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David Halberstam

A *Case Study of a Journalist's Role and Vision on the Vietnam War*

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Introduction

'You know, you never beat us on the battlefield?'

'That may be so, but it is also irrelevant'

- Conversation between Colonel Harry Summers and Northern Vietnamese Colonel Tu.

The relationship between the American media and the Vietnam War is one that has often been debated between historians. Prior to the Vietnam War the government underwent fundamental changes with regards to their relationship with the press. There was a so called 'new secrecy' in which the government felt that the need to keep the public (and therefore the press) away from information became bigger than ever before. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower introduced measures such as the McMahon Act (meant for development and control of atomic energy) and Executive Order 10-290 (which gave every Federal Agency the right to declare any kind of information 'confidential'). These measures, according to an anonymous journalist "gave just about everybody in Washington, including janitors, the right to withhold information in the sacred name of national security.[1] However, despite these measures to decrease the influence of the press, the Vietnam War would prove that these journalists had more power than ever before. They were out in the trenches acting as paper soldiers and have often been both criticized and praised for their work in Vietnam. Most criticism came from government officials and journalists like Joe Alsop who believed that the

[1] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers, The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993) 14-17.

reporters were undermining support for the war. Meanwhile, critics of the war praised them for the fact that they didn't serve as a propaganda machine for the U.S. government.

David Halberstam was one of the more prominent journalists who was active during the Vietnam War, writing articles for the *New York Times* during his stay in South-East Asia. He was one of the journalists who was critical of the government at times, and who, especially at the end of his tenure in Vietnam, openly doubted whether the U.S. should have gotten involved in Vietnam. There is a general consensus among conservatives that these journalists were reporting in a negative way on purpose. And David Halberstam was one of the most prominent journalists who supposedly belonged to this group. Halberstam makes for an interesting test case since he has been a very active writer after his tenure in Vietnam. A lot of this literature had to with Vietnam and it offers many insights into the war.

Today many historians still debate whether it was right for the USA to intervene in Vietnam, and there is still a lot of debate going on how the greatest military power in the world could not defeat a small Southeast Asian state. The argument that is by far the most popular one is that the media was greatly responsible for defeat. As Harry Summers told Colonel Tu, Vietnam did not beat the Americans on the battlefield. Vietnamese casualties were way higher than American casualties and even their most well known-attack (Tet offensive) was actually a military defeat. So if they did not lose it on the ground, there must have been a different reason for their defeat. There are numerous claims from the conservative corner (including journalist Joe Alsop) that the media was biased, that their reports were inaccurate and that they were sensational and incorrect. By doing this they undermined war support and once you lose support and the public opinion turns against you it suddenly becomes more difficult to successfully wage in a war.

The main goal of this research will be to look into the conservative criticism that the media lost the war in Vietnam. Even in the field of academics, there is still a lot of debate on

the role that the media has played. Daniel Hallin, who has written a study of the influence of the media during the Vietnam War, acknowledges that one argument still stands out: the one that the media was, deliberately, opposing the government and was in turn responsible for the U.S. losing the war.[2] Hallin calls this the oppositional media thesis and explains that this thesis states that the Vietnam War was a crucial turning point in terms of media influence, and particularly, with regards to the influence of television. Hallin disputes this view, and states that the way in which American journalists conducted their work didn't become actively oppositional during the Vietnam War. Critical coverage increased over time, but the ideology of objective journalism (which was characteristic of journalists in the 1960's, according to Hallin) stayed very much alive. This thesis will examine the extent to which Halberstam's Vietnam reporting confirms or contradicts the "oppositional media thesis.

As one can see there are still many different opinions on the subject. Some researchers portray these journalists as heroes and admire them for their critical outlook on the situation whereas others are critical of their work and believe that some journalists didn't go far enough in their criticism on the war (Daniel Hallin was one of these critics).[34] For this research we shall use David Halberstam as a test case as the topic of discussion would become too broad if we were to answer this question by looking at every single journalist that was active during the war. Besides that, Halberstam makes for a very useful test case since he has probably been the most active writer after his Vietnam-stint. The literature that he has written can be used to compare his earlier views from his time at the *New York Times* and that way we can see if there have been any shifts in his opinion on the Vietnam War.

What will also be of key importance in this research is the overall role and landscape of media in the U.S. and its relationship with the government. As said, the government had

[2] Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," The Journal of Politics 46 (1984): 2-3.
[3] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers, The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993).
[4] Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

been trying to decrease the influence of the media and to increase its own influence on outgoing reports. Again, we shall use Halberstam as the main test case here to see if he was also influenced by the pressure that came from the government and if he was any different from the average journalist that was active during this period. It is very clear that the landscape of media was changing rapidly. Was Halberstam a lone wolf in this changing landscape or did he, just as others, adapt to the situation?

Whether someone like David Halberstam was really undermining war support through his reports will be difficult to determine since it is difficult to measure just how much influence they had on public support for the war. However, by looking at other reports and literature that has covered the media's coverage on the Vietnam War we can try to see whether Halberstam was actually more negative than his colleagues and whether his reports were sensationalist.

For this we shall look at the New York Times and look at the editions that surround certain key events. These events led to more extensive media coverage with regards to Vietnam and will make good test case to look at Halberstam's reports and compare them to reports of certain colleagues at his newspaper. Again, this can be used to determine whether Halberstam was obliging to pressure from the New York Times and was just reporting in the same way as his fellow New York Times journalists or whether he was an exception.

The material that will be used can be easily divided into four categories. Firstly, the literature that focuses on the media's influence with regards to the Vietnam War will play a crucial part in laying the foundation for the essay. This should give the necessary background information on the landscape of the media and how it acted in Vietnam. These books can also be divided into two categories, as some will focus explicitly on the Vietnam War, whereas others will also look at the period prior to the war as to see what the landscape of journalism was like at the time. Secondly, we will use all the literature that David Halberstam has written

on the Vietnam War. The reason why this will be used is obvious, he is the central figure in this test case and this literature will be used to compare his later views to his earlier views. Thirdly, we will also look at other accounts of Vietnam journalists such as Peter Arnett, who also wrote a book discussing his time as a journalist in Vietnam. This will be useful to see whether Halberstam was one of a kind or whether these journalists all had the same opinion when discussing their time in Vietnam. Lastly, the New York Times plays an important role as it was the employer for David Halberstam and as we discussed earlier, articles from crucial moments in the Vietnam War will be used for this research.

