The “Visible” Enemy: Meditations on Dehumanization, War, and the Enemy

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An honors History senior thesis submitted to the History Department of Rutgers University.

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New Brunswick, New Jersey
May 2011
Acknowledgements

To Professor Gardner, I would like to thank you for being my inspiration. Thank you for your never-ending index of knowledge about the Vietnam War and for your unconditional support throughout the writing process. Also, it is with my greatest appreciation that I thank you for your patience – as I know many of my initial drafts were quite frightening to read.

To Toby Jones, my secondary reader, thank you for stepping outside of the Middle Eastern studies realm to advise me on my thesis work. It is your knowledge of human rights and journalistic coverage of the Iraq War, which led me to believe that you’d be of great help. In the future, I hope to study journalism in Iraq.

To Professor Masschaele, thank you for your guidance. Thank you for the deadlines, advice, and personal support throughout the thesis process. Our seminars allowed me to stay on track and transform my thesis from an incomprehensible mess to a finished product.

I would like to thank my parents. To my mom, for listening to my mental breakdowns and always knowing the right answer, through this and my entire undergraduate career. Also, to my dad, who inspired me to pursue history and for funding my education to allow me to attend Rutgers.

Thank you to the professors who dedicate their time to teaching future historians and making Rutgers one of the best programs in the nation. In addition to my advisors, I’d like to acknowledge Professor Clemens, Professor Matsuda, and Professor Markowitz, who have all guided me and offered support.

To Bruce Reynolds, a journalism professor, thank you for teaching me the value of influential and truthful journalism.

Thank you to the journalists who have helped me, Bill Gordon and Richard Pyle. I would like to personally dedicate this to Bill Gordon, who passed away during the thesis process. To both of you, without journalists, the written word would never be the same.

To my best friend, Maggie, who has always inspired me, thank you for being there through all the phone calls that I missed while writing this and keeping me sane.
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Introduction

First Glance at the Media’s Role in the Vietnam War
A journalist is taught to be neutral. In theory, a journalist must be neutral, because most news is based on conflict. Neutrality in journalism requires a journalist to report without opinion or favoritism. It is a source of pride for many journalists; however, it is also a difficult task. One must remember that journalists are people and not objects or robots. Human emotion is a natural instinct that is impossible to relinquish. Emotions make it difficult to avoid opinion interfering with stories.

The other element that interferes with neutrality for journalists is ambition. Most journalists desire the Pulitzer Prize. Newspapers or individuals may attain the Pulitzer by capturing a story or picture that changes the world. These are the juicy stories. There is a difference between dry and juicy stories. Dry stories like covering a flower convention are stories that a journalist is often indifferent to. The writing is neutral because there is no desire to insert an opinion, compared to juicy stories that involve conflict. When there is conflict there are two or more sides. If one is to refer to the media as the watchdog, then the juicy stories are the meat that induces the dog to salivate. These are the stories that all journalists desire. These are the stories that the government fears the most. The government fears these stories, because they often reveal faults in policy.

Since journalist involvement in warfare, there has been a continuous rift between the media and the government. Without media presence, war would be a simpler task for the government to execute. The military resembles a hierarchical structure. The government sends the military to war. The cabinet assigns orders to the higher officials of the military, who in turn, repeat orders to the ground forces.
Realistically, if there was no media involvement, the government could control wars without public knowledge or influence.

The Vietnam War changed the role of media involvement in war. Previous wars like WWI and WWII were both heavily censored by the government. Military officials revised the stories before they reached the public. In this time period, the media presented the American cause as valiant and noble. This favoritism toward the military’s policies developed from limited media access to battle and lack of technology. Soldiers at this time were also fighting oppressive governments, who committed obvious atrocities. Vietnam differed from previous wars. The Americans were fighting not only an invisible enemy, but the public had increased access to images of war. Vietnam is often referred to as the “television war.” Images and film were brought to audiences by television programming on nightly news channels like CBS, NBC, and ABC. The nightly news programs served a vital role in allowing the American audience to view images of war over-seas. In the 1960s, major newspapers like The New York Times and The Washington Post increased in circulation to reach a nation-wide audience. The access to newspapers and television programming changed the role of the media in influencing public opinion. The power and control that the media maintained during the Vietnam War would be the primary reason for censoring American wars after the 1960s. Today, the media battles government restrictions on photographs of wounded soldiers, coffins coming home from war, and victims of conflict, as a result of minimal censorship in Vietnam.

There was no direct government censorship on the media during the Vietnam War. In the beginning, most media outlets held favoring opinions toward the war.
However, as more negative images began to appear, the public and media opinion started to shift. In a desperate attempt to keep public support, the government attempted to manipulate the media. Journalist had complete freedom to roam the countryside of Vietnam; however, like the United States, Vietnam is a large country. Battle occurred sporadically throughout the countryside. This made locating conflict difficult. Bill Gordon, a former reporter for *The Star Ledger*, describes getting transportation to particular zones as a near impossible task. Commanders often prevented journalists from boarding their aircraft to keep cameras away. When access to battle was denied, journalists attended nightly meetings held by military officials to obtain information. Gordon referred to these as the “five o’clock follies.”

During the meetings, the military officials presented body count figures usually far exceeding reality. The statistics that were presented blatantly revealed the military’s attempts of manipulation. It became clear that these figures and information could not be trusted.

There will continuously be a conflict between the media and the government, because the government prefers to keep its flaws hidden. The media has the ability to expose these. The Vietnam War influenced the terms of three different presidents. The presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon all feared the influence of the media on public opinion.

President Kennedy attempted to remove journalist David Halberstam from *The New York Times* based on his reporting. Kennedy personally requested the publisher remove Halberstam from the *Times* staff in Saigon. A Kennedy aide,

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Arthur Schlesinger, confided to Halberstam that, “The president used to tell me how he could always find so much more stuff in your stores in the Times than he could from his generals and ambassadors.” ² Even though the reporting was accurate, the information tarnished the image of the Kennedy campaign. Halberstam stated, “The truth is that Kennedy believed what I was reporting, but he was pissed to read it because there it was – a first-class foreign policy failure on the front page of The New York Times.”³

After President Kennedy’s assassination, President Johnson inherited the Vietnam War and the critical press with it. President Johnson continuously felt as though he lived in the shadow of Kennedy. While Kennedy would be remembered as valiant, charming, and eloquent, Johnson was viewed as slow spoken, elderly, and hesitant. Above all, LBJ did not want to be remembered for losing Vietnam. Media disapproval of the war only increased his paranoia and determination to succeed.

President Nixon is remembered for ending the Vietnam War, but was probably the most paranoid of the three towards the media. Nixon never believed that the media gave him an even break. Right at the beginning, Nixon believed he lost the television debate to Kennedy because of his appearance on television, not his arguments. He also believed that the media held too much power over public opinion and its negative view of the war influenced the public to shift as well. Nixon

² Anderson, David, Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre [Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1998], 70.

³ Ibid., 70.
assented, “their [the journalists] whole objective in life is to bring us down.” During his invasion of Laos, he accused the media of predicting its outcome. The media predicted failure; therefore, the mission would be doomed to fail. The President refused to allow his advisors to give information to journalists. He believed the information would be turned against him. “Don’t help the bastards ever. Because they’re going to stick the knife right in our groin.” He continued, “I respect people that are trying to kill me. I don’t give them the knife.” It is apparent that Nixon’s disapproval of the media was not based on the war, but centered on the protection of his own image.

All three Presidencies obviously feared the role of the media. It is difficult to maintain public support when corruption is revealed. Trust is not easy to win back. Television became a revolutionary source of media during the 1960s. Nightly news programs captured the attention of public audiences, however, its affect was only short-term. The most powerful source of information during Vietnam would not be the written word or projected film, but the influence of a single image.

Still imagery proved to be most powerful in long-term memory, perhaps because it can be easily studied. Unlike film, a single image does not have to be continuously fast-forwarded, re-winded, or paused. A still image also contains greater clarity. Photojournalists would produce photographs during the Vietnam War that did not resemble those of previous wars. These pictures would reveal elements

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5 Ibid., 559.
6 Ibid., 559.
of evil and hatred compared to the valiant images of soldiers in World War I and II. Americans no longer appeared to be the good guys and this created an unsettling feeling in the American public.

These images revealed not only flaws in American war policy, but faults within the development of the military. Most of the soldiers in Vietnam were in their twenties. Many of them were not legally able to drink. These young men became subjects to the horror of war. Staggering numbers of soldiers developed symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or fell victim to substance abuse. These young boys watched as countless fellow soldiers were blown to pieces and struggled to distinguish between the villagers and the enemy. This forced the soldiers to often commit unnecessary killings in order to survive themselves. Those in the military became frustrated as the American government sat comfortably, sending more boys to die in an unfair war. Most battles took place in isolated jungles. The soldiers faced the enemy with only a gun and the ruthless, unconscious voice from basic training. There were no outside reminders of their previous life at home. There was no one to stop war from occurring.

Journalists were the only outsiders from the scene of war. The images that the journalists captured were horrific, but do not reveal the full scale of battle. Many injuries, atrocities, and murders would remain unknown without the presence of a journalist. In some cases, the presence of a camera is enough to stop atrocities from occurring. The pictures in the camera provide evidence. The pictures reveal a narrative and a piece of history.
The Vietnam War contained many graphic, horrific photographs, but three stand out in particular. These photographs are not in sequence, but collaborate to create a message of horror and injustice. Malcolm Browne’s “Self-Immolation,” Eddie Adams “Saigon Execution,” and Nick Ut’s “Napalm Girl,” are all visual memories of the war.

These photographs revealed acts of war crimes, hurt, anger, and suffering. Each photo revealed a vivid image of the enemy. It was not a vindictive Vietcong soldier, but an elderly monk, an innocent-looking victim, and a little girl. These photographs highlighted an element of human emotion. This is what those in government fear the most. Soldiers are trained to dehumanize the enemy, as are the citizens. In order to fight an effective war, there can be no sympathy. If the enemy is never revealed, then backlash can be avoided. These photographs caused soldiers to reconsider and regret their actions. Public opinion became outraged toward the American government. The power of photography strips the power of dehumanization. Without dehumanization, the cause of war is lost.

I think that in any war, the government attempts to keep its enemy anonymous, in other words, having no face or name. This way the public will avoid sympathy for the enemy. The government in many ways feared the role of the journalist, because journalists have the ability to capture vulnerability and human nature. All three of these photographs, as in others throughout the war, capture a core concept of humanity in suffering. The Buddhist monks were willing to sacrifice the core principle of peace in their religion through inflammation to protest against the Diem regime. Eddie Adams’ photo emphasizes that the suspect was willing to
sacrifice life in order to fight for his homeland. Kim Phuc, the napalm girl, sacrificed her identity in order to become a symbol of war and an advocate for health care. These photographs capture the suffering of the Vietnamese, which led to the metaphorical removal of the white gloves. The United States became the enemy. Therefore, the government chose to lay blame on the media to hide their own faults. The photographs not only reveal elements of suffering, but a massive flaw in military strategy and discontent between the military and government. This discontent would be revealed in the My Lai massacre, however it was almost permanently hidden.

What would be the result of war without journalists – My Lai.

The photographs are revolutionary, but often misunderstood. Pictures are nothing without captions. They become simply pictures. They have no meaning. These pictures only reveal suffering. One must search beyond the photograph to understand the story and honor the past. Each photograph deserves an explanation. The enemy can no longer be anonymous.
Chapter 1

Dehumanizing the Enemy
All humans are born with natural instincts. Individuals are naturally prone to protect themselves. If someone is to throw a ball at one’s head, the instinct is to duck. Only baseball players are trained to stand still while a 98 mile-an-hour fastball is thrown at one’s body. People are also aggressive, as it is often used as a method of self-protection. However, aggression can usually be tamed. People tend to become more aggressive in dangerous or unfamiliar situations. Aggressive instincts surface when confronted by danger. War is an unusual and unfamiliar situation; therefore, the military programs soldiers to combat fear with methods of self-protection and aggression. Even with training, soldiers are resistant to killing others because it is fundamentally wrong. Humans are not born with hatred, nor are they born to kill. Killing and racism are not instincts; they must be programmed or taught. These teachings are instilled in the minds of soldiers during basic training. It is these methods that cause one to lose his sense of morality and lead many to kill in order to survive.

