietnamese gunboats had made “unprovoked” attacks on two US Navy destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The official narrative, [filled with deception](#), led Congress to quickly pass (with only two dissenting votes) the [Tonkin Gulf resolution](#) – providing an unconditional green light for war on Vietnam. Reporting absolute lies as absolute truths, the country’s most esteemed news media cleared the way for escalation of a war that took [upward](#) of [3 million lives](#) in Vietnam.

Typical coverage came from the Washington Post, which ran this banner headline on 5 August 1964, two days before passage of the war resolution: “American Planes Hit North Vietnam After 2nd Attack on Our Destroyers; Move Taken to Halt New Aggression”. Twenty-four years later, I inquired about whether the newspaper had ever retracted its bogus reporting on the Gulf of Tonkin events. When I reached the reporter who had written much of the Post’s political coverage of those events, the former chief diplomatic correspondent Murrey Marder, he said: “I can assure you that there was never any retraction.”

When I asked why not, Marder’s voice was tinged with sorrow. “If you were making a retraction,” he said, “you’d have to make a retraction of virtually everyone’s entire coverage of the Vietnam war.” He added: “If the American press had been doing its job and the Congress had been doing its job, we would never have been involved.”

On the home front, opponents of the war had to fight an uphill battle against the media establishment. Contrary to the myth that news coverage stoked the fires of anti-war sentiment, mainstream outlets actually lagged way behind. In February 1968 – the same month 49% of [polled](#) Americans said sending US troops to Vietnam was “a mistake” while 41% said it was not – the Boston Globe conducted a survey of 39 major US newspapers. Not a single one had editorialized in favor of withdrawing American troops from Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the war reportage had numbing qualities, with coverage scarcely able to convey human realities. After reporting from Vietnam during the late 1960s, the Esquire correspondent Michael Herr wrote in his book *Dispatches* that the US media had “never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about. The most repulsive, transparent gropes for sanctity in the midst of the killing received serious treatment in the papers and on the air.” Reporters being fed the latest from military

spokespeople could easily become jaded, as “the jargon of progress got blown into your head like bullets” – and after wading through the deluge of war-related news stories, “the suffering was somehow unimpressive”.

No aspect of mythology about Vietnam coverage has been more tenacious than the firmly held belief that television brought the war into America’s living rooms, stirring up disapproval in the process. While entrenched as a truism, the notion that TV served as an anti-war asset is contradicted by abundant facts, as documented by researchers who actually went back to painstakingly watch the news broadcasts of the three American networks.



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People mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam war. Photograph: Richard Vogel/AP

In his exhaustively researched book *The ‘Uncensored War’: The Media and Vietnam*, the journalism scholar Daniel Hallin summed up how the televised news regularly suited the warmakers in Washington: “Television coverage of Vietnam dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives and thus banished him not only from the political sphere, but from human society itself. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong were ‘fanatical’, ‘suicidal’, ‘savage’, ‘half-crazed’. They were lower than mere criminals ... they were vermin.”

TV news played a much larger role in promoting the Vietnam war than challenging it. That was especially true during the several years of escalation that brought the number of US troops in the country to 500,000 by the end of 1967. Midway through the year, when *Newsweek* commissioned a Harris poll to find out how television affected public opinion, the

magazine [reported](#): “TV has encouraged a decisive majority of viewers to support the war.” The poll found that 64% said TV coverage had actually increased their support for the war, while only 26% said it had boosted their opposition.

But what about the memorable TV news reports that showed American military actions in a distinctly unfavorable light? Well, they’re memorable because they were so rare.

CBS Evening News caused a stir in August 1965 when the correspondent Morley Safer did a [standup report](#) next to US Marines using cigarette lighters to burn down huts in the village of Cam Ne. “The fact that this particular journalistic endeavor is now celebrated by virtually everyone who writes on the subject does not, however, mean that it exemplified the coverage of the war during this period,” the journalist Edward Jay Epstein wrote in an investigative series that TV Guide published eight years later. “On the contrary, in examining network newscasts and scripts from 1962 to 1968, I could find few other comparable instances of indiscriminate American destruction or brutality” – even though “hundreds of South Vietnamese villages were destroyed and evacuated in ‘relocation programs’ during this period”.

A leading scholar on the history of broadcasting, Lawrence Lichty at the University of Wisconsin, conducted an exhaustive analysis of filmed reports that aired during the same span of a half-dozen years and concluded that such American TV reports showing cruel actions by US troops in Vietnam “could be counted on one hand”.

Overall, the American press was careful to stay away from atrocity stories about the troops. Instead of signifying intrepid journalism, the media saga of the war’s most famous massacre was quite the opposite.

In March 1968, US army soldiers killed [several hundred unarmed civilians](#) of all ages in the Vietnamese village of My Lai. Within months, “evidence of the massacre was presented to top national news media by Vietnam veteran Ron Ridenhour and others, but not one outlet would touch the story”, my RootsAction colleague Jeff Cohen has [pointed out](#). “It wasn’t until November 1969, more than a year and a half after the My Lai slaughter, that the story was finally published by the small, alternative Dispatch News Service and dogged investigative reporter Seymour Hersh.”