The research will start by giving background information on the landscape of the media and will also give some background on the journalist who is the main focus in this entire research: David Halberstam. This will serve, as we stated earlier, as a foundation for the rest of the research. After this beginning chapter we will then start to look more closely at the conservative claims that have been made with regards to journalists and the Vietnam War and see how Halberstam has been accused and whether his reports can indeed be seen as overly anti-government. We will try to answer whether this criticism is fair or whether Halberstam is just being used as a scapegoat by conservative criticizers. After these general chapters, we will look more closely at one of Vietnam's most crucial events which Halberstam covered: the Buddhist crisis and the subsequent fall of the Diem government. Again, Halberstam's reports will be used as we try to explain his reporting on the war and again it will be compared to colleagues to see whether the conservative criticism is justified. In the fourth chapter the focus will switch to Halberstam's colleagues. We will look at reporters that were critical of Halberstam but also at reporters that admired him. In this chapter the stance of the New York Times will also be looked at. How did they pressure Halberstam and what were the exact reasons that they pressured him? Lastly, the changing policy of the U.S. will be combined with the literature that Halberstam has written will be used to see if there has been any shift in

thinking from his side and how he has tried to explain the Vietnam War and all the criticism that was aimed towards him and his colleagues. Has his opinion changed throughout the years? Does he regret anything? This will all be discussed in the final chapter as we try to come to a conclusion which will have to answer the question whether David Halberstam was indeed deliberately negative and a prime example of journalists undermining war support for the Vietnam War or whether he was just a young and enthusiastic journalist that was being misunderstood by conservatives and was simply despised for doing a good job.

Chapter 1

Landscape of U.S. journalism and politics prior to the Vietnam War

'No corner of the building (the White House) seemed to be off limits. [...] On some days more reporters went into the White House offices to talk with staff members than did government workers who had come on federal matters.'

- Hugh Sidey, reporter for *Life* magazine, talking about the openness of the Kennedy Administration.

Throughout U.S. history journalism has evolved and expanded its influence. Its power to give the public the information that it wants and/or needs has grown over time. Beginning with the electoral victory by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the government started to realize the new potential that the media had and began to use it to improve its own image. Kennedy certainly wasn't the first who used the media for his own good, but he did implement new measures that greatly improved the governments power in relation to the media.

David Halberstam was impressed by Kennedy's new strategies and the way in which he adapted to a new era: "John F. Kennedy was, above all else, a marvelously contemporary politician with a shrewd sense of the sources of power [...] and by nature Kennedy had a

grasp of the new balance. He knew television and print were becoming more important all the time and that was a source of strength for him: he could always sell himself to the media."[5]

During Kennedy's first press conference as the president of the United States, he moved the meeting to a different site - the State Department building - so as to make it more suitable for television broadcasts. Next to that, he did not require journalists to state their name and their employer so that he could spend more time answering the questions. Lastly, the most revolutionary change was that he was going to hold this press conference during a live telecast. It was a move that journalist James Reston called "the goofiest idea since the hula hoop"[6]. But though it was considered to be unorthodox, Kennedy was the man of the hour and was praised throughout the country for his performance. He had seen the potential of the media and journalism and used it for his own good.[7]

Kennedy's charismatic appearance did not only have a positive effect on public opinion, but also on the journalists who reported on him during his campaign. Reporters were getting more access and information from the White House and Kennedy's staff knew everything about the journalists, from their favorite hobbies to which background they came from. As a result, many journalists became Kennedy supporters and some even became very close friends. Joe Alsop, a *Washington Post* columnist and a very influential journalist, was one of several journalists who had such a good relationship with Kennedy that he became one of his closest friends and admirers. [8] However, to state that the relationship between the government, the media, and the public was now more open and friendlier than ever would be incorrect. Even though Kennedy tried to depict himself as the most open and honest president

[5] Lewis J. Paper, *The Promise and the Performance: The Leadership of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Crown, 1975) , 321-322.
[6] Ted C. Sorensen, *How a President Makes News* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 106.
[7] Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers, The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 24-27.
[8] David Halberstam, *The Powers that be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 375.

in the history of the U.S. there was enough trouble going on in the background which the Kennedy administration was desperately trying to keep away from the outside world.

It all started when two American pilots returned home on January 27, 1961. Both pilots where held by the Soviet Union after their surveillance plane had been shot down over the Barents Sea. These pilots weren't allowed to give any interviews and every speech regarding this topic was to be revised by the White House. Several observers were appalled at these actions and said that "the demands for even the most routine news information were more stringent than any they could recall."[9] In addition to that, the administration also had a desire to use its good relations with the press in order to spread false information and clamp down on any report that could benefit their potential enemies. [10] Even though most journalists were pretty mild in their criticism, some did notice this trend. Eugene Pulliam, a journalist for the Indianapolis News and a chairman of the Freedom of Information committee said that president Kennedy "failed to live up to his promise of greater freedom of information.". However, he and his colleagues did acknowledge that the White House itself had been more accessible than ever before. Hugh Sidey, who wrote for *Time* magazine, said: "No corner of the building (the White House) seemed to be off limits. [...] On some days more reporters went into the White House offices to talk with staff members than did government workers who had come on federal matters." [11]

But this 'openness' towards reporters threatened the objectivity of reporters. The fact that the White House seemed more accessible than ever made journalists vulnerable to manipulation. James Reston was one of the journalists who saw this trend develop: "It is hard to go into that House...and not be impressed with it and the terrible burden that the President has to carry. How could you help but be sympathetic? [But] once you become sympathetic, it

[9] Jack Raymond, "Military Curbed on 'Tough' Talks," *New York Times*, January 28, 1961, p. 1.
[10] Wyatt, 31.
[11] Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy, President* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 99.

becomes increasingly difficult to employ the critical faculties."[12] The fact that reporters were generally becoming less critical was a problem as it enabled the White House to control to a large extent the information that was given to the public. Furthermore, journalists' behavior was even more influenced by Kennedy's way of telling journalists more than they should know. The effect was that journalists felt that they were being given information that no one else had. However, once a reporter decided to use this information, or criticize the president's actions altogether, the White House would clamp down on the reporter. Hugh Sidey was one of the reporters who fell victim to this as he published an article in *Time* magazine in which he criticized the appointment of General Maxwell Taylor as a special presidential military adviser. All of a sudden Sidey, who was one of Kennedy's favorite journalists at the time, became an outsider and all of his sources in the White House would continuously ignore his requests.[13] It was a prime example of selective openness by the Kennedy administration. Reporters who didn't criticize the administration were given more information whereas others were shut out. In addition to that, the government did an excellent job in providing lots of information, more than most journalists could handle under their deadline pressures. This kept reporters, editors and the public satisfied, but it generally left out the actual truth that was ongoing in the background.