Basic training is a grueling task for any individual to endure. It is a program designed to create the ideal soldier. Every division of the United States military must participate in this process, ranging from the Marines, Army, Navy, and the Air Force. Basic training is designed to instill character and promote the cause of the military. It is a program that is used in militaries throughout the world. No matter what the country, the task of basic training is the same. It promotes a competitive nature by encouraging soldiers to enter the mind of the enemy. If the enemy can be out-smarted and demeaned then it can be defeated.
The first step is removing individuality. Although men and women can participate in the military, men were only used in actual combat during Vietnam. The documentary, *Anybody’s Son Will Do*, describes the process of U.S. Marine training in preparation for combat. The film demonstrates that in the 1980s, the structure of preparing recruits did not differ from those who experienced training for Vietnam. The setting is Parris Island, S.C., a training ground for the Marines. Many of the troops in this documentary received training from former Vietnam veterans. First, the Marines are shaved bald. An officer describes this as a process that “stripped all evidence of human identity.” Shaving completely removes human hair. A boy is no longer seen as a blonde, brunette, or red head, but simply a boy. This uniformity is a symbol of brotherhood. All the Marines share this common bond. This is the first step in removing individuality to create a well-oiled machine. Stripping individuality removes the power of voice. The individuals are no longer able to speak out in the fear of being viewed as outsiders. This would excommunicate them from the brotherhood.

The second step is removing confidence in order to rebuild it. These new Marines are stripped of any prior confidence and made to feel less than dirt. The idea is instilled that without the military, these boys will remain boys and never become men. The screaming of officers during training is meant to intimidate, but to also build assurance within themselves. In the documentary, the Marines fall backwards off a steep building as their officer holds the other end of the rope. This is a technique that builds trust and removes fear from the minds of the troops. The

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7 *Anybody’s Son Will Do*, documentary, directed by Paul Cowan, 1983.
Marines are trained to believe that if fear is removed then they will become invincible. An officer stated that during training the new Marines can be motivated to do whatever you want in recruit training. Although techniques may differ, Marine training is similar to all other divisions of the military. A sense of brotherhood, trust, and confidence must be established to create faith in the system. Once a unified team is built; the training to kill can begin.

Each morning, the Marines are required to chant. The chant states, “This barrack contains 45 highly motivated, truly dedicated romping stomping blood thirsty kill crazy United States Marines Corps recruits, sir.” This chant represents a twisted version of a cheerleading chant. Instead of chanting to play defense or offense, these troops chant their desire to kill. More importantly, the Marines recognized themselves as Marines, not individuals. It is small methods in training that slowly remove individuality. The process seems harmless at first, but slowly begins to encompass one’s entire mindset.

During training, military ground forces are trained to master the use of weaponry. Infantrymen spend countless hours practicing aim and the handling of grenades, guns, and other weaponry. During the learning process, officers repeat that grenades and other weapons are designed to produce casualties. The superior officers become the unconscious voice in the back of the soldier’s mind. This is their primary purpose. Anyone with working motor skills is capable of using a machine gun, however, it is only those with training that can fire on another individual. Even with training, killing is a near impossible task to complete. Brainwashing has always been

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
a significant part in basic training: “Unless officers were trained in psychology and were able to counter the effects of mechanization and anonymity, all their expertise with guns, ranges, and ballistics was useless.”

An enemy has to be created in order to kill. In Vietnam, the enemy was of Asian descent. Enemies are often created with assistance from the media. Soldiers of the Vietnam War grew up with prejudice towards the Japanese from World War II. Hollywood and the media have a huge influence on public opinion. During World War II the Japanese were the enemy. “World War II-era movies commonly presented Japanese soldiers as brutal and inhumane.” The Japanese, who are of Asian descent, carried many of the same labels that were used in Vietnam. “Images of Vietnamese became more common and more negative during and after the Vietnam War. Vietnamese were portrayed as ‘crafty, devious, guerrilla warfare perpetrators of violence.’” These racial stereotypes carried over to basic training to assist in dehumanizing the Vietnamese.

First, the Vietnamese were reduced down to bodies without souls. The Marines in the documentary viewed the enemy as having no desire for the welfare of others. An American officer repeated, “A mind is nothing more than an explosive or chemical substance that is designed to kill.” This enemy was a machine that was designed to kill Americans. The Vietcong had to be destroyed to the point of nothing.

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11 “Asian Americans in Film and Television Entertainment,” *Rutgers Libraries* [N.D.], 69.

12 Ibid., 69.

13 *Anybody’s Son Will Do.*
left. The officer continued, “Rip out his eyeballs again, destroy his love machine. You will destroy him privates, so there is nothing left of him.” The enemy had to be killed, then degraded afterwards. Once an enemy is dead, there is no longer a threat. To remove his eyeballs is to remove a source of identity. This would make the enemy almost unrecognizable to the victim’s relatives, when searching for remains. To remove his genitals serves no logical purpose. This represents a symbol of manhood and the ability to procreate. Removing this only serves the purpose to humiliate. Soldiers are not only trained to kill, but to demoralize.

Stereotypes not only assist in dehumanizing enemies, but are also a powerful tool in societal relations. Contemporary films contain many stereotypes, but they often go unnoticed. This is because films seem irrelevant in shaping opinion. Asian stereotypes still exist in present-day society from WWII and Vietnam. The modern media portrays Asian characters as sneaky and deviant. The Asians typically out-smart or contain skills that the Americans desire. They are also presented with slanted eyes and contain a yellowish skin color. The Asians are commonly viewed as foreigners and continually present a threat of danger. As children, the population slowly absorbs these stereotypes, which allows racism to develop in the future. Today, slang terms such as gook, chink, and nip are all used to describe the Asian race. Stereotyping does not easily disappear. It helped to assist the American soldiers in dehumanizing the enemy in Vietnam and may still be useful for possible future wars to soldiers of the current generation.

14 Ibid.
Vietnam is unlike other wars, because there was no direct enemy. This was not like the Germans or Japanese in World War II. Vietnam was split between the oppressed South Vietnamese and the oppressive, communist North Vietnamese. Their identity was indistinguishable. “Training regimes prepared them for ‘flesh-and-blood, fully mortal, and therefore vulnerable’ targets – it did not prepare them for an eerie enemy ‘who does not seem to be present.’”\(^\text{15}\) The Vietnamese villagers were indistinguishable; therefore, everyone became the enemy. All Vietnamese had the potential to kill, even children. Soldiers lived in a constant fear of danger. In training, soldiers were taught that Vietnamese children carried grenades and women held razor blades in their vagina.\(^\text{16}\) Innocent villagers in the south were targeted because American soldiers were trained to believe all Vietnamese could be a source of potential death.

The threat of death was not only prevalent for individual soldiers, but for the company as well. A fellow soldier’s life was just as important as one’s own. An officer stated that, “The enemy is the most important. It binds the unit together.”\(^\text{17}\) Soldiers are isolated from the outside world; therefore their unit becomes a new family. They share a common bond, which is living in fear of the enemy. Soldiers are brainwashed to believe the importance of brotherhood. An officer said, “If seeing your friend’s head blown off doesn’t motivate you, there is something wrong with you.”\(^\text{18}\) It is arguable that no amount of training can ever encourage one to kill.

Killing has to stem from fear or anguish. The death of a brother is, for many, enough

\(^{15}\) Bourke, 65.

\(^{16}\) Anderson, 173.

\(^{17}\) Anybody’s Son Will Do.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
to seek revenge. If this is not enough, the choice of preserving one’s life is enough to kill.
Chapter Two

Malcolm Browne’s

“Self-Immolation”
Fire is a symbol of progress. Like the beginning of the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam, its spark is small, but with increased tension, continues to build. Fire has the ability to either ignite or destroy. The Buddhist movement was fueled by a self-immolation of an elderly Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc. Duc’s sacrifice ignited a movement to destroy the totalitarian Diem regime in Saigon. Much like propaganda, Duc’s immolation was strategically planned to capture the attention of the press. Malcolm Browne, an Associated Press photographer, would capture one of the most controversial photos of the Vietnam War. His photograph represents not only an image of sacrifice, but also a message of desire. Duc’s immolation was a desire to pay tribute to a group of innocent victims who were recently murdered by the Diem regime at an event on the Buddha’s birthday. The immolation was not only significant because of this, but it brought attention to the injustice faced by the Buddhists in Vietnam.

Eastern religions have not had a significant presence in American culture, in comparison to the country’s Christian roots. Buddhism, a traditional eastern religion, is familiar to Americans, but they are not well versed in its teachings. Therefore, without detailed education, Americans rely on media images to create a visual and mental representation of the religion. Media can influence stereotypes. Through stereotyping, misinterpretations are inevitable, because stereotyping is often bias. Stereotyping is a form of dehumanization because it creates an inaccurate, preconceived image. When relying on western images of Buddhism, one visualizes a passive bald male in a robe who meditates. This image incorporates elements of the Buddhist faith, but is far from a complete understanding. Perhaps this symbolized the
intention of Duc’s immolation – to highlight the ignorance of the Americans toward the Vietnamese culture. In the Sutta Nipata, the Buddha states, “It is ignorance which smothers and it is heedlessness and greed which make the world invisible.”\textsuperscript{19} Self-sacrifice is not uncommon to the Buddhist faith, but is often overlooked. Therefore, when the American public viewed a monk surrounded by flames, the image of peace and fire did not add up. Because the history behind self-sacrifice was unknown, the origin of its intent remained unseen. Americans perceived the act as a cry for help; however, it was also a political movement to remove an oppressive regime.

Suicides can be interpreted in many different ways. In American culture, suicides are predominantly viewed as wrong, because most Western religions consider the act a sin. “Catholics, as well as many Protestants and Jews, consider suicide essentially an act of homicide – and therefore a sin.”\textsuperscript{20} Western religions are bound to a monotheistic God, who has granted his followers the gift of life in return for good deeds. These religions are comprised of rules or commandments that comply with God’s will. Suicide is therefore an act against God, the ultimate sin. Traditionally, those who commit suicide are depicted as evil and are shunned by those


who observe religion. The immolation was viewed as a sacrifice rather than a suicide. Perhaps Westerners were able to sympathize with Duc, because Christianity is based around self-sacrifice. Jesus Christ is said to have sacrificed himself in order to absolve the sins of others. This is a parallel that Western cultures are familiar with.

Duc’s immolation can also be interpreted differently from a psychological viewpoint. The phenomenological approach in psychology focuses on individual existence and the experience of the self. From this approach, suicide is viewed as the ultimate form of control. Each individual is subject to death; there is no control over this. Suicide allows an individual to choose the date, time, and how one’s death will occur. In a sense, suicide is then a release from control. This thinking views suicide as an act of empowerment. It gives authority to the individual. Duc’s suicide mirrors this thinking, in that; he could be released from the control of an oppressive Diem regime. The regime could no longer control him.

Most Vietnamese Buddhists, “follow the Mahayana Buddhism acquired from China.”²¹ “Mahayana seeks the welfare of all, and salvation is obtained through the aid of Bodhisattvas, saintly humans who voluntarily refrain from entering the final blessed state of Nirvana in order to act as helpers of humanity.”²² Duc was viewed as a Bodhisattvas, because of his revered position within the Buddhist faith. Duc’s immolation was not out of anger or despair, but an act to save the religion. In the Buddhist faith, death through fire is not seen as a violent act, but a sacrifice. Fire is not an act of violence, but an element of nature. A Buddhist bonze (monk) said, “And in the Lotus Flower scriptures it is written that burning the self is allowed in the

²¹ Ibid., 151.
²² Ibid., 152.
case of forgetting the small self. If one loves the small self, one cannot love the others. So, the first reason for burning is to destroy the small self. The second is to protect Buddhism. But burning would be permitted only for those two reasons.”