As the war dragged on, with a US victory nowhere in sight, controversies became fierce – but neither the hawks nor the supposed doves of medialand questioned America’s “right to carry out aggression against South Vietnam”, Noam Chomsky [observed](#). “In fact, they didn’t even admit that it was taking place. They called it the ‘defense’ of South Vietnam, using ‘defense’ for ‘aggression’ in the standard Orwellian manner.”



[View image in fullscreen](#)

American soldiers from the 173th airborne in 1965. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

With few exceptions, the framed issues in mass media were matters of efficacy rather than morality, much less international law. And so it was when the CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite – known as “the most trusted man in America” – provided the most fabled minutes of wartime commentary in the history of American television.

After several years of [cheering on the war](#), Cronkite returned from a trip to Vietnam and put together a one-hour [CBS special report](#) that aired on 27 February 1968, ending with [a commentary](#) that startled viewers with downbeat words: “To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past ... To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.”

Cronkite closed his solemn assessment by declaring: “The only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.” His anguish was evident, while his message was far more centered on military failures than moral ones.

Cronkite’s commentary was hardly the antiwar turn that some cracked it up to be. His words reinforced rather than challenged the official claims of virtuous intent that he and so many other US journalists had done so much to propagate – insisting that leaders who proceeded with the horrific war year after year were “honorable people” who sought to fulfill “their pledge to defend democracy”.

In the world according to dominant media, the US is a defender of virtue against wrongful deeds by bad actors. Along the way, distorted narratives about the Vietnam war have served

as parables for the next American wars, in keeping with George Orwell's dictum: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

With scant media pushback and much affirmation, one president after another during the last 50 years has turned upside down what the US did in Vietnam. News watchers aware of the war's [methodical lies](#) and enormous cruelties have gritted their teeth while presidents twisted history to depict Uncle Sam as a benevolent giant.

American presidents have never come anywhere near offering an honest account of the Vietnam war. None could imagine engaging in the kind of candor that the Pentagon Papers whistleblower [Daniel Ellsberg](#) bluntly [provided](#) when he said: "It wasn't that we were *on* the wrong side. We *were* the wrong side."

Two months after taking office in early 1977, President Jimmy Carter was dismissive when a reporter asked if he felt "any moral obligation to help rebuild" Vietnam. "Well, the destruction was mutual," he [replied](#). "We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I don't feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability."

A dozen years later, Ronald Reagan [told](#) a gathering at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington that the war had been a "noble cause" – "however imperfectly pursued, the cause of freedom".

While announcing formal diplomatic relations with Vietnam in July 1995, President Bill Clinton felt compelled to fabricate history. "Whatever we may think about the political decisions of the Vietnam era, the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives," he [said](#). "They fought for the freedom and the independence of the Vietnamese people."





[View image in fullscreen](#)

A Palestinian woman mourns the death of a family member killed during an Israeli strike on Gaza. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

At the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington in May 2012, President Barack Obama [spoke](#) of “honoring our Vietnam veterans by never forgetting the lessons of that war” – which included “that when America sends our sons and daughters into harm’s way, we will always give them a clear mission; we will always give them a sound strategy”. But Obama was far along in replicating the tragic folly of the Vietnam war.

During his first years as president, Obama [more than tripled](#) the number of US troops in Afghanistan, reaching a peak of 100,000 in 2011. Jingoistic flattery was irresistible. In the spring of 2010, Obama [told](#) assembled troops in Afghanistan: “All of you represent the virtues and the values that America so desperately needs right now – sacrifice and selflessness, honor and decency.” Obama had been five years old when Johnson traveled to Vietnam and [told](#) assembled troops: “No American army in all of our long history has ever been so compassionate.”

Since October 2023, the latest two presidents have taught a new generation of Americans what Johnson and Richard Nixon taught baby boomers during the Vietnam war. When the warfare state calculates massive profits for the military-industrial complex and geopolitical advantages for the US government, moral entreaties do not enter into the policy calculus. Joe Biden and Donald Trump have enabled the daily, [systematic mass killing](#) of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, [made possible](#) by continuous US arms shipments to Israel – making the US

a full partner in genocide, as documented by [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#).

Presidential impunity runs parallel to media pliability. While controversies have abounded about a wide range of US war efforts, the standard arguments featured by news outlets do not question the prerogative of the United States to militarily work its will on the world as much as feasible. The Vietnam war was no anomaly in its profusion of official government mendacity or the overall compliance of the nation's mass media.

Two years before he died in June 2023, Ellsberg [told](#) me: "That there is deception, that the public is evidently misled by it early in the game, in the approach to the war, in a way that encourages them to accept a war and support a war, is the reality."

It's not difficult to deceive the public, he added: "You're often telling them what they would like to believe – that we're better than other people, we are superior in our morality and our perceptions of the world."

- Norman Solomon is the director of RootsAction and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His latest book is [War Made Invisible: How America Hides the Human Toll of Its Military Machine](#)