In April 1961, this led to more trouble with the *Bay of Pigs* crisis in Cuba, a military operation that the government had desperately tried to keep away from the public, until the moment it failed and it became impossible to hide. According to Kennedy, it was necessary to keep such sensitive military information away from the public. The press responded in fury. The *St. Louis Dispatch* said that the Kennedy administration was undermining 'the essential mission of the press, which is to inform, interpret, and criticize.' Another paper, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, stated that 'If our government acts foolishly, slothfully, or otherwise

[12] Worth Bingham and Ward S. Just, "President and the Press," *The Reporter*, April 12, 1962, pp. 18-21.
[13] Wyatt, 31-33.

unwisely, we may find ourselves propelled into a global, nuclear war. The only way our citizens can keep an eye on their officials in this life-and-death issue is through alert, responsible news reporting'. [14]

And so the press pointed towards the government, but the press also had itself to blame according to some journalists. Many journalists were aware of the fact that in a conflict such as the Cold War, some things should remain a secret. In the case of the Bay of Pigs however, there was no secret to be kept since 'it was about as secret as opening day at Yankee Stadium', according to journalist James Reston. He later added that the press 'said too little' and that they had 'very little to say about the morality, legality or practicality of the Cuban adventure when there was still time to stop it.' The entire crisis had shown that journalism was being kept in check by the government which was pushing newspapers to only publish information that wouldn't harm their own country. The government was being secretive, the journalists weren't critical enough, and the end result was that the people didn't get the information that they deserved because of the Cold War-national security mentality that was all present throughout U.S. media.[15]

This was also the case with the situation in Vietnam prior to the escalation in 1963. Although it was logical that the administration tried to keep military operations, technology and intelligence a secret, its main strategy concerning Vietnam was to play it down. It was not going to ignore the complaints of the media, but it would try and make it seem as if nothing was going on in Vietnam. This was important for several reasons. Firstly, the administration wanted to make it seem as if it was complying with the Geneva agreement, an agreement which was set up to keep foreign military powers out of the Vietnam conflict. Secondly, Kennedy was afraid of public opinion. He was well aware of the power of U.S. journalism which was partly responsible for his rise to fame. The last thing he wanted was a piece on the

[14] 'Press is Divided on Kennedy Talk, Editorials across the Nation take Censorship stand,' *New York Times,* April 30, 1961, p. 68.
[15] Wyatt, 38-39.

front page of the *New York Times* on the growing number of Americans getting involved in the conflict. This had a lot to do with the Korean War, a war in which the media wasn't as active as it would be during the Vietnam War, but nevertheless the majority of the public in the U.S. felt that the government had made a mistake in getting involved in Korea.[16] The Kennedy administration feared that another limited land war in Asia would lead to the downfall of his administration and would give the Right a free passage to take control of Washington D.C..[17]

And so Kennedy would try to keep the media satisfied by keeping the White House open for (most) journalists and giving them all the answers they wanted. But this 'openness' did not mean that the media, and therefore the public, was getting the truth. A prime example of this is the Taylor-Rostow mission during which General Taylor led an investigation on the American support for the South-Vietnamese troops. The conclusion from Taylor was that ground combat troops from the U.S. were necessary if they wanted to succeed and that it would be better to send them as soon as possible. But during and after General Taylor's mission there was not a single article which discussed this conclusion as it was kept behind closed doors. The media and the public got a different story. The *New York Times* reported: "Military leaders at the Pentagon, no less than General Taylor himself, are understood to be reluctant to send organized U.S. combat units into Southeast Asia. [...] General Taylor declined to speak for the president, but declared: 'Any American would be reluctant to use troops unless absolutely necessary.'"[18] One month later, when Taylor had returned from Vietnam, the *New York Times* yet again asked the General, who was in favor of sending ground troops to South Vietnam, whether he would recommend to send more troops: "The General declined to comment directly. [...] However, when General Taylor was reminded at the airport that his remarks before leaving Saigon had been interpreted as meaning that Ngo

[16] John E. Mueller *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), ch. 3.
[17] Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29-30.
[18] Lloyd Garrison, "Taylor Cautious on G.I.'s for Asia", *New York Times*, October 16, 1961, p. 1.

Dinh Diem's problem was not manpower, the General replied: 'That is correct. It is a populous country.' Officials said it was correct to infer from this that General Taylor did not look favorably on the sending of U.S. combat troops at this time [...] there would be considerable surprise here if General Taylor recommended such a move."[19]

Behind the scenes, Taylor and Kennedy were not on the same page. Taylor was in favor of sending ground troops as fast as possible whereas Kennedy had several problems. Firstly, he didn't want to look weak by not fighting Communism. And secondly, he wanted to avoid having his own Korea war which would certainly hurt public support for his administration. But despite this disagreement the media failed to report it.. Amongst them was David Halberstam's employer, the *New York Times*, which reported the following on Kennedy's press conference a couple days later which announced that several hundred specialists would be sent to aid the South-Vietnamese army:

> "President Kennedy has decided on the measures that the U.S. is prepared to take to strengthen South Vietnam against attack by the Communists. The measures [...] closely followed the recommendations made by General Maxwell D. Taylor, the President's military advisor. The U.S. plans do not include the dispatching of combat units at this time. They call for sending several hundred specialists. [...] The plans also call for fairly large-scale shipments of aircraft and other special equipment. Officials emphasized that the President [...] had not foreclosed the possibility of sending ground or air combat units if the situation deteriorated drastically. The President, it was said, does not wish to bind himself into a "never position. However, the President and

[19] E.W. Kenworthy, "President Cool on Asia Aid; Sees Gen. Taylor", *New York Times*, November 4, 1961, p. 1.

> General Taylor agreed, according to reliable information available here, that the South-Vietnamese government is capable of turning back the Communist threat."[20]

This offers a prime example of the U.S. Government managing the news. It wanted to show the public that the entire administration was on the same page and at the same time make it seem as if extensive involvement of ground combat troops wasn't going to be a legitimate option. The media didn't doubt this and according to Hallin, the journalists were being naïve in their reports on General Taylor: "It is interesting to note that reporters often missed or ignored pointedly evasive answers by Taylor that seemed to hint strongly that there was a disagreement in the administration."[21] This is especially true for the article cited on the previous page, "*Taylor Cautious on G.I.'s for Asia*", in which Taylor refuses to speak for the President - which shouldn't be an issue if they were in full agreement - and gives a rather general answer instead of really answering the question that was asked. Whether it was due to laziness, or fear of the Kennedy administration retaliating against reporters, is difficult to tell. But it is clear that already at that time there was a tense relationship between the media and the White House.

[20] E.W. Kenworthy, "U.S. to Help Saigon with More Experts and Planes", *New York Times*, November 17, 1961, p. 1.
[21] Hallin, 220.

Chapter 2

Conservative criticism of David Halberstam and the media bias

'I've never seen anything to match the way they [American officials in Saigon] hate you.'