For many Buddhists, suicide is viewed as a transitional stage, especially in the Vietnamese culture. “Very rarely – an elderly Buddhist monk approaching death would burn himself to reach Nirvana more quickly. But before 1963, there had been no martyrs in Vietnamese history.” Suicide is not encouraged in Vietnamese culture or Buddhism. The self-immolations were seen as sacrifices. A Buddhist monk claimed, “And in the Mahayana ceremony of ordination, the monk-candidate must burn one or more small spots on his body. When uttered while kneeling before the community of sangha (group of monks) and experiencing this kind of pain, the vows express all the seriousness of one’s heart and mind.” They served the purpose of serving the bigger self. In Saigon, the government favored Catholicism, while Buddhism became inferior. The Buddhists faced a continued struggle to gain equality, which damaged the spirit of the religion. The Buddhists fought to maintain their religious equality from a government force. Religion is a personal right that should not be dictated by the government. Unlike property, religion is a mindset and a way of life. When a religion is deemed unequal, a quality of the individual is demeaned. A Buddhist follower Minh stated, “When your religion is threatened, you realize how much it means to you. But you see, today the idea of Buddhism and the

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23 Ibid., 152.
24 Ibid., 151.
25 Ibid., 152.
idea of freedom go together. It’s not just our country, it’s our way of living we want to defend.”

A Buddhist Minh states, “Many Buddhists had read the works of Gandhi and Martin Luther King and had followed closely with the civil rights movement in the United States. But there was a centuries-long tradition of passive resistance against tyranny in Vietnam, as well – a tradition that included sit-downs, fasting, and quiet non-cooperation with authorities.”

The problem with quiet demonstrations is that they can be silenced. There is a point, where activism needs to be increased to send a message of change. Although it is necessary to send a message of change, activism should remain non-violent, as stated in Buddhist teachings. Political activism arises because groups often feel they are oppressed. In Vietnam, the Buddhists had been oppressed since the French imperial rule. “Diem had retained the French imposed Decree #10, which labeled Buddhism as an association rather than a religion. While the French had used this law to limit the authority of Buddhists and increase the power of their Catholic supporters, Diem’s refusal to throw out the onerous law served as a constant reminder to Buddhists of their inferior status in South Vietnam despite their claim to represent over 80 percent of the populace.”

An association implies that the Buddhist religion was more of a group with a common bond than a faith. This infuriated the Buddhists, because their faith was devalued. To devalue a religion is to claim that its beliefs are invalid. This not only effects the present, but

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26 Ibid., 157.
27 Ibid., 157.
the ancestors who brought Buddhism into historical importance. The Vietnamese revered their ancestors, and to insult the history of Buddhism, would insult their ancestors as well. Religion in Vietnam is not only a belief, but also a way of life.

Religion is not a story that most journalists strive to cover. Journalists often seek stories of murder, rape, and conflict to achieve front-page status. There is an expression in journalism that states – If it bleeds, it leads. Although the statement is realistic, it violates the code of journalist ethics. This statement became prevalent in journalism because of the public’s fascination with conflict. Richard Pyle, former Saigon bureau chief states, “The real job of photojournalists is to show events and tell a story as honestly as possible, not push a political agenda. If a certain photo has the effect of ‘shocking the uninterested,’ that may be a useful result but for a news-photographer, it should not be the first purpose.”

Many journalists become insensitive in searching for the story to shock the world. Individuals become faces without a name. Although journalists are not trained to dehumanize their subjects, like the military, dehumanization occurs. Journalists tend to forget that after the story is published, the subjects will continue life outside of the printed article. It is those journalists that maintain an interest in human life that obtain the Pulitzer.

In journalism, religion is often placed on the back burner. It is true that stories of religion are always in the news, but they are always accompanied by conflict. Stories about individuals and their religious experiences are placed in editorial pieces of Sunday journals for readers to glance at, if time permits. However, when blood or conflict is associated with religion, stories about religion become more

29 Pyle, Richard, interview by author, online, January 8, 2011.
appealing. Why has religion become secondary to conflict? Historically speaking, religion is the source of most wars, either because of misinterpretations or feelings of religious superiority. Religious conflict arises because religion gives significant meaning to life, for some. Each religion creates a meaning and purpose behind life and the hardships that one endures. To those who observe religion, religion is the foundation for one’s beliefs. To invalidate one’s religion, is to invalidate existence. Unlike speech, hearing, or body movement, religion is a belief that cannot be taken away. To religious worshipers, it is a faith that cannot be beaten out by any amount of force and is too strong to convert. Because it cannot be taken away, it is threatening.

Governments often use religion as a tool to dehumanize. The aggressor can either transform a religion into a source of evil (like what occurred to the Jews in the Holocaust) or strip religion from their outward identity (what occurred in Vietnam). In various news sources, America always fought the Vietcong or protected the South Vietnamese. Neither group contained a religion. They were not Taoists, Buddhists, or Confucians. Why? It is easy to sympathize toward an individual with religion, because religion is the greatest source of one’s identity. The American public became ignorant to many customs and traditions that accompanied the background of the Vietnamese. The U.S. projected them with no religion, therefore, this got in the way of understanding the immolation. Without background knowledge, the American public only perceived what was represented in the photograph. To Americans this was simply a resistance from Communism; however, the Buddhists saw an entirely different picture.
“In a case like Vietnam, and in war, there is so much drama and sometimes horror that many photos will have shock effect without the photographer having to look for it,” states Richard Pyle. In the summer of 1963, the Buddhist demonstrations continued throughout Saigon. Many journalists grew disinterested and viewed them more as a nuisance than anything, according to Browne. Without conflict, demonstrations seem boring. The cause alone is not enough. “Because of what I knew about the Buddhist tradition in Vietnam, I realized that it had to be taken seriously. So while other correspondents got tired of the endless street demonstrations that were going on, I stuck with them, because I had the sense that sooner or later something would happen,” Browne stated. Browne remained interested in the cause of the Buddhist movement. He was rewarded with their respect. Browne would be tipped about the upcoming immolation, partly due to his interest and the Buddhists’ desire for the press to be present. Duc Nghiep, a Buddhist who was fluent in English made the call that said, “We shall hold a meeting tomorrow morning at eight A.M. I would advise you to come. Something very important may happen.” The same call would be made to various other news members, but Browne would be the only one to show. This Buddhist cause was clearly an issue of civil rights. Without conflict, civil rights demonstrations are often over-looked. If the message had foretold of self-immolation, there would have been a brawl to publish

30 Ibid.

the first camera shot. Without this detail, Browne would be the only one standing. Because Browne cared enough to respect the religion, he would have the opportunity to capture the picture that would alter the perception of the Buddhist religion in Vietnam.

Malcolm Browne would capture the most chilling religious image from the Vietnam War. His memory would be forever disturbed by the sight and smell of two scents that lingered in the air on June 11, 1963. “The long, brown joss sticks that burn at Buddhist holy places and homes throughout South Vietnam generate a pleasing fragrance said to find favor with ghosts. But the smell of joss sticks is one that I shall never be able to dissociate from the ghastly smell of burning human flesh,” he stated. Readers and viewers overlook authors and photographers in favor of lasting stories and images. One can read a beautiful column or glance at a stunning photograph and forget the writer or photographer within a few hours or minutes. This is not the case for journalists. The journalists that capture these events will forever remember their existence. It may not be the exact time or date, but a specific element will be remembered from each story. In this case, it was the smell of burning human flesh. Journalists are forced to develop a delayed reaction to pain. “As shock photography goes, it was hard to beat. It’s not something that I’m particularly proud of. If one wants to be gruesome about it, it was a very easy sequence of photos to take,” said Browne. When looking through a camera lens, one tends to dissociate from the situation. Similar to watching a movie, the viewer has the ability to focus on the images, but fails to realize the crunching of popcorn or the presence of the theatre.

33 Ibid., 1.
34 Ferrari, 101.
The actual surroundings become secondary, because the brain has the ability to concentrate on one aspect. “I think combat photographers are very conscious of the idea that the real fear comes later, after they get home and develop their film and have a look at what they were through,”35 Browne continues.

The actions required in handling a camera take the emphasis off the focal point. While the photographer is pre-occupied with the precision of the focus and emphasizing certain features, their mind has the ability to temporarily block senses and sounds. This is partly due to adrenaline. When one is excited, fear is removed. Once the picture is captured the excitement fades and the photographer is reminded of the elements. For Browne, the smell of human flesh represented the horror behind the photograph. This is not something that can be captured through photos or even film, but something only those who are present experience. This is the element that viewers forget. The burning of human flesh is a scent that many are fortunate not to encounter. In other forms of self-sacrifice, such as gun wounds, self-mutilation, or hanging, there is no immediate foul smell. Fire physically burns the skin until all of the nerves and organs are unable to function. This creates a smell that is powerful enough to remain present for extended periods of time, allowing the memory of the execution to linger as well. Unlike other forms of suicide, burning is not instantaneous. The victim can remain alive for several moments to reveal the anguish behind the suffering. This method of suicide highlights true pain and emphasizes the intention of the sacrifice. This method of death removes the possibility to dehumanize, because it is impossible to avoid the vision of suffering.

On the morning of June 11, 1963, Browne would witness an elderly monk, whose immolation would change the course of American involvement in Saigon. “Three other monks were walking from the car side by side to the center of the circle. One of them placed a small brown cushion on the pavement, and the monk in the center sat down on it, crossing his legs in the traditional position of Buddhist meditation known as the ‘lotus posture,’”36 said Browne. What Browne would witness was a monk sitting in a position of inner peace. The lotus position is an element of the Buddhist faith that is used in meditation. The monk’s posture would symbolize a recognizable symbol of the Buddhist culture that is familiar even to those who do not practice. What occurred next did not symbolize peace. Malcolm Browne said, “there was a human element to it that was just horrifying, because the sequence of pictures showed the initial shock of the flames touching his face, and so forth. He never cried out or screamed, but you could see from his expression that he was exposed to intense agony, and that he was dying on the spot – and then, in the end, when the body was rigidly burned, they couldn’t stuff him in a casket because he was splayed out in all directions.”37 In the photograph or film alone, one cannot witness the anguish on Duc’s face. The shot is too far away to reveal these features. In comparison, the film highlights the number of viewers that witnessed the event. No one tried to protest or stop the immolation from occurring. This suicide is not comparable to friends or family that attempt to end their lives. It was not done out of spite or self-hatred, but for a cause, much greater than individual life. Richard Pyle states, “The Buddhists claimed they wanted only to be able to practice their religion without interference, but

36 Browne, 3.
37 Ferrari, 101.
they became so politicized that some were willing to sacrifice themselves in spectacular and gruesome suicides by fire to embarrass Diem’s regime and turn world opinion against it.”

It is important to understand that Buddhism was not the national religion of Vietnam, but was widely practiced. “President Ngo Dinh Diem and most members of his Government are Roman Catholics. Nearly 80 percent of the people of Vietnam are Buddhists,” during Diem’s reign. Buddhists made up a majority of South Vietnam, but were being subject to oppression by a dictator-like minority regime. Like the fire, the Buddhist protest movement would start off small, but would escalate as quickly as paper catches to fire. Buddhists are pacifists and do not promote violence of any sort. This was the main point of the immolations. Fire does not create violence toward anyone but the self. The photograph particularly shocked Americans, because our culture tends not to associate Buddhists with the political sphere. This is a fault that is created through stereotyping. Although, Buddhists are pacifists, the religion is simply a way of life, not a diversion from politics.

Duc’s immolation was the result of a previously ignored law that would be imposed by the Diem regime. “In April 1963, the government ordered provincial officials to enforce a long-standing but generally ignored ban on the public display of religious flags. The order came just after the officially encouraged celebrations in Hue commemorating the 25th anniversary of the ordination of Ngo Dinh Thuc, the

38 Pyle, interview.
Archbishop of Hue, during which Papal flags had been prominently flown.”

To be forbidden to fly a religious flag is the equivalent of removing a cross from a church. Religious symbols are sources of history and pride within the religious community. The provision to remove all religious flags arrived before the celebration of Buddha’s birthday. The Buddhists were advised not to fly flags in honor of their leader, while the papal flags still had the permission to be displayed. In respect of their religion, many Buddhists proudly displayed their flags and attended celebrations of the holiday. Diem’s regime viewed this as an insult toward the government and ordered the crowds to be broken up. Even when the Buddhists resisted without violence, the military opened fire on the crowd, killing nine, some children. “Armored vehicles allegedly crushed some of the victims. The Diem government subsequently put out a story that the Vietcong agent had thrown a grenade into the crowd and that the victims had been crushed in a stampede. It steadfastly refused to admit responsibility even when neutral observers produced films showing government troops firing on the crowd.”

The Diem regime not only killed innocent victims in a celebration, but also refused to take blame. The blame was diverted to another party to remove fault from the government. When innocent lives are taken, there is no sense of closure in death. There is no reasoning behind the cause; therefore, it can never be put to rest. The government minimized its people to the point of not deserving justice, equality, or an apology.

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41 Ibid., 217.
Thich Quang Duc offered a plea to the government. “The good monk’s plea had been simple: “I pray to Buddha to give light to President Ngo Dinh Diem, so that he will accept the five minimum requests of the Vietnamese Buddhists. Before closing my eyes to go to Buddha, I have the honor to present my words to President Diem, asking him to be kind and tolerant towards his people and enforce a policy of religious equality.” The Buddhist demands were as follows: “The request of the Buddhists that their priests be allowed greater freedom in teaching Buddhism. No terrorism or arrest of Buddhist priests. Buddhists demands that the Government officers responsible for the Hue killings be punished and that the Government admit responsibility for the incident and legally pay compensation to the families of the victims.” These requests would serve in addition to the request to fly Buddhist flags. While the Diem government attempted to appease the Buddhists, their compromises fell short. The Buddhists were given permission to fly the Buddhist flag with the national flag on religious holidays. The government agreed to give monetary aid to the families who lost members in the shooting, but not the term “compensation.” This term would place blame on the government for the killings. The most important point of the five presented by the Buddhists would continue to be ignored. Because the government did not admit to the killings, the deaths remained


invalidated. This infuriated many Buddhists, especially those in the younger generation. Since the resolution was never completed, riots continued to exist between the Buddhists and the government for years. The immolation brought worldwide attention to the ruthlessness of the Saigon government and their treatment of the Buddhist population. The American government pressured the Diem regime to solve the problem, but Diem’s government simply discredited the Buddhist cause. “Suicide as an anti-Government tactic is a ‘camouflage’ of political motivation. We are living in a climate of formidable intoxication,” Mr. Nhu stated. *The New York Times* reported, “He said that ‘intoxication’ has been communicated to Americans and others with the help of the foreign press.” Although the press contributed to the publicity of the Buddhist cause, the press cannot be blamed for revealing a situation of injustice. When the unequal treatment by the government was revealed, the Diem family attempted to hide from its faults. “Mme. Nhu publicly ridiculed the Buddhist suicide as a ‘barbeque,’ accused the Buddhist leaders of being infiltrated with communists, and construed the protest movement as Viet Cong inspired.” Whether immolations are illegal or not, labeling them a barbeque, does not invalidate their cause. Ridicule is used to mask discomfort. By comparing the immolations to a barbeque, where meat is roasted, Nhu attempted to dehumanize the cause. Because


45 Ibid., 2.

46 Gettleman, 219.
the cause was too great to mask, this only highlighted her insensitivity. The Diem regime could not escape condemnation as oppressive.

The Americans became outraged towards the Diem government, as a result of the immolations. They interpreted Duc’s sacrifice as a message of help towards the United States; however, this was not the message that was intended. “Gen. Paul D. Harkins has ordered American military advisers to stay away from their assigned South Vietnamese units if those units are used to suppress demonstrations by Buddhists.”

It is ironic that the United States military was ordered to avoid the dispute, when it was the initial cause. To the Vietnamese, the United States was viewed as an imperialist like the Chinese and French before. They did not understand the Vietnamese culture. This was highlighted in the misinterpretation of the immolation. The United States was not the savior, but a country whose ambitions were not to be trusted. The problem with America’s interpretation of Duc’s message is that America could not find its own fault in the problem. After a coup of the Diem regime, the Buddhist problem continued to exist. Thich Tri Quang would become the new leader and symbol for the Buddhist movement. Even after the fall of the Diem regime, Quang would remain critical of President Khanh and the other regimes to follow. The United States could no longer place blame on the Diem government, therefore, blame fell on the new leader. The CIA labeled Quang as, “a fanatic nationalist, undoubtedly anxious to see the U.S. out of Vietnam at the earliest possible

Maxwell Taylor “ominously described him as ‘the most effective and dangerous politician in Vietnam.’" The American government placed blame on the continued Buddhist movement and their new leader, because a new source of evil had to be revealed. When an enemy is no longer in existence, America could no longer be the good guys.

Duc’s self-immolation would certainly shock the world. Duc would become a revered symbol in Vietnamese history because of his sacrifice. The “monks in charge of burning the body claimed that Quang Duc’s heart would not burn. A singed piece of meat purporting to be the heart was preserved in a glass chalice, becoming and object of worship.” Duc’s heart would represent his admiration for the bigger self and the Buddhist religion. This message would become clouded by the Saigon and American government, but remained clear to the Vietnamese people. In the years that followed 1963, the Buddhist movement would become more aggressive toward the American backed governments. Countless other Buddhists would burn themselves and demonstrations would continue. Whether this was Duc’s intention, it is unclear. Although many in the American government accused the Buddhist monks of being militant in the years following 1963, it is unfair to categorize future movements with that of Duc. Duc’s purpose served to bring to light the Buddhist struggle and those who unjustly died at the Buddha birthday celebration. His message would inspire revolutionists to seek change for years to come. Recently, “an unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouaziz, doused himself with paint thinner and lit a match on Dec. 17,

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48 Topmiller, 23.
49 Topmiller, 23.
50 Browne, 3.
2010. His desperate act set off street clashes that ultimately toppled the country’s autocratic ruler, and inspired nearly a dozen other men to set themselves on fire in Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania. Self-immolations provide hope in cases of oppression. Sometimes sacrifice is necessary, because a self can never be at peace if elements of one’s individuality are invalidated. A political agenda like the one pictured in the immolation photo can also be seen in the Saigon Execution photograph in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Eddie Adams’

“Saigon Execution”
The photograph is black and white, a staple of Eddie Adams’ photography. Adams stated, “All war should be done in black and white. Film that is printed in black and white projects a more gruesome picture. Emotion is the central theme because there is no color scheme to distract the viewer. “It’s more primitive; color tends to make things too nice. It makes the jungle in Vietnam look lush – which it was. But it wasn’t nice.”\(^{52}\) The photograph, titled, “Saigon Execution,” depicts a South Vietnamese soldier shooting a Vietcong suspect. The message that the photograph should project is that the good guys are killing the bad guys. This is essentially the perfect photograph for war photographers. The single shot captures the horror of war. The Saigon Execution differs from the other photographs because it displays immediate violence. Murder is a common theme in war, but it is rarely captured at such an intimate viewpoint. The photograph is remembered because its content contained violence unparalleled in previous wars, but it also set a standard for the infinite possibilities of future war photography.

Eddie Adams obtained the Pulitzer Prize based on the response of this photograph. This photograph altered the American public’s perception of the Vietnam War. Horst Faas, the Saigon bureau photo editor in 1968, described the photograph as impeccable. Faas stated that, “[It was] the perfect newspicture – the perfectly framed and exposed ‘frozen moment’ of an event which I felt instantly would become representative of the brutality of the Vietnam War.”\(^{53}\) The photograph


is simple, yet complex. It is the perfectly executed photograph, however, the picture is nothing without a caption. Photographs are beautiful and have the ability to display history unlike any other form of communication. However, photographs can be deceitful, if not properly studied. Like in any contract, there is always a fine print. The important information is scrolled over, because once one thinks the message is understood, background information becomes irrelevant. In war there is always a story, there is always a meaning, therefore, background is never insignificant. Adams’ photograph faced a problem that many journalistic photographs experience—failing to read the caption. When glancing at the photograph, there is one clear message: the Vietcong suspect dies and the others walk away free. One life was literally taken that day, however, one other would be destroyed and another would be haunted forever. This is a caption that is not written behind the photograph, but a story covered underneath the lines. The resolution of the photograph is crystal clear, however, the intentions of the subjects would become blurred throughout history. In essence, “the perfect news picture” would be destroyed.

Eddie Adams took the photograph of the Saigon Execution on the second day of the Tet Offensive. Militarily speaking, Tet was a victory for the American and South Vietnam military, as many North Vietnamese were taken hostage or killed. The VC attempted to take control of South Vietnamese cities during the first day of the new lunar year. This initial fighting shocked the Americans, but the fighting was quickly contained. Although Tet was a military victory, it created an enormous uproar at home. To the public, Tet was reminiscent of the French at Dienbienphu.
The media images did not parallel the major victory that the American government claimed.

Photographs during Tet depicted the Vietcong breaking into the U.S. Embassy and various accounts of fighting in the streets. The perception of the images drastically altered the situation for the worse. Adams’ photograph was taken relatively early in the Tet Offensive and in an area that contained a mini battle. The background of the photograph is a street in the Saigon area around a Buddhist pagoda “in an area where Saigon becomes Cholon, the Chinese section of the capital.”

Horst Faas describes the situation that day by saying, “Eddie teamed up with one of NBC’s most experienced cameramen – NBC was an office neighbor of AP and tips and transport were often shared. Eddie and Vo Su were driven slowly towards the area where fighting was reported, then walked when they found the streets had become abandoned and litter from a fight was visible.” If one looks closely at the background, there is literally no one in the street aside from soldiers and the one captured suspect. The area is far from the main sections of battle and occurred at a time when the Vietnamese Marines captured the pagoda back from the Vietcong. In war terms, this was a win. The suspect was captured and the territory was returned.

As Adams saw the prisoner taken aside, the general pulled out a pistol. This is a typical scene in warfare. Prisoners are held hostage and often interrogated at gunpoint. The fear of death is a decisive tool in recovering held information. This situation is normal in war; however, in seconds the normalcy of the situation would be erased. The captain pulled the trigger at the exact moment the camera snapped the

54 Ibid., 2.
55 Ibid., 2.
photo. Adams would continue to snap a sequence of photos that would reveal the
detail in which the prisoner died. Vo Su would film the event at the same time. The
moment would be captured in two different lights.

Shortly before the Tet Offensive, television sets in America acquired color
vision. The execution would not only be displayed in black and white, but in color as
well. The color brought a vivid element to the execution. The blood did not appear
dark black on a gray scale, but red. The same color of red that everyone bleeds. The
film would be distributed to major news-outlets in America during nightly
programming and the photograph would appear on television, magazines,
newspapers, and became a piece of propaganda for the anti-war demonstrations in
both America and North Vietnam.

This image appears to be a normal war photograph, however, it became a
decisive moment in history. The photograph caused a great divide within the
American public about the point of the war. This led to massive turmoil in the United
States, ranging from the government to the public. Adams stated, “The hawks
complained that the media should get on the team, and the doves and anti-war
demonstrators held up the picture as an example of the brutality of the people allied
with the U.S.”\textsuperscript{56} The photograph led many to question the intentions of the American
cause. To many, the Vietcong member in the picture was no longer dehumanized.
His blood, like the blood of the Americans, had the same capability of bleeding. He
was human and vulnerable to pain too. The photograph shocked the American public
because war photography in previous wars did not depict violence in this magnitude.

\textsuperscript{56} Adams, 144.
Violence did exist, but images did not. Therefore, if the public is shielded from knowledge of atrocities, they do not exist in their minds.

This picture contributed greatly to the events of 1968 and even led a journalist to shift from a vow of neutrality. During the events of Tet, Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America, flew to Vietnam to witness the situation first-hand. Cronkite stated, “All that optimism and here were the Vietcong right in the city of Saigon. That was what turned so many of us at that point into saying: ‘This is the end. Stop it.’” When Walter Cronkite publicly denounced the war, many of the viewers followed. This would invoke a strong sense of paranoia in President Johnson and led to his announcement of not seeking re-election. The photograph revealed a side of the American cause that proved unsettling to many. Was the photograph accurate in portraying the truth?