- U.S. Public Advisor John Mecklin in conversation with David Halberstam in July 1963. [22]

David Halberstam arrived in Vietnam in 1962. It was a new experience for him and for many of his colleagues such as Ed Sheehan and Peter Arnett since they had never been in a situation like this. Halberstam referred to himself and his colleagues as 'the privileged few' and called Vietnam 'a very special assignment.'[23] Halberstam had asked the *New York Times* in 1961 if he could cover the Vietnam War because "I was tired of the Congo, tired of hearing UN spokesmen claim they controlled areas they obviously did not control; tired of hearing the UN say before each major meeting that Tshombe (Congolese politician) could be trusted, and that it was the people around him - the Belgians and Munongo - who were causing all the trouble."[24]

In some way, the Vietnam War started off on exactly the same footing, with the U.S. government officials claiming that the situation was under control when it was not. But what made this conflict different for Halberstam, and more interesting than the Congo, was the fact that this was a war in which America was beginning to fully commit itself to the cause and

[22] Wyatt, 104.
[23] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 718.
[24] David Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964) , 19.

where a reporter was easily able to gather information from the troops that were being deployed, something he couldn't do that easily in the Congo where there was an army with a huge variety of nationalities.

Central to the reporting of Halberstam and his colleagues in Vietnam is the conservative criticism that fell down on them as they were sending out their reports to their respective editors. Halberstam was among those singled out by conservative journalists such as Joe Alsop who claimed that these journalists were betraying their country with their sensationalist reporting. Prior to the Vietnam War, journalists were not being critical enough, such was the critique from academics such as Daniel Hallin. But now that the conflict was escalating, journalists were becoming - according to conservatives - too critical with regards to government policy in Vietnam.

In 1962, when Halberstam first entered Vietnam, there was no such criticism whatsoever. In fact, Halberstam wasn't critical at all when he first reported on the Vietnam War. He subscribed to the domino theory, a fear that communism would spread like an epidemic, and added that he saw Vietnam as vital to the security of South Asia: 'If the Vietnamese, who are perhaps the toughest people in Southeast Asia, fell to the Communists, the pressure on other shaky new nations would be intolerable.'[25]

An explanation for Halberstam's support for U.S. policy during the beginning of the Vietnam conflict can be found in how the American authorities treated him in Vietnam. Halberstam's predecessor at the *New York Times*, Homer Bigart, had been very vocal about how the Vietnam conflict wasn't going anywhere. When Bigart left, government officials tried to get Halberstam on their side by continuously praising his work. However, this only had a short effect, as Halberstam had been receiving warnings from Homer Bigart himself who told him that the authorities were trying "to silence the few honest Americans who will level with

[25] Ibidem, 60-61.

correspondents."[26] Another example occurred during a dinner that he had with colleague Jacques Nevard and an American official. During this meeting the official had given both of them lots of information, and Halberstam was very pleased with this. Afterwards, Nevard alerted Halberstam to the fact that this had been the first time that he had gotten so much information from an American source: "It's the first time he's ever told me anything. They're making a play for you [David] [...] and they're very, very glad that Homer [Bigart] is gone."[27] Halberstam slowly started to become more critical once he got settled in Saigon and found out that the authorities were indeed trying to praise all the new young journalists, just to make sure that they were reporting more positively than their 'grumpy' predecessors. For him and his colleagues, the circumstances under which they had to do their work were harsh. They were stuck in small, hot offices and relied on information coming from wire services. This was less than ideal, also because the reports that they made wouldn't arrive in the U.S. at the time that it was finished. It would usually take a few days before it could be posted. This made it more difficult for journalists like Halberstam to write reports that weren't outdated. On top of that, they weren't getting any help from the U.S. government, which was trying to control the reports that came out of Vietnam.[28]

Ironically, it was Joe Alsop, one of the conservative journalists who would become one of Halberstam's most prominent critics, who was largely responsible for Kennedy's new stance on the relation with the media in Vietnam. Alsop was one of the biggest supporters of South Vietnam's president at that time, Ngo Dinh Diem, and in a column he wrote that Kennedy wasn't being supportive enough and that South Vietnam was under enormous pressure because of it.[29] Alsop got this information from Diem personally, and the U.S. Ambassador in South Vietnam was not amused that American journalists were now getting to

[26] David Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire,* 24.
[27] Ibidem, 77.
[28] Wyatt, 86-90.
[29] Joseph Alsop, "Matter of Fact....: Warnings Aplenty". *Washington Post*, April 17, 1961, p. A13.

discover the 'ins and outs' of this conflict. Something had to be done, according to Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow.[30]

The Kennedy administration quickly decided to use a new strategy. Diem was in total control of the Southern Vietnamese press, and he believed that the U.S. would use the same strategies to control the American journalists. Therefore, whenever an American journalist like Halberstam published something that was critical of his government, he accused the Americans of not supporting him on purpose. John Mecklin, who was the chief of the United States Information Agency, said that it was becoming 'unpatriotic for a newsman to use an adjective that displeased Mme. Nhu.' [31](Mme. Nhu was the wife of Diem's brother, and a highly influential figure in the South Vietnamese government).

Journalists such as David Halberstam were accused of being unpatriotic. Was this a fair accusation? When looking at the accounts of someone like David Halberstam, this accusation seems exaggerated. Halberstam joined the troops in the field and while being there he listened to everything that the soldiers had to say. Simply put, he was just doing his job. The U.S. was getting more and more involved in Vietnam and the national news organizations wanted an explanation for this involvement. They wanted their journalists in Vietnam to write more stories, to provide more news and to make sure that their employees had the best information that they could possibly get. But since the U.S. government wasn't giving Halberstam and his colleagues any valuable information, the only solution was to join the troops in the jungle: "How do you add up thirty minor engagements each day, almost all of them in places you've never been to, and with no substantive information to cast light on the significance of the situation? It was very quickly obvious to me that the story could not be covered from Saigon briefing rooms, despite all the multicolored arrows on the maps."[32]

[30] National Security File, 'Durbrow to Rusk'. *Kennedy Papers*, April 12, 1961, box 193.
[31] John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment: an Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 168-170.
[32] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 80.

And so Halberstam 'joined' the ARVN Seventh Division in South Saigon. He followed the division into combat and translated its experiences before he put them on paper. Halberstam couldn't help but notice that these troops were getting more and more frustrated: "Americans are bothered by the Vietnamese failure to patrol [and] the lack of urgency in the fight against a quick and elusive enemy. There is some feeling on the part of the Americans in the field that, despite all the talk of counter-guerrilla tactics, the real battle has yet to be joined."[33] In the very same article, Halberstam added that 'it should be reported, that there is considerably less optimism out in the field than in Washington or in Saigon and that the closer one gets to the actual contract level of this war, the further one gets from the official optimism."[34]

As to be expected, the South Vietnamese government was not amused with reports such as these. Together with the Kennedy administration it undertook measures to decrease their influence. The U.S. government was mainly trying to keep reporters out of combat situations whereas the South Vietnamese government was constantly trying to sabotage the 'unpatriotic' reporters. If all of this didn't work, reporters were eventually forced to leave the country. Such was the fate of two of Halberstam's colleagues, Francois Sully (*Newsweek*) and James Robinson (*NBC*). Sully was punished for an article that was too critical of Mme. Nhu while Robinson was punished because *NBC* was particularly seen as a news outlet that had a predominantly negative influence on the war effort. [35]