Photographs simply depict scenes. Sight alone is a rocky foundation for one to rely on. Without words, there is no proof that the picture accurately reveals the situation to the viewer. Adams said, “And the picture can be a lie. But that person will look at that, and it’s real, and it becomes a real thing. So pictures are a lot more important than people think. You know what they say. The written word is bullshit. The picture is what does it!” Pictures are often relied on more heavily than words because pictures appear to have no prejudice. The pictures do not lie, but the interpretation can be a lie. Written words are hard to trust, because they are accompanied by the element of human opinion. Pictures do not contain direct human opinion; therefore, one believes that the interpretation of a picture is simply enough.

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58 Adams, 147.
When glancing at the photograph, it is easy to see an element of evil; however, war is evil. Evil cannot be eliminated from war. There is a Vietcong member, dressed in a plaid shirt and black pants. His hair is blown to one side as a result of the shooting. His clothes are ordinary and resemble something that an average citizen would wear. A historian writes, “On television we see his black shorts, clothing we associate with relaxation.” His clothes humanize the victim. Suddenly, the viewer’s eyes are drawn to his face, the face of the now fellow human. The bullet strikes his head, his hair is blown back and there is a grimace of pain on his face. This is an expression of pain that is relatable to anyone who has experienced anguish of some sort. Next, the eyes shift to General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who is the apparent villain in this scene. Although Loan is a member of our team, this is erased from immediate memory. His back is to the camera, showing only a side angle of his face. The viewer immediately disregards that Loan is human too, and focuses on the gun. His muscles are flexed, revealing an element of strength. This is a strength that overpowers the helpless victim. “We see an ear, but Loan seems to lack a human face. We move easily from noticing the shape of his head, and his ill-fitting flack jacket, to equating oddity with inhuman behavior.” Loan in this process is dehumanized. This photograph demonstrates that once a different subject is


60 Ibid., 424.
dehumanized, public opinion has the ability to shift. In the background, there is an empty street, drawing direct attention to the execution. In the corner, there is a fellow South Vietnamese soldier, who appears to have a smile on his face. This creates an illusion of the soldier mocking the victim. From this perspective, it is understandable to see how this photograph would induce public outrage. This is not the whole story. As Adams states, “When you look at a photograph, you’re looking at 1/500th of a second and it’s a moment. It doesn’t tell you why that happened. It doesn’t tell you much. You don’t see all sides of it.”

A life would be destroyed that day, but not the one of the Vietcong suspect. Loan’s life would be destroyed, but this was not mentioned in the accompanied article. It is a part of history that cannot be revealed by a photograph.

This photograph, unlike others, contained an obvious aggressor and victim. The American public viewed the VC suspect as the victim. This innocent man appeared to be helpless in the hands of the ruthless South Vietnamese general. The Vietcong guerilla was simply a villager fighting for independence and freedom. The suspect was simply a Vietnam citizen fighting against oppression. To general Loan, however, this was not an innocent civilian. Loan stated in an interview that, “He [the suspect] is Nguyen Tan Dat, alias Hon San. He is the commander of a VC sapper unit.” To Loan, this was the enemy that he was trained to kill. More specifically, Dat became a personal enemy to Loan. Moments before the execution, Dat had killed Loan’s fellow soldier, along with the soldier’s wife and kids. Loan stated, “They tell me that he had a revolver, that he wounded one of my policemen, that he spit in the

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61 Adams, 147.
62 Culbert, 426.
face of the men who captured him.” Dat’s wife would confirm in an interview with John Hart that he was in fact a member of the Vietcong. War is an unfair situation because opinion differs on both sides. One’s enemy is another’s hero. Dat’s wife would say that, “I hate the leeches of the people and those who are the slaves for the imperialists who killed my husband. Even though I am old and weak, if I learn where he is I am ready to kill him.” To Dat’s widow, Dat was simply her husband who was fighting for a cause. On the other hand, Loan too, was fighting for a cause. Loan became a victim himself of a friend’s death because of Dat. Neither party was completely innocent in this situation. There is no cause that is more justified than the other. However, while Dat was sacrificed for his cause, Loan became subject to massive amounts of ridicule for the remainder of his life.

Adams’ was assigned to do a cover-story on Loan after the photograph had been published. Much to Adams’ surprise, Loan was not filled with hatred or animosity. Loan stated, “You know, after the picture appeared my wife scolded me. She told me that I should have taken the film away from the photographer.” This might have been the course of action for many officers in the military, but to Loan, Adams was simply doing his job. Adams’ job was to cover the story and Loan’s job was to defend the cause. Adams simply took a picture and won a Pulitzer Prize. Loan defended the name of his fellow soldier and the American cause and became demeaned by the Americans. After the execution, Loan said to Adams, “They killed

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63 Ibid., 426.
64 Ibid., 426.
65 Adams, 147.
many of my people, and yours, too.”66 As a result of public outcry over the photograph, the Americans shunned Loan. He was one of many who served the American cause, but reaped no benefits from the Americans.

The American government realized the picture displayed an image that highlighted fault. The picture revealed a South Vietnamese soldier executing a Vietcong guerilla. This should have induced support from the American public. Americans at this time were not accustomed to witnessing brutality, therefore, the graphic nature of the photograph created outrage. Loan should have been viewed as a hero, but instead carried the title of villain. Although the American government agreed with the actions of Loan, their support had to be hidden. In order to keep public opinion favorable toward the war, Loan had to be demeaned. “When General Loan was severely wounded while charring a Vietcong hideout three months later and taken to Australia for treatment, there was such an outcry there against him that he was moved to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, where he was repeatedly denounced in Congress.”67 Loan’s life contained no value to the Americans. He was not a life worth saving. Loan pleaded to the Americans to help him escape Saigon with his family, but his cries were ignored. He eventually would escape on his own and reside in Virginia. During this time, Loan and Adams would become close acquaintances. Adams continuously felt guilty because his photograph

66 Faas, The Saigon Execution, 3.
depicted Loan as a ruthless killer, when in reality he, “devoted time to showering presents on orphans.”

Because of the photograph, Loan’s life remained a struggle. He attempted to open a pizza shop, but the shop would close when his identity was revealed. A line on the restroom wall read, “We know who you are, you fucker.”

The photograph created a title for Loan that he could not escape. Like pictures, titles last forever, until proven otherwise. American society branded Loan with the title of ruthless killer. Loan attempted to live a peaceful life in America after the Vietnam War, but became a victim of unwarranted mistreatment. Loan fought for the American cause. The American public knew that the situation in Vietnam was unjustified, but they did not want to be the source of blame. Therefore, the blame was displaced onto Loan. In theory, the bullet that Loan used to execute a murderer of his friend bounced off the enemy and shot Loan instead. Loan would forever be wounded by this shot.

Eddie Adams was a Marine before he became a war photographer. He understood the ins and outs of battle and related to those in the military. Throughout his career, Adams, became an accredited photographer. His photographs mainly focused on celebrity portraits and war scenes. According to his book Eddie Adams: Vietnam, Adams covered thirteen different wars. Former colleagues remember Adams as continuously searching for the perfect photograph. Many in the journalism industry hail the “Saigon Execution” as the perfect photograph, but to Eddie, the photo produced more harm than good. Adams states in his documentary, An Unlikely Weapon: The Eddie Adams Story that, “When I saw the picture, I was not

68 Ibid, 1.
69 Adams, 148.
impressed, and I’m still not impressed.” Adams continuously critiqued the photograph for imperfections in framing and lighting. To Adams this was simply an average war photograph; it was nothing special. His work would become linked to this photograph, similar to how the photograph would be linked to the Vietnam War. The connection appeared inescapable. In reality, this photograph is not the most important photograph from the Vietnam War. Adams states, “it was a nothing story.” By contemporary standards, this photograph is milder in violent content than many video game graphics. Contemporary audiences have become more accustomed to violence because the media is more prone to displaying it. For centuries, warfare has remained the same. Although technology has advanced to kill differently, the basic structure of war is to kill. Adams’ photograph is revolutionary because it defied the boundaries of war journalism in previous wars. Again, this relates to the theory of dehumanization. The American public was certainly aware that atrocities were being committed in Vietnam, but the enemy was invisible. If violence is not shown, the public tends to disregard it. Adams’ photograph brought the image of merciless killing to the American public. The victim’s face was in full view: it showed a grimace of pain, the structure of cheekbones, and the out-pour of blood. The enemy gained a face and therefore, became human. The American public was confronted so viciously with violence that they could not ignore it. Once violence is personalized, it is difficult to avoid responsibility. A simple news


71 Adams, 144.
photograph became a turning point in the Vietnam War. The photograph would also be seen as a turning point in Adams’ career; however, it was a photograph that he resented. His son stated that, “[Adams] was never proud of the picture. It haunted him for the rest of his life.”

For Adams, this was a photograph that destroyed the life of general Loan. He continuously felt ashamed of the photograph and responsible for the negative impact it created for Loan. It is ironic that Adams is known for this particular photo, but he himself would refuse to display the photograph in many of his galleries.

After considering the background of the photograph and those who are involved, it gains another interpretation. In the background, there is an empty street. There is no fighting or any villagers present. Loan chose to shoot the victim in the daylight, but out of sight of any other viewers. This was not a public execution. The “victim” in the photograph is wearing plaid and black pants. This is not the common attire for a Vietnamese soldier. So, while it can be interpreted as being relaxed clothing, it also resembles deceitful attire. The clothing was not designed to invoke sympathy, but to disguise a Vietcong guerilla as an innocent bystander. This would make an attack easier on the South Vietnamese soldiers – it would be unexpected.

Loan’s face appears concentrated, as he is probably focusing on the loss of his friend. There is no smile, no mockery, but he is simply executing a task in memory of his friend. To Loan, this is the enemy. The fellow soldier in the background appeared to be smiling at first glance, however, his expression alters to an expression of pain or sorrow. Killing is not an easy sight to watch, but it is often necessary in war.

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72 Eddie Adams Doc in Theatres, 1.
Photographs depict scenes that are open for interpretation. No one will know the background, unless one digs deep within the meaning of the cause. Background plays a vital role in every photograph. The next photograph, Nick Ut’s “The Napalm Girl,” contains an inspirational history behind a tragedy.
Chapter Four

Nick Ut’s

“Napalm Girl”
The girl in the picture – the line is ambiguous within itself. The title alone could represent any picture and any girl. Perhaps this is symbolic of the intention of war, to keep the enemy anonymous and without meaning. However, much to the government’s dismay, the subject of the photograph would not remain anonymous. Known to many as the “Napalm Girl,” Phan Thi “Kim” Phuc would become a symbol of the Vietnam War. Associated Press photographer “Nick” Ut would not only capture the Pulitzer Prize, but the tragedy of war in one shot – the victim of an accidental bombing. Fox Butterfield of The New York Times reported the incident as an, “Accidental bombing like today’s is not a rare occurrence in Vietnam, but such mistakes are seldom reported in the official United States or South Vietnamese military communiqués.”

The American government entered the war to eliminate the Vietcong. Prior to entering the war, the American government dehumanized the Vietcong to evil communists. Therefore, while accidental bombings are frequent, they go unnoticed because the government seems to be fighting a just cause. However, this particular bombing unveiled a tragedy of war that was symbolized through a little girl running in terror from a napalm bomb. At nine years old, Kim Phuc did not appear to be the enemy, but rather a helpless child. Once the “invisible enemy” was revealed, many in the American public began to question the intention of the bombings, and who exactly was classified as the enemy.

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Perhaps the most shocking aspect of these photos is that they reveal accidental bombings are not rare, but rarely captured. “The two Skyraider aircraft of the VNAF bombed the edge of the village, near the Cai Dai pagoda, in a familiar pattern – first explosive bombs, then incendiary bombs – large containers with a mix of explosives, white phosphorous and the black oily napalm – and ending with heavy machinegun fire during closing strafing runs”\(^74\) In the Vietnam War, massive bombings were a frequent tactic used by the American government to eliminate the hidden enemy. Because the Vietcong were able to hide in underground tunnels or disguised in forests, fighting on foot was often a dangerous task for the American military. Therefore, bombing was seen as the more effective way of increasing the Vietcong body count. However, bombing is a less humane source of killing, which means more inaccuracy and less sympathy. It was by rare chance that the photograph that shocked the world was initially captured. Nick Ut was not the only journalist on the scene that day. Also present were David Burnett from Time Magazine, Hoang Van Danh a freelancer for United Press International (UPI) and AP, as well as, cameramen from BBC, ITN, NBC, and other organizations.\(^75\) As the other photographers were changing their film, Ut was able to capture the images emerging from the black smoke. Through the camera lens, Ut did not find silhouettes of a villainous Vietcong figure, but rather children.


\(^{75}\) Ibid., 3.
These were children who were running in fear and anguish, in the hopes of finding help to relieve the pain. This was an image that was infrequent in photography at the time and unprecedented with respect to the horrors shown in previous wars. Ut recalls, “We were short on film and my cameraman, the late, great Alan Downes, was worried that I was asking him to waste precious film shooting horrific pictures which were too awful to use. My attitude was that we needed to show what it was like, and to their lasting credit, ITN ran the shots.” Ut’s photograph and the accompanying film would reveal to the American public the fault of the American government. Misplaced bombs not only destroyed land, but killed innocent victims as well. Unfortunately, in aerial attacks all victims are fair game—children, women, men, and the elderly. For those involved and at home, the sight of a child being unjustly tortured was too much to bear.

The photograph contains many children emerging from the black smoke, however Phuc stands out among the rest. This is primarily because of nudity. The initial shot was airbrushed for reasons of taste. Richard Pyle, a former AP Saigon bureau chief states, “The Kim Phuc photo was airbrushed by AP for reasons of taste—most newspapers did not use pictures showing frontal nudity— but that applied only to the photo transmitted by wire; the original un-retouched version was widely published in magazines and later on the internet.” Exposing full frontal nudity was

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77 Pyle, interview.
an unprecedented practice at this time, because the American public was and still is unaccustomed to it.

It is a matter of fate that Phuc lived through the attack. Phuc states, “Panicking under the fire, I suddenly realized my feet had not been burned. At least I could run away. If my feet would have been burned, I would have died in the fire.”

So instead of perishing, Phuc was able to run into the site of the photograph that would alter her life forever. The viewer must remember that pictures are not fiction, but a documented reality. The subjects of pictures are forever altered by the circumstances in which they are captured. In this situation, the picture was vivid, gruesome, and difficult to swallow.

Glancing at the picture, one can see that Phuc is in obvious discomfort. While all the other children are clothed, Phuc is naked, revealing that she has been burned significantly more than the others. Because her clothes were on fire, Phuc had to remove them in order to avoid more drastic burns – this is a scary thought within itself. Her arms are wide and open, compared to the other children who run with their arms alternating forward and backward. Her feet also appear to be stumbling. This is related to the exposure of the napalm. Because her burns are significant, her body is forced to compensate for the lack of mobility. Aside from movement alone, in her face there is an expression of sheer terror and helplessness. Perhaps this was most effective in evoking emotion out of the viewers at home. Her look alone is how a

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child would run to their parent in search of help and relief. This is a sympathy that is relatable to the viewer and their own children. This is the type of sympathy that the government seeks to avoid. In Vietnam, in particular, the presence of an enemy was necessary to keep public opinion in favor of war. The sight of the little girl created sympathy for the Vietnamese, which discredited the United States government. Furthermore, this is a reaction that can only be produced by journalists in the midst of war. Which in turn, makes the job of a journalist so dangerous to those in the government.

As the photograph was distributed to news agencies across America, there developed a concern in the public about the fate of the “napalm girl.” Newspapers around America like The New York Times and The Washington Post posted stories about Phuc’s surgeries and recovery. It is interesting to note that stories about Kim Phuc were linked to the title of “napalm girl” or the “girl in the photo,” which highlights the role of dehumanization. Although there was a general concern for Phuc, her identity often remained unknown. The American government used dehumanization training in Vietnam to keep public and troop support. Although Phuc’s identity may have slipped the mind of some, her photograph remained a constant presence. Furthermore, because the photograph remained, questions about America’s intentions in Vietnam persisted.

As the American public questioned the intentions of the war, higher officials in the government like General Westmoreland attempted to discredit the photograph. General Westmoreland stated in a speech in Fort Lauderdale, FL that, “My God, if
she was hit by napalm, she would not have survived."\(^{79}\) Following the speech, he stated, “I said it was told to me that she was burned by hibachi.”\(^{80}\) Napalm is designed to destroy. While it is impossible to get rid of the burns, it is not impossible to survive. Those who are hit by napalm and survive are often subject to a life of excruciating pain. Are those who survive lucky? Clearly, Kim Phuc was not burned by a hibachi grill as the picture shows. Westmoreland’s statements reveal a sense of discomfort in revealing faults in the military’s warfare strategy. Westmoreland chose a Hibachi grill as the source of Phuc’s burn because Hibachi grills are typically associated with Asian culture. However, this is a generalization. Hibachi is a traditional style of cooking within the Japanese culture. Phuc was Vietnamese. Although those with Vietnamese and Japanese heritage are within the Asian culture, the comment contains a tone of slight racism and an attempt to remove the responsibility of harm displayed in the picture. General Westmoreland was a clear advocate for journalism censorship. *The Washington Post* reported, “Westmoreland said his comments about the photo were in the context of explaining how the press distorts news in foreign countries by applying domestic standards to what is news.”\(^{81}\) He implied that the media uses domestic standards of rape, violence, and murder to foreign news to make them newsworthy. Although these issues are happening

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80 Ibid., 1.
81 Ibid., 1.
abroad, they should remain newsworthy. Violence of any caliber is not acceptable whether foreign or domestic.

Although the Vietnamese girl was not in America, her pain really existed. There is no distortion within the photograph by the media, as the picture cannot begin to describe the atrocities these children faced. In fact, while Westmoreland argued most photographs are depicted for reasons of fame, Nick Ut risked his fame in order to save Kim Phuc. Without Ut’s assistance or photograph, the girl in the picture would cease to exist – an option that would be more appealing to those in the government. Even if the picture did not exist, Phuc would be forever exposed to the burns that would alter her life.

As Kim Phuc approached the journalists, Nick Ut remembered her screaming, “Too hot, too hot.” As a result of the napalm burning through her skin, Kim became both over-heated and severely dehydrated. “When the girl had stopped, Nick Ut and ITN correspondent Christopher Wain poured water from their canteens over her burns.” However, napalm is designed so that it cannot be commonly removed. This would defeat the purpose of the chemical, to make the enemy suffer. Therefore, Phuc was exposed to the same extreme. Napalm could not be removed by soap or water, but only minimally alleviated through hospitalization alone. Because Ut was South Vietnamese, he was able to communicate with the villagers to transport her to the hospital.

Journalists are taught to be neutral and to eliminate feelings from stories. However, no amount of schooling is able to eliminate sympathy. This also instills fear.

82 Faas, Nick Ut Recalls Events, 4.
83 Ibid., 4.
in the government towards the role of a journalist. Because a journalist maintains the
desire to help and inform the public, Ut was willing to risk his photograph from being
published to save Phuc. Nick Ut recalled, “When we reached there the hospital was
overcrowded with war injured people. I had the impression that the emergency nurse
who received us intended to hospitalize Kim Phuc, but not rush her to be treated –
considering her a hopeless case and to die sooner or later. I got through to a doctor
and explained who I was, what I had photographed and that Kim Phuc needs
immediate help.”

It is these situations that make the perception of victims of war drastically
different to journalists than those in the military. In combat, there is an “eye for an
eye” perception towards the enemy, because most in the military lose comrades to the
opposition. However, to a journalist, this is usually not the case. Journalists are
present to expose reality and the scene of war. Only Ut and Wain were able to
experience first-hand the extent of Phuc’s burns without being blinded by bias.
Therefore, it was easy to sense her vulnerability and unveil a sense of humanity
within the two journalists. Kim Phuc referred to Ut in an interview: “He saved my
life. He’s wonderful, isn’t he? I am so grateful that he didn’t only do his job, but
he’s a human being helping another.”

Although Kim Phuc was specially admitted, she would continue to endure the
pain from her scars for the rest of her life. “Kim stayed in the hospital for 14 months
and went through 17 operations, remaining in constant pain to this day.”

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85 Ibid., 1.
86 Lumb, 2.
appeared that the physical pain would never cease neither would the mental pain that accompanied her scars. Once South Vietnam fell to the communist regime, Kim Phuc became a symbol rather than a person. Phuc had the dream of becoming a doctor to help those who were also victims of war. Through government interference, she was no longer allowed to attend university in her hometown of Trang Bang, but was instead transferred to Ho Chi Minh City. Here she would be subject to greater control under the communist government. She never received monetary donations for her relief fund, because the government confiscated it. She was often forced out of classes to speak of the war in various countries across Europe. However, the colder climates would aggravate her condition, often causing hospitalization, and forcing her to miss classes. Phuc wouldn’t graduate from college until her late 20s. “When speaking to journalists, Phuc stepped into the spotlight and played the part of the happy student, the life she wanted; when they departed, she was left in darkness, with the life that had been forced on her.”

In many ways, the picture would diminish her identity. She was forced to relinquish her own sense of independence, childhood, and dreams because of the photograph. The life she was given was forced upon her. She resented the communist regime, because she involuntarily became a puppet for them. Her hidden life became synonymous with her scars, in that, they had the ability to be covered, but were always present. Because of her condition, she didn’t have the energy to practice medicine, but still had the urge to help. She wanted to visit the United States, but was blockaded by the government in fear of her leaving. It wasn’t until she was sent for schooling in Cuba that she was given the opportunity to escape

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to Canada on a honeymoon. Here she was presented with the freedom to reap the opportunities that the photograph could provide. Although the photograph initially caused Phuc pain, once she found freedom, the photograph represented a symbol for change. Phuc realized that the photograph could be utilized to promote health care. An important point in journalism is that pictures can never be fully understood without reading the caption. Phuc’s picture offered the photograph of a little girl that was burned by a mistake in war. However, the meaning behind the picture provided a purpose that would impact the lives of many more.

There are many “Kim Phuc’s” in Vietnam. Countless children were victims. This is the message that the photograph contains. During the Vietnam War, health care was severely limited in the country. The only hope was the “Children’s Medical Relief International” created by Dr. Arthur Barsky of New York. At the center, doctors worked to repair skin grafts and burns as a result of weapons and bombs. “In 1972, Vietnam had one government paid doctor per forty thousand people; by comparison, the figure for the United States was one per six hundred. The country had almost no specialists. In 1972, there was one fully trained Vietnamese anesthesiologist for the civilian population in the south.”88 In comparison to the United States, Vietnam was a severely underdeveloped country. Phuc noticed this through her trials at medical centers and realized that most injured children were not given the same opportunities to survive as she was. The photograph that essentially ruined a greater portion of her life also provided an opportunity for her to live. According to a plastic surgeon at the Barsky Center, “[Kim] she is among the least

88 Chong, 85.
seriously injured here and she will be going home soon.”\textsuperscript{89} Ut’s picture captured one little girl, who was fortunate enough to run into the right people. However, while it is natural to sympathize for one, the intention of journalism is to highlight the bigger situation. This little girl could be any little girl. While there are always going to be enemies in war, innocent casualties will always occur. Human inaccuracies will always be inevitable. Phuc’s photograph is famous because it sends a message of hope, in the sense that Phuc represented a miraculous healing from a war tragedy. The sympathy that was felt towards Phuc, during Vietnam, could be paralleled to other innocent victims of war.