According to Halberstam, these expulsions were taken very seriously by American colleagues. For him, it was a clear signal that he shouldn't write anything that would displease the Diem administration. Halberstam said that it all came down to a fine line on which a journalist had to walk. On one hand, he had to write newsworthy material, but it should not be

[33] David Halberstam, 'U.S. Deeply Involved in the Uncertain Struggle for Vietnam', *New York Times*, October 21, 1962, p.3.
[34] Halberstam, 'U.S. Deeply Involved.'
[35] Mecklin, 132-138.

too critical because it was obvious that the present rulers - Diem and the U.S. government - were having none of it. Apart from Sully and Robinson, most reporters were allowed to stay, but they were continuously watched and hindered during their work. Meanwhile, journalists such as Joe Alsop, Richard Tresgakis, and Howard Sochurek (*Time-Life*) were given special treatment. It should be no surprise why these journalists were being helped: they were all supporters of Diem. Alsop especially, was highly regarded by the Diem, who saw him as the only American journalist that he could trust. In return, Alsop always got the best assignments when the Americans were going into combat situations. Because of all these benefits, it shouldn't be a surprise that Alsop always remained positive about American intervention in Vietnam and that he was very critical of someone like Halberstam. Therefore, the American and South Vietnamese authorities tried to make Halberstam's job as difficult as they possibly could without resorting to illegal measures and outright censorship.[36]

Some U.S. officials disliked reporters such as Halberstam and didn't keep it to themselves: "The American commitment had been badly hampered by irresponsible, astigmatic and sensationalized reporting."[37] Those were the words of General Earle Wheeler in 1963. He felt, just like Diem and his family did, that it was the press that was undermining their effort in Vietnam. All of a sudden the Vietcong wasn't the only enemy that they were dealing with, but they also began to see these critical reporters as enemies of the war effort.

A journalist who felt the same way as General Earle Wheeler was Robert Elegant, a British-American journalist who had been a reporter in Vietnam for the *Los Angeles Times*. In 1981, he wrote an article called 'How to lose a war: the press and Vietnam' in which he heavily criticizes the U.S. press for (sometimes unconsciously) sabotaging the American war effort in Vietnam. One of the points Elegant makes is that U.S. correspondents were not thinking outside the box, they were only talking to each other and therefore they started

[36] Wyatt, 96-97.
[37] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 30.

sharing similar views on the conflict. With regards to Halberstam, one can point to the warnings he had been receiving from predecessor Homer Bigart before he went to Vietnam. Bigart was one of the main critics of U.S. policy in Vietnam, and it could very well be that Halberstam was influenced by his views and his articles. However, looking back at his first weeks in Vietnam, his tone was nowhere as critical as that of Bigart, and it wasn't until the first burning of a Buddhist monk that he started to become more critical in the pieces that he wrote. Another point of criticism lies in the fact that, according to Elegant, many reporters were seeking the approval of their editors.[38] When looking at Halberstam's relation with the editors at the New York Times, this doesn't seem to be the case. Halberstam himself explains in *The Powers that be* that he was fully aware of the influence that he had as he was writing for one of the biggest newspapers in the country. He aggressively pursued interesting stories, while trying to avoid getting expelled from the country. This infuriated president Kennedy, especially since Halberstam had such good connections. Through these connections, he was seemingly getting information at a faster rate than the U.S. embassy itself. So in a way it wasn't just the critical reporting that was bothering the administration, but also the freedom and power that someone like Halberstam had to gather any kind of information that he wanted to. But whereas Kennedy's administration clearly disliked Halberstam, the latter was also making his editor at the *New York Times* quite nervous. An excerpt from a conversation between Kennedy and *New York Times*-publisher Arthur Sulzberger is a perfect example of Kennedy's dislike for Halberstam:

> "'What do you think of your young man [Halberstam] in Saigon?" Kennedy began.
>
> "We like him fine," Sulzberger said, somewhat taken aback.
>
> "You don't think he's too close to the story?" The President asked.

[38] Robert Elegant, "How to lose a war: the press and Vietnam," Encounter 2 (1981): 73-90.

"No", said Sulzberger.

"You weren't," suggested the President, "thinking of transferring him to Paris or Rome?"

"No", said the publisher of the *Times*, he had no such plans.'[39]

However, Sulzberger and the *New York Times* were nervous about Halberstam's reporting. In fact, according to Halberstam, the paper didn't like the fact that their main reporter could be portrayed as someone who was soft on Communism. After all, it was a war being waged against Communism and one of the most popular claims that conservatives made was that reporters such as Halberstam were supporting Communism through their critical reporting. Therefore the paper did advise Halberstam to be more balanced in his reporting and that it would be wise to add some quotes from the administration which were positive. That way the paper couldn't be portrayed as an institution that was soft on Communism during the Cold War itself. Still, as Halberstam said, he saw it as a balancing act in which he was constantly trying to make newsworthy reports without angering too much people. That way his editors would be happy and the president would maybe dislike him a little less. But it was no secret that Halberstam was one of the most disliked journalists in Washington during his stay in Vietnam.[40]

In *The Powers That Be*, Halberstam claimed that the Kennedy administration waged a public relations war rather than an actual war. He described how both the Kennedy and the Johnson administration tried to convince the public that journalists such as himself were untrustworthy reporters. They tried to force the military into not leaking any negative reports to journalists, but this proved an impossible task. Even though the higher ranked officials stuck to a more positive story, the regular soldier expressed his frustration to men like

[39] Halberstam, *The Powers that be,* 446.
[40] Halberstam, *The Powers that be,* 446.

Halberstam and Neil Sheehan. And so the White House , according to Halberstam himself, started to attack the journalists on a personal level. Rumors were being spread which said that most of the journalists didn't go into battle at all and that they drank too much which made their reports even more negative. Reporters were also portrayed as communist sympathizers. It was whispered that the reporters lacked experience of war and therefore could not report it accurately. Simply put, the administration portrayed journalists such as Halberstam as unpatriotic weaklings who didn't understand the conflict that they were reporting. It put pressure on the military itself not spread any stories that could undermine the war effort.

With the number of soldiers reaching a number of 200,000 during the Johnson administration, this proved an impossible story to control. However, the White House was probably relieved when Halberstam left Vietnam. Reporters who met President Johnson before being assigned to Vietnam were regularly being told 'not to be like Halberstam and Sheehan, they're traitors to the country.'[41] It was safe to say that journalists such as Halberstam were heavily disliked amongst U.S. officials. U.S. Public Advisor John Mecklin even recalls a scene where the officials in Saigon got word that an unnamed reporter almost got shot by the Vietcong, after which "a senior official snapped his fingers in disappointment, like a man who had missed a putt on the golf course. Everyone laughed."[42]

Even though Halberstam has never expressed regret for the role that he has played during the Vietnam war, Robert Elegant does show that some reporters have changed their opinion on the subject. He cites two reporters, one from Great Britain and one from Germany, who both feel 'ashamed' for their reporting during the conflict. Besides that, Elegant does rightfully point out that many reporters, Halberstam included, probably lacked detailed knowledge of the country's situation. Many journalists who came to Vietnam didn't have any experience with the country, and were asked to report on a complicated conflict in a country

[41] David Halberstam, *The Powers that be,* 447-451.
[42] Wyatt, 104.

unknown to most reporters. Still, Elegant's conclusion that many reporters were sympathizing with Hanoi because, more often than not, the American administration at times lied about tactical details of their mission, seems harsh. Halberstam, being a journalist, rightfully became suspicious of the U.S. administration when they found out that certain things were being hidden from them. But that doesn't automatically mean that they believed everything that came from Hanoi. Simply put, Elegant is seemingly connecting two cases with each other that don't necessarily have a connection with one another. In support of Halberstam, it should be noted though that Elegant's article is mainly critical of the impact of television, and doesn't talk about many newspaper reporters such as Sheehan, Halberstam or even Alsop. But the article does, rightfully, raise some questions on the role of the international media during the Vietnam conflict.[43]

However, these accusations don't all apply to Halberstam. He was one of the first young reporters who was in Vietnam when the conflict was rapidly changing, and therefore he (and also Sheehan and Karnow) more or less had the story for themselves. Once Halberstam left, many more young and up and coming reporters would head to Vietnam, and it is safe to say that some were definitely inspired by Halberstam's reports. One of these correspondents, John Sack, was a reporter for *CBS* in Madrid when he read a piece on Halberstam in *Esquire*. He was a friend of Halberstam, and after reading the article he suddenly felt an urge to come to Vietnam: "Of course I read that story about David, and that picture of him crossing a swamp with the hat on and turning back to look at the camera. A pang of nostalgia, maybe even jealousy, went through me, and I thought: 'I'm supposed to be there."[44] Throughout the literature it is clear that David Halberstam had become quite the pioneer for new journalists coming to Vietnam, and in a way one could say that Elegant is right when saying that young reporters when to Vietnam with a prejudice. But Halberstam wasn't one of them, and if he did

[43] Elegant, 74-90.
[44] Marc Weingarten, *The Gang that wouldn't Write Straight* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

go to Vietnam with a certain prejudice, it was one very different from those that came in the years after him.

Lastly, Daniel Hallin opposed the oppositional media thesis and claims that the majority of journalists in Vietnam, including Halberstam, always stayed true to their ideology of objective journalism. The tone did become more critical as the war went on, and especially the Tet offensive sparked an increase in critical reports. However, this happened almost four years after Halberstam had left. So if these negative reports, which weren't deliberately critical according to Hallin, had a huge influence on war support, then one can point out that Halberstam's successors had more impact on the undermining of war support than he did. [45]

[45] Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," The Journal of Politics 46 (1984): 11-12.

Chapter 3

The Burning Monk and the fall of Diem

'We all personalized the struggle. But Halberstam personalized it more than anyone else.'

- Neil Sheehan, journalist for *United Press International*

One of the first big stories that Halberstam covered was the Buddhist crisis in 1963, a crisis that led to the downfall of the Diem regime. He was one of the first reporters at the scene of the first burning monk. On June 11, 1963, Halberstam was alerted by one of his Vietnamese sources that he should quickly get out of bed and go to a demonstration taking place in the city centre of Saigon. At first, he didn't think that something special was going on, but he soon saw a monk in the middle of the street, surrounded by flames and quietly burning to death. The U.S. government had tried at all times to put Diem in a positive light. But this scene convinced Halberstam that the regime was one of repression; it undermined American support for Diem.[46] But if one looks at the reporting on the Buddhist crisis it becomes apparent that Diem made several crucial mistakes and that the press corps had nothing to do with it.

According to Halberstam, the crisis had already begun before the scene of the burning monk. In May 1963, Buddhists were protesting because the government forbade them to use religious flags during a parade. Diem's response was fierce, as he ordered his troops to shoot at the demonstrators, killing several protesters. What followed was a mass-protest, and Halberstam was appalled by Diem's handling of the crisis: "Observing the government during

[46] Wyatt, 99.

these four months was like watching a government trying to commit suicide." [47] Then the burning monk scene took place on a city centre in Saigon, and as said before, it became an event which made Halberstam even more critical of the conflict. The gap between the American press and the local officials was growing wider and wider as the South-Vietnamese government was, as Halberstam put it, going into self-destruct mode by harassing the Buddhist groups.

According to John Mecklin, who was the U.S. Public Affairs Officer from 1962 till 1964, the South-Vietnamese government was wrong in thinking that these protests were being exaggerated by the U.S. press corps. Although he did believe that reporters such as Halberstam had a huge grievance towards Diem, and that they revelled in his mistakes, they did nothing wrong in reporting the Buddhist crisis. Mecklin admitted that it was Diem's own fault that the press used this unrest to show how inadequate his government was.[48]

Nevertheless, the anger of Diem and Mme. Nhu towards reporters such as Halberstam and Neil Sheehan continued to grow. Even though they didn't directly try to bring down Diem and his government, these reporters indirectly kept the Buddhist protests alive. In first instance, the Buddhists were trying to get the American government on their side. However, they soon found out that the Americans would stick by Diem's side and so they turned to the only other outlet that they could find: the journalists. Through them they could show the rest of the world what was going on and that is just what they did. Halberstam and others were pre-notified whenever a mass demonstration was being held and journalists would always be at these mass protests when they started. U.S. officials, Mecklin included, were left in the cold and didn't know anything about upcoming demonstrations.

All of a sudden, the journalists and Buddhists were gaining the upper hand in this crisis. As soon as the American officials started to notice this trend, they advised Diem to

[47] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 199.
[48] Mecklin, 162-163.

issue an apology to the Buddhists and to try and come to terms with them before things spiraled out of control. But Diem and Mme. Nhu would have none of it and they subsequently started their own media war by claiming that the burned monk was 'drugged' before he burned himself to death, and that the only useful thing the Buddhists had done for the country was "to barbecue a monk." Also, in a radio speech Diem declared that in an act of "concealing propaganda that sowed doubt about the goodwill of the government, a number of people got intoxicated and caused an undeserved death that made me very sorry."[49] Diem later claimed that the burning monk had been bribed by Malcolm Browne and AP just so that he could take an amazing photo.[50] However, this didn't sound trustworthy at all, since Mme. Nhu would later add that "if they burn 30 women, we will go ahead and clap our hands. We cannot be responsible for their madness."[51]