If the public is not blinded by prejudice, the picture becomes clear. To be free of prejudice, one must look at both sides of the story. Through the pictures alone, one can view the obvious victims of physical torture. However, there is another party, who will suffer anguish beyond that of those in the photograph. Captain John Plummer sat down the following morning, June 7, 1972, and noticed the AP headline, “A Misplaced Bomb…And a Breath of Hell. Why Trang Bang? It Was in the Way!”\textsuperscript{90} Underneath the title stood the same picture that would haunt Captain Plummer for years to come. “In that moment of utter terror, two lives became inextricably linked: the badly injured child and the young American officer, a father


\textsuperscript{90}Chong, 82.
himself, who ordered the bombing."\(^9\) A father himself, he felt ashamed and tortured by the thought of harming an innocent girl. Plummer would link the photograph to the cause of a deep depression that led to stages of alcoholism and divorce. “It was just the photograph. It was always black and white. And I could always hear the screams of the children on the road.”\(^9\) When looking at past memories, the mind is capable of inserting images or actions that never occurred. Although he never actually heard the children screaming, he was able to establish a vivid image of hurt and terror. Ironically, once the picture was revealed to Plummer, a sense of personalization established. Plummer inserted screams into his mind to give the children a sense of reality. Voice allows figures to become human. Voice is a quality that is taken away with anonymous killing, which makes the task simpler to execute. This is a part of war that governments avoid speaking of.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) drastically increased during the Vietnam era. Ut’s photograph revealed a victim that would have remained anonymous forever. This image placed a sense of doubt in Plummer’s mind, which could have been avoided. Without the photograph, perhaps Plummer would never have second-guessed the air strike or any killings in war. This is what the government seeks to avoid. It wasn’t until years later that Plummer was able to meet

\(^9\) Williams, Geoff, “I could always hear the screams of the children,” *Biography I*, no. 9 [September 1997]: 32.  

\(^9\) Ibid, 4.
with Phuc. Phuc would be the speaker at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day and said in the speech, “Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him, ‘We cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and the future to promote peace.’”\textsuperscript{93} Plummer would learn the extent of the bombing and that two of Phuc’s brothers would become casualties of the air strike. In their first meeting, “She stopped and turned around, and that was the moment our eyes met, and all the things she wanted to say to me, and all the things I wanted to say to her, were said with our eyes.”\textsuperscript{94} Because of this photograph, Plummer was able to track down a victim, who he wished to meet every single day. The speech revealed that even photographs do not capture the extent of suffering. Without this picture, peace of mind would never have been achieved. Removing dehumanization from war allows an interaction between two individuals, rather than the enemy and the victim. Vulnerability is realized on both ends and a possibility to move forward appears.

Nick Ut’s photo will remain one of the most famous from the Vietnam War, if not, in history. Behind this picture is a story of triumph and peace. This picture portrays the story of going through hell to get to heaven. Kim Phuc was forced to sacrifice her identity, as a result of the North Vietnamese communists exploiting her suffering. Phuc was forced to become a symbol of war. She became caged by an identity. Even in her later years, Phuc feared that her identity would be revealed and she would be forced to return home. She carried this fear into her marriage. “Night and day, the couple kept the curtains drawn on the front window. Kim grew afraid to

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 5.
leave the house for fear that it was being watched, or that someone lay concealed, waiting for an opportunity to take her picture. Whenever the buzzer sounded, she tried to keep the baby quiet, and to avoid stepping where the wooden floor would creak.” Kim became sheltered from the world to a hauntingly similar image of Anne Frank hiding in the attic to avoid Nazis in Germany. A downfall that comes with dehumanization is that, often we exploit those who appear famous. They are treated as creatures rather than individuals. Kim Phuc did not wish to become a famous image of war. If anything, she wanted the picture to disappear. “In her waking hours, as in her nightmares, Phuc was still running from war. She wanted to stop running; she wanted whatever was making her run to stop as well. She just wanted it all to end.” Not until she was able to escape the constraints of those who exploited her, was she able to realize the beauty of the photograph. It would become a photograph that would advocate for peace, a photograph that would save Captain Plummer from continued alcoholism and depression, and a photograph that would lead the Kim Phuc Foundation to provide necessary health care for victims of war. It would become a journalist’s dream and a government’s nightmare. A wonderful foundation exists as a result of this photograph. Kim Phuc was able to share her story with the world. It is a scary thought to think: what if photographs did not exist?

95 Chong, 5.
96 Ibid., 127.
Chapter Five

The Absence of A Journalist

The My Lai Massacre
There is a common saying that reads – ignorance is bliss. If one is unaware then one cannot be held accountable. This statement contains a certain amount of truth, but in reality, responsibility is a state of mind. In every action there is responsibility either indirectly or directly. One is given the choice to ignore it or be held accountable. The photographs that were discussed in the previous chapters symbolize elements of human weakness and strength. With these elements, there is also, an underlying sense of responsibility. The responsibility lies with the photographer, the journalist, the victim, the aggressor, and the viewer. Responsibility will always be a central theme in war, because someone is always accountable.

In a democracy, the accountability is placed on the military and the government. The government creates the wars for the military to fight. Wars commonly involve countries that battle to settle disputes. Within countries, there is a citizenry. It has become a common, yet false notion that because the public is not literally fighting, they are not to be held accountable. The belief is that murder and crime should be the responsibility of those who directly commit it. If one has never lifted a weapon or launched a grenade, how is one responsible? Again, this is another true statement, but dangerous if acted upon. Citizens hold a great responsibility in war, especially in countries like the United States, where there is the ability to speak out against the government. If citizens do not speak up, they are also to blame. If there is no voice to halt injustice from occurring, it can never be prevented. In order for this to be effective, a citizenry must also be educated on the actions of the government and the current events of the world.
Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” To be ignorant of a cause is to be unaware of its background and implications. Without sufficient knowledge of a topic, prejudice is inevitable. One has to be aware of both sides to make an informed decision; otherwise conflict will continue to exist. However, when one is educated, stereotypes and bias can be erased. It is true that murder is the direct cause of the shooter, but the uneducated citizen is indirectly responsible for allowing a war to occur. There is a domino effect in place – the military represents the country, the country represents the citizenry, and the citizenry influences the actions of the government. Therefore, in war, everyone’s hands are stained with blood.

There is a paradox to this theory. Although the voice of the citizen influences the government, the government is in control of the information presented to the citizen. This makes distributing information tricky. This is the purpose of the media, to serve as the metaphorical checks and balances to the political system. The media is responsible for distributing information that is free of prejudice. However, in war, the media’s hands are often tied by censorship of the government.

History teaches students that media censorship was not present during the Vietnam War. Again, another true statement, but it is a statement that skims the surface to avoid the truth. Words were not directly censored compared to stories of previous wars; however, the media was restricted to certain locations. Vietnam is a large country, which makes travel difficult. The media represented a limited presence in Vietnam, compared to the military, especially in the later years of the war. Therefore, it did not have a universal presence. This leads to the question of – what is
the danger of not having a journalist? Would the truth continue to be told or would selfish motives corrupt the actions of the military? The answer can be exposed in two words – My Lai.

The primary reason that I chose this particular thesis topic, is that, I for one, was guilty of ignorance toward the My Lai massacre. As an AP U.S. history student and a history major, I was not informed of the events at My Lai until sophomore year in college. However, this is not a fault that I can blame on myself, but rather that of my generation’s teaching. Students today, are simply not informed of incidents like My Lai. These events are not incorporated into general American history, because it is not a source of pride for America. Tim O’Brien, a renowned veteran author, describes the sight of blank stares of students in response to My Lai. “We’ve obliterated it from the national consciousness, just as we obliterated what happened to the American Indians. My Lai is just a footnote in history of a war that is also a kind of footnote.”

It is a common trend in elementary schools to teach history that emphasizes the glory of America. Its faults are briefly highlighted, if at all mentioned. The current generation cannot be responsible for the past, because events cannot be altered. If the past is ignored, it becomes irrelevant and forgotten. A root in the word history is story. The purpose of a story is to create an everlasting memory, which is the point of history, to learn from the past to prevent future mistakes. Ignoring history has become a fault within the teaching system. My Lai is not discussed openly because it represents the antithesis of the “invincible American.” American

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97 Anderson, 177.
soldiers are viewed as valiant, strong, and noble, which many of them are. This is not a credit that should be taken away. However, soldiers are not invincible and become subject to the horrors of their environment. My Lai illustrates the tragedy of war, and more importantly, the failure of the Vietnam War. It is a massacre that reveals brutality, psychological trauma, dehumanization, and ruthless killing. These are qualities that are associated with the Nazis and the Japanese of WWII. My Lai is covered-up, because these colors do not blend with the red, white, and blue image that America strives to maintain.

There is no beauty in killing. Killing is a messy process. Morals become blurred and values shift from the individual to that of the company. My Lai is defined as a massacre – a massacre without a clear meaning. On the morning of March 16, 1968, the 1st Battalion, 20th infantry, known as the “Charlie Company,” marched into the village of My Lai. Son My, the area of My Lai was known throughout the army to be a Vietcong stronghold. The villagers were thought to be sympathetic of the communist cause. It is documented that 504 Vietnamese died that day, many of them older men, women, children, and infants. Initial orders claimed that the villagers would be at the market at the time of the attack. The only villagers who were left were said to be Vietcong. The helicopters landed early in the morning, around 7:30 a.m., when many of the villagers were still eating breakfast. A villager,

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Do Chuc, commented, “My family was eating breakfast, when the Americans came. Nothing was said to us. No explanation was given.” For the next several hours, U.S. forces slaughtered hundreds of Vietnamese, for what appeared to be no reason. In reality, there’s always a reason. My Lai revealed numerous flaws in the American policy. It highlighted poor leadership, young soldiers who became subject to psychological trauma, frustration against an invisible enemy, and the result of dehumanization training. It is understandable that because of the many negative aspects associated with the Vietnam War that a young soldier might lose control. Ground forces are restricted to an environment of war. Fellow soldiers, officers, or the enemy are their only company. This causes the mind to focus on war, rather than personal morals. This leads to the question of: If an outside source, like a journalist, had been present, would My Lai have occurred?

Members of the “Charlie Company” averaged around 20 years in age. In a sense, they were just kids, who were trained to be killers. In the documentary, Four Hours in My Lai, Kenneth Hodges a former sergeant of the Charlie Company described these kids as “good soldiers.” According to Karin Tompson, a mental health profession, a good soldier is defined as, “following orders, hyper vigilance, learning to dehumanize the enemy, and becoming adept to emotional constriction.” Based on these strict guidelines, the soldiers of the Charlie Company were good

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100 Four Hours in My Lai, documentary, 1989.

101 Anderson, 149.
soldiers. Soldiers are trained to kill and defend against the enemy; therefore, they cannot be faulted for the training that has been instilled in them. However, a key word should be highlighted in this sentence – enemy. At My Lai there were no Vietcong enemies. To the soldiers, they were personal enemies.

The Vietnam War is often referred to as not a normal war. War is never normal. Instead, war is given a structure of what is “normal.” In war, there is an enemy; there is a protagonist, and a cause. In Vietnam, the structure was far from what is considered normal in war. “The enemy usually consisted of uniformed soldiers, and at the end of the battle it was usually obvious who had won or lost. In Vietnam the progress and the results were seldom clear, and often there was no clear-cut way to tell a civilian friend from a military enemy.” The American soldiers became victims of fighting an invisible enemy. The Charlie Company had been in Vietnam only a few months before the My Lai massacre. In three months, four were killed and 38 were wounded in the division. A day before the massacre, a fellow soldier who was seen as a father figure, was killed by a booby trap. Most of the deaths that this company faced were the result of land mines or snipers. The soldiers found themselves dodging an invisible enemy in order to remain alive. To them, this was an enemy that took the lives of their friends, but could not be found to seek revenge.

In a sense, living in a war is similar to reading a suspense novel. One flips through the pages in fear of conflict, murder, and pain. Except those who read the book can close the page and return to normalcy. The soldiers are the characters in the

\[102\] Anderson, 15.
\[103\] Cookman, 155.
book. This is their everyday life. It is hard to fault the life of a soldier, because few have the experience of being involved in war. It is hard to pass judgment, when one has not been held hostage, or had a gun to their head, or witnessed a friend blown up by a land mine.

At the end of the day, soldiers are ordinary people, who come from ordinary backgrounds, but war is no ordinary task. “The Vietnam War taught us that one can create a war structure that is psychologically and organizationally primed for atrocity, that is, a situation, in which an ordinary person, an average person, is quite capable of walking into and committing atrocities.” Soldiers are isolated from home during war; therefore, companies often become replacement families. War is an experience that cannot be shared through stories alone. There is always going to be an element missing that cannot be described. Soldiers share a common bond in the struggle for life. As members of the company were wounded and killed, the fellow soldiers became increasingly frustrated. Boot camp detracts sympathy from the soldiers for the enemy, but it does not train to feel unsympathetic for fallen soldiers. The death of a loved one is a pain like no other, especially for unjust reasons.