The protests had already gotten out of hand and all the reports and accusations from Diem just made matters worse. Slowly, the anger from Diem towards journalists turned into actual physical altercations. During a Buddhist protest on July 7, Halberstam and several other reporters were watching the protests unfold in Saigon. Then out of nowhere, Malcolm Browne and Peter Arnett were being surrounded by a mob and one of Browne's cameras was smashed during the altercation that followed. In a *New York Times Article* on July 8, Halberstam wrote: "Moments later (after Browne and Arnett had been pushed) the secret policemen began pushing reporters and trying to seize the photographers cameras. [...] William Trueheart, charge d'arraires in the U.S. Embassy, said that the embassy had been told by the Vietnamese that a few people 'lost their heads.'"[52] Halberstam, who was perhaps the tallest and most physically imposing of the reporters, intervened and prevented his colleagues from being hurt. According to Neil Sheehan, who was also present and being provoked, "Halberstam charged

[49] David Halberstam. 'Diem Asks Peace in Religion Crisis,' *New York Times,* June 12, 1963, p. 3.
[50] William Prochnau. *Once Upon a Distant War* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1996).
[51] James Reston. 'Phone Links Cut', *New York Times*, August 21, 1963, p. 1.
[52] David Halberstam. 'Police in Saigon Jostle Newsmen,' *New York Times,* July 8, 1963, p. 3.

with a bellow before they had an opportunity to hurt Arnett seriously, he knocked and tossed the lightly built Vietnamese aside and stood over Arnett, his grizzly-bear shoulders hunched and his great fists poised, yelling: 'Get back, get back you sons of bitches, or I'll beat the shit out of you!'"[53] Browne and Arnett both were forced to go to a police station the next day and were almost convicted of assaulting innocent bystanders if it wasn't for the fact that they were still relying on the U.S. for its assistance during this military conflict. But all of a sudden, Diem and his officials seemed more busy fighting the press than they were fighting the Vietcong.[54]

During the altercation in July, Halberstam had been able to defend himself, but soon afterwards Diem and Mme. Nhu were starting to become even more paranoid. They saw the American press, or at least a big part of it, as the enemy. On August 21, 1963, Halberstam sought refuge at the office of an American official (John Mecklin). Together with Neal Sheehan, he had gotten word that Mme. Nhu had ordered a group of men to assault the places that they were staying at, and that they were even on her death list. Since they both knew how paranoid and desperate the Diem administration had become, they rushed off to Mecklin who offered to let them hide in his office for the next 3 weeks. As an American official, Mecklin was well aware that these threats could very well be true and he wanted to avoid the drama that he had experienced during the arrest of Arnett and Browne.[55] As Mecklin himself said, these journalists didn't do anything wrong. He didn't agree with their reporting before the Buddhist crisis, and acknowledged that some reporters seemed to be out there to deliberately hurt the U.S. cause (he didn't give any names, so whether he included Halberstam in this group is unclear), but during the Buddhist crisis their reporting was undeniably unbiased. He made it very clear that it was the Diem administration that was destroying itself and that

[53] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 352-353.
[54] Mecklin, 162-171.
[55] Sheehan, 356-357.

people like Halberstam were simply watching it unravel. Diem and Mme. Nhu were so desperate to hold onto power that they wanted to find another scapegoat, and this became the American press.

In the chaos that ensued, Halberstam suddenly had two fronts that he needed to cover: firstly, he was still asked to watch military developments; secondly, the Buddhist crisis added a political element that was equally interesting. This had a lot to do with Halberstam's background as a reporter in Mississippi and in Nashville, Tennessee, where he was a reporter in a time when the American Civil Rights movement was struggling for power in the Deep South. The Buddhist crisis reminded him very much of the crisis that had been present in the southern part of the U.S. And so Halberstam covered the entire crisis with great interest and thanks to his Buddhist sources he was always able to get all the information about future protests and demonstrations. He was also able to place everything into a logical context for his readers because the Buddhists would give him terrific information on the background of the political conflict. The Buddhists wanted to show the world what was going on, and reporters like Halberstam, who remembered scenes like this from the past in Mississippi and Tennessee, reported it with great interest as the conflict was entering a new stage. [56]

In all this turmoil it is fair to ask whether the Buddhists themselves were deliberately manipulating the U.S. press corps. Halberstam himself acknowledged that the Buddhists were very well aware of the influence that the journalists had. "They did not understand the function of a free press, but they quickly sensed that it could be used and that it gave them some protection." In other words, despite the fact that they didn't grasp the concept of something as 'objective journalism', they did feel like they had a new ally in their battle against Diem. But if they Buddhists were manipulating the journalists, then Diem was certainly doing the same. Halberstam also explains how, on several occasions, policemen

[56] Sheehan, 351.

would leave Buddhists alone once the press arrived. In a way it became a cat and mouse game with the press stuck in the middle. [57]

This conflict expanded Halberstam's connections in Vietnam, up to the point where he was much better informed than American officials, especially when it came to the political conflict. U.S. officials were aware of the problems and were pressuring Diem to 'fix it.' Still, their connections weren't as good as those of Halberstam or Sheehan, who had inside information which they acquired from the Buddhist groups. A prime example of this can be found on August 21, 1963, when the Diem administration prepared series of attacks on Buddhist shrines which became to be known as the Xa Loi raid. The U.S. officials had already been insisting for quite some time that Diem would be wise to put the conflict to an end. Instead, he fired back and whereas Halberstam knew all about it, the U.S. administration was left in disbelief when they got the word from Halberstam and his colleague Neil Sheehan that these attacks were about to take place. One of the officials became angry with the two reporters and asked them "Why didn't you tell us?". All of a sudden Halberstam himself started to realize just how well-informed he had gotten and he couldn't believe that the U.S. administration had no clue about the Xa Loi raid taking place that day. [58]

Two days later, Halberstam put together a story which proved that Diem's own special forces, not the Vietnamese army, had initiated the Xa Loi raid.[59] Despite the fact that the Vietnamese authorities were making it more and more difficult for him to do his job, he was still hopeful that his story would make it to New York. Because of the heavy censorship and the fact that he was still reporting from an underdeveloped country, Halberstam often didn't know how his story would be published. But two days later word had reached Saigon that Halberstam's article had been published on the front page of the *New York Times*. Halberstam, who was in an office with Sheehan and some other journalists, was applauded by several

[57] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 205-206.
[58] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire,* 226-228.
[59] David Halberstam, "Plan Said to Be Nhu's", *New York Times*, August 23, 1963, p.1.

colleagues; Charles Mohr (*Time*) said that Halberstam and Sheehan were "the first reporters I've ever known who scooped the State Department by four days." [60] Halberstam continued to get better information than the majority of the U.S. officials and his hard work was beginning to become the end for Diem, in whom the American administration was losing faith. Also in Vietnam, Halberstam sensed that Americans were feeling less and less enthusiastic in supporting the government of Diem. Despite their loyalty and their willingness to battle communism, one American advisor said it was simply a matter of time: "they just aren't going to want to keep taking risks for a Nhu government." Another American pointed out the irony of the situation in which both Americans and Vietnamese found themselves: "When a young Vietnamese and a young American get on well together, one thing they have in common is that neither likes his own country's policy."[61]

At the beginning of the Vietnam conflict, Halberstam described himself as one of the most hated reporters in Vietnam. But as Diem created a state filled with chaos and fear, the U.S. officials began to shift their annoyance towards Diem himself, and not so much the reporters. Diem and Mme. Nhu were trying to scare away journalists such as Halberstam and even considered removing them by force. Eventually, the Kennedy administration couldn't ignore the chaos that Diem was creating. Kennedy had become frustrated with Diem's unwillingness to change his course and eventually there was no turning back. The CIA also agreed and acknowledged that Vietnam was "at serious risk of being lost over the course of time" as long as Diem remained in charge. After months of talks and negotiations between Kennedy and his administration, the trigger was pulled on November 1, 1963. Diem was killed during a coup in the presidential palace, and a change of course was supposedly imminent.[62]

[60] Wyatt, 119.
[61] David Halberstam, 'Anguish in Saigon,' *New York Times*, September 3, 1963, p. 4.
[62] Halberstam, *The Powers that be*, 266-292.

According to Halberstam this turn of events wasn't a great surprise, as he had already predicted in late August that there would "either be a coup d'etat, [...] or a Nhu coup, which would include an attempt to crush the Buddhist movement." At one point Halberstam had even been approached by a Vietnamese source who happened to be in a plot involving young Vietnamese officers. Halberstam, who was quite surprised, would be given inside access to the story, but would also have to flee the country if things went wrong. Halberstam had decided that it was worth the risk, but eventually the contact faded. [63] Still, it was clear to him that something was about to happen, and eventually, on November 10, the expected coup took place. For Halberstam, it meant that he and his colleagues would no longer have to fear the censorship of Diem's administration, and for a moment it seemed as if both the press and the government were about to become partners. In fact, Halberstam, who was preparing to leave Vietnam at the end of 1963, said that the removal of Diem made it a lot easier to work in Vietnam as a journalist: "For once, the job of a reporter in Vietnam was easy."[64]

In terms of media bias, it is telling that even an U.S. official such as John Mecklin was ready to admit that David Halberstam wasn't there to promote his own agenda. During the Buddhist crisis the administration of Diem had handled the entire situation so poorly that the reporters could hardly be blamed. They simply reported what they saw, and what one would see wasn't pretty. Nevertheless, Joe Alsop and Marguerite Higgins, two conservative journalists, remained critical of Halberstam. And not every editor was pleased with the work that Halberstam was publishing in the *New York Times*.

[63] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 221-226
[64] Ibidem, 300-301.

Chapter 4

Halberstam in comparison with his colleagues & pressure from his editors

"Reporters here would like to see us lose the war to prove they're right"

- Marguerite Higgins, journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune*

Alsop and Higgins completely disagreed with the reports that Halberstam wrote. Higgins used the classic argument that journalists such as Halberstam engaged in negative reporting in order to advance their careers. Alsop and Higgins both remained on the side of the government no matter what happened. Whereas Halberstam himself had made a shift after certain events occurred in Vietnam, Alsop and Higgins were one of a few who were determined to prove that the U.S. government was doing the right thing. Alsop, during the Buddhist crisis and the subsequent fall of Diem, had already criticized Halberstam for starting a 'reportorial crusade'. He claimed that journalists such as Halberstam were ignoring 'the majority of Americans who admire the Vietnamese as fighters.' According to Alsop, only 1 out 10 U.S. officers had a negative view on the Vietnamese troops[65]

Alsop was a *Washington Post* columnist who had strong ties to president John F. Kennedy. He was considered one of Kennedy's best friends and in return it meant that Alsop was never too critical of Kennedy. What did seem strange is that Alsop became critical of Diem when the latter was in danger of losing power. Just as he had a close relationship with

[65] Mecklin, 120.

Kennedy, Alsop was also very close to Diem; in fact, the South-Vietnamese president made it known that he was only able to trust one American journalist, and this journalist was Joe Alsop. With these relationships came special treatment. Alsop claimed that Halberstam had picked a side and that he would do anything to make sure that the other side lost, but Alsop did exactly the same. Even when he was critical of the U.S., he was still supportive of the paranoid Diem who had begun to physically intimidate other journalists.

In the case of Marguerite Higgins it also seems that there was a good reason for her to become hostile of those who were critical of the U.S. government. In the case of Higgins, it wasn't a close relationship with Diem or Kennedy, but rather the fact that was been married to a soldier, Lieutenant General William Evans Hall.[66] This seems to be a rather logical explanation of the fact why she always remained positive about the U.S. effort in Vietnam and continued to criticize journalists like Halberstam who she felt were trying to undermine the war effort.

Editors regarded Alsop and Higgins as two very experienced journalists. Both of them had earned their stripes; Higgins had won a Pulitzer prize for her work during the Korea War. As a result, some editors at the *New York Times* started to get worried and were afraid that Halberstam was going on a pro-communist crusade that would eventually bring down morale in the U.S. amongst the readers. The editors didn't mind that reporters were sometimes critical of the government, as they valued their political independence. However, some felt that Halberstam's course was too extreme. Despite his great journalistic attributes, he didn't have a lot of experience, and the fact that someone as experienced and respected as Marguerite Higgins was saying the exact opposite worried the paper.[67] It was a time in which tensions between editors and reporters were rising throughout the journalistic landscape. At *Time*

[66] Wikipedia contributors, "Marguerite Higgins", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marguerite_Higgins (accessed July 7, 2014). (Also confirmed by a bio on Williams Evan Hall: http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=52534107)
[67] Sheehan, 347-348.

magazine for example, two reporters, Charles Mohr and Mert Perry, resigned after their editors had published a story which criticized the negative reporting from Saigon. Their own critical stories had already been shot down on several occasions as the editors had made it clear that they were trying to support Diem in any way that they could; negative reporting wouldn't be beneficial and would hurt the cause. It is yet another example of a newspaper and/or magazine which was under the impression that it could make the difference between winning and losing in this conflict. [68] A few weeks after Mohr and Perry resigned, *Time* magazine took back some of the harsh words that it had expressed when talking about journalists like Halberstam, Sheehan and even their own reporters: "[...] today telling the truth about the Saigon press corps is a difficult job."[69] Simply said, *Time* magazine acknowledged that it didn't know all the details about the situation in Saigon and that its own report was based on fears, rumors, and a political agenda.

Tensions rose at the headquarters of the *New York Times* as well as editors started to doubt Halberstam. They informed him of Higgins' reports and asked him if he could fact check his reports more carefully to make sure they were accurate. Halberstam was not amused, he had already been a reporter in Saigon for quite some time and he felt insulted that his bosses, after all this time, doubted his competence. In a conversation with one of his editors, Nathaniel Gerstenzang, Halberstam voiced his complaint: "Gerstenzang, if you mention that woman's name (Higgins) to me