The soldiers were led to believe that they were defending the South Vietnamese against a communist enemy. Many became curious of how the villagers in the south avoided the landmines and traps, if they were against the enemy as well. The soldiers began to believe that everyone was an enemy. “Many concluded that no one was on our side and that their main goal now was not to help an ally but to simply

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104 Anderson, 21.
survive their tour of duty.”

The invisible enemy caused the soldiers to lose a sense of control. The soldiers sought a way to seek revenge on the enemy and regain control. Paul Meadlo, an infantryman from the Charlie Company stated, “[It was] like my brother was getting killed or wounded. I wasn’t getting no satisfaction from it. So what it really was, was just mostly revenge.”

The massacre was an attempt to regain control and revenge for their fallen brothers. Tim O’Brien stated, “Aimless, that’s what it is, a bunch of kids trying to pin the tail on the Asian donkey. But no fuckin tail. No fuckin donkey.”

Once the metaphorical “donkey” was found, there was no letting go. Anger mixed with aggression ignited the sense to kill.

In theory, one less Vietnamese represented one less chance of death for American soldiers. The elderly represented the values instilled in the young VC, the women gave birth to the VC, and children were the future VC. This was a future that the American soldiers wanted no part of, therefore, children were murdered as well.

Specialist Varnado Simpson admitted that, “From shooting them, to cutting their throats, to scalping them, to cutting off their hands, and cutting out their tongue,” he

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106 “So I…Killed 10 or 15,” The Washington Post, November 25, 1969,  

107 Anderson, 97.
said, “I did that.” Removing the tongue removes the power of voice, missing body parts take the ability to move, rape removes innocence, and death eliminates a sense of agency or control from the victim. The Vietnamese were not treated like people, but animals. Killing became easier after the first one. More importantly, soldiers are trained to kill if fired upon. If there is no fire then the killing must be ordered.

Lt. William Calley, the First Platoon Leader, was the only officer or soldier convicted of murder at My Lai. However, Lt. Calley was not the only officer or soldier guilty of murder that day. Many, like Michael Bernhardt, a member of the Eleventh Infantry Brigade, believe that higher-ranking officials were responsible. Bernhardt states, “Calley’s just a small fry.” Numerous soldiers described a pep talk given to the soldiers by Captain Medina after the ceremony of a fallen soldier. The talk consisted of destroying everything in sight. William Eckhardt, a military lawyer said, “As I began to read the evidence, a couple of things emerged about the order. There is no doubt that there was a pep talk, and we can talk about the nuances of that and whether it was permissible or not. Everyone said there was a peptalk, but strangely enough, the more I looked, only those who said they received a specific order were the ones who killed.” My Lai was covered up for 19 months by the military. By this time, most who were involved were already out of the army and could not be prosecuted. Many higher-officials hid the massacre out of fear of not being promoted. If it had to be hidden, something was wrong. Wars are still defined

108 Cookman, 156.
110 Anderson, 42.
by law. *The New York Times* reported that Captain Medina said, “I did not see any massacre in Mylai.”

Soldier Meadlo rebutted this testimony in his statement, “Like I said Captain Medina was right there. Why didn’t he put a stop to it. He knew what was going on. He could of put a stop to it at any time he wanted.”

Although Medina lied under oath, he was not charged with any crime. Regardless of who is to blame between Medina or Calley, the My Lai massacre revealed the inner workings of frustration within the military. “Even those veterans who had made victims of others could find an audience for their claim to victim status for themselves. After all, it had not been their choice, but that of their government, to fight a war in a country where the enemy was continuous with, and often indistinguishable from, the civilian population.”

The military resembles a puppet show. The government acts as puppeteers dictating the moves of the military’s officers, who control the actions of the soldiers. According to Sergeant Kenneth Hodges, in the documentary, those who refused to shoot would be subject to a potential court martial or shot on the spot. For many it was a choice of their lives or the lives of Vietnamese.

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112 So I...Killed 10 or 15, 2.

The My Lai massacre might never have been revealed if it wasn’t for a letter. Ron Ridenhour, a former soldier, wrote a letter that was distributed to congressman Morris Udall of Arizona, President Nixon, and various other officials describing in detail the massacre at My Lai. Seymour Hersh, an investigative reporter broke the news story, but faced unbelieving outlets. Without the photographs of Army sergeant Ron Haeberle, My Lai might not even be remembered. It will continuously be questioned if the massacre would have occurred with the media present. The answer is probably not. The media serves as a figurative watchdog to inform the public of injustice. This term can also be taken literally because actions change when there is proof of guilt. Pictures provide truth. It was only by luck that pictures of My Lai are present today. “Their assignment was to cover the operation for a division newspaper. Haeberle used an Army-issued camera loaded with black-and-white film for the newspaper but shot color film in his own camera.”114 The black and white film would be confiscated, but Haeberle kept the color film a secret. The pictures would be published in the Cleveland Plain Dealer then Life would purchase them for $50,000. Haeberle’s photos revealed pictures of mutilated victims, victims spread out on a trail, and, his most famous one, a group of victims moments before death. The photograph that depicts a small group has become synonymous with the My Lai massacre. The picture depicts an elderly woman whose face is filled with anguish. She is clenching her stomach, as if trying to relieve an ulcer or the feeling of nerves. Behind her is a little girl, clinging to another villager. The photograph captures her face in the middle of the cry. Behind the elderly lady is a woman buttoning up her

114 Cookman, 157.
blouse, with a child attached to her hip. The woman buttoning up her blouse represents an image of normalcy. Just moments before the shooting, she was probably getting dressed. The little boy on her hip appears oblivious to the whole situation, as demonstrated in his blank stare. He is far too young to know what is going on or why the village is being attacked. He is also probably too young to know the difference between communism and democracy. Moments after the picture was taken, these people were all killed. “Based on a year of photographing colonels and generals who rejected any picture that made the army look bad, Haeberle implied that senior officials would have destroyed his color images. Without condoning his inaction, one can acknowledge that he probably could not have halted the rampage. He may also have feared retaliation from the soldiers.”  

The photographs displayed images of atrocity that should not have been viewed outside the military. Haeberle did not pose a risk to the military. He was one of them; therefore, he was not viewed as an outsider with access to the public. His camera would also be confiscated because the photographs were for military purpose alone.

Haeberle’s photos and Hersh’s story would be discredited once available to the American public. Many claimed them to be a source of propaganda. It is hard for the public to distinguish our soldiers as the enemy. The Americans were thought to wear the white hat or gloves and rescue the victim from evil. Pictures are intended to preserve a memory. Although in time these pictures will be placed on a dusty shelf and reviewed in course material or scholarly work, the soldiers who committed murder will never forget these images. This is similar to how the Vietnamese will

\[115\] Ibid., 158.
never forget the incident. Truong Thi Lee, a My Lai villager, claimed, “I was alive because there were corpses on top of me. The more I think about it the more I want to cry.”116 Lee lost both her children and mother in the massacre. The villagers will forever hate the Americans because of this atrocity. There appeared to be no explanation. In the documentary, one villager describes the soldiers giving the children candy on their first visit, the villagers providing water on the second to the troops, and on the third, they shot everyone.117 The villagers were left to deal with the mess as the Americans moved on. Huts were burned down, bodies were mutilated and remained everywhere, livestock was destroyed, and the water was contaminated because of the dead bodies. The villagers who survived remained victims by living in an atmosphere of constant reminders. They were simply victims of displacement. The American soldiers viewed them as an outlet to relieve stress and frustration.

American soldiers would become victims as well. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a term coined by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1980s. PTSD is reliving trauma. Although it was present in previous wars the development of PTSD was a direct response to the Vietnam War. “The sufferers experienced anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, psychic numbing (the inability to feel strong emotions), aggression, and guilt from either having killed or having survived when their buddies died.”118 The Veterans Association believed that at least 500,000 of the 3 million Vietnam veterans suffered from this. The number would later

116 *Four Hours in My Lai*, documentary.
117 Ibid.
118 Anderson, 13.
increase to 800,000, confirmed by psychological professionals. Soldiers would remain subject to the murders. Infantryman Simpson said in the documentary, “This is my life, this is my past, this is my present, this is my future, and I keep it to remind me. Referring to the extreme trembling in his hands and legs. This is what made me this way. When his son was accidentally shot and killed, Simpson saw this as a punishment for My Lai.” There is a price that comes with the military that is camouflaged in advertisements. The military displays images of soldiers proudly saving the victims. However, when the tide is turned there is no one to save the soldier. Soldiers become unwanted and discredited when they commit atrocities. Killing is an instinct that is trained into the mind, but there is no training on how to recover from murdering another. Perhaps the presence of a journalist could have prevented this from occurring, maybe not. Although the answer will never be known, the more dangerous option will be the absence of a journalist.

119 Ibid., 13.
120 Cookman, 159.
Concluding Statement
If an unjust action is recorded, it is less likely to be committed in the future. If there is no chance to be caught, people will take advantage of the situation. There are no consequences if there is no proof. The lessons learned at My Lai will serve as a precedent as to why journalists will always be useful during war.

Haeberle did not pose a direct threat to the military, because he was not official press. The presence of the camera slightly altered the mindset of the soldiers. As Haeberle approached a group of soldiers sexually assaulting a villager, their actions altered with the knowledge they were being recorded. “When the soldiers noticed the journalists, they abandoned their sexual assault and herded the women and children together.”\textsuperscript{121} Photojournalists pose a threat to the military because pictures record history. If an actual journalist had been present at My Lai, the pictures would be published in newspapers across America. It is doubtful that soldiers would want their mother or father to witness their unjust actions. The fear of losing anonymity is often enough to stop atrocities.

Without a journalist, the public is forced to rely on the voice of the government. There is no check and balance. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton states, “Another lesson from the Gulf War that I would take to be a false witness was that of keeping out imagery that might be disturbing to the American public, that is, keeping the press and television cameras from recording dead bodies, civilian casualties, and painful scenes of any kind. This breaks the connection of images between people at

\textsuperscript{121} Cookman, 158.
home and soldiers fighting the war, which is so crucial for what happened in Vietnam and for the democratic process to reestablish itself.”

There is often tension between the military and the press, because the press reveals what is occurring to the public. This often makes the military look bad because this is their job. They become subject to the rules of the government. While the President and cabinet sit comfortably in Washington, the military is forced to fight their cause on the front lines. This is the job and heart of the troops. The military does commit atrocities, but they are subject to a danger that an average newsreader or government official will never understand. Government officials face the threat of not gaining reelection, while military officials face the possibility of death. Government will continue to place blame on the media in hopes that unrest between the government and military will remain hidden.

As time progresses, the government continues to place restrictions on the media for reasons of national security. Ridenhour believes, “Probably we’ll never hear about another My Lai even if there is another one. Part of the reason is, there will be nobody around where it happens.” He continues to describe how the military consists now of career soldiers. These are no longer scared boys who just graduated high school. There is a sense of brotherhood, like in a fraternity, that the military contains. Secrets will remain within. Journalism has changed, war has changed, and the military has changed. Newspapers are no longer family operated, but corporate businesses. These businesses often cater to the needs of the government to receive funding; therefore, corruption is often hidden.

122 Anderson, 24.
123 Anderson, 71.
History exists so we can learn from our mistakes. It states, there will never be another Vietnam – which is ironic, since Iraq and Vietnam are often described as synonymous with one another. The power and control that the media maintained during Vietnam would be the primary reasoning in censoring American involvement in wars after the 1960s. Today, the media battles government restrictions on photographs of wounded soldiers, coffins coming home from war, and victims of conflict, as well as embedded journalism. Without journalists, one will never know if there is another Vietnam. There would not be photographs like the Self-Immolation, the Saigon Execution, or the Napalm Girl, but these victims would still exist. Imagine a world without journalists. As we sit comfortably and read The New York Times, we are informed of our military’s actions over-seas. Without journalism, the Times would cease to exist. We would be forced to rely on body counts from the government. Sound familiar?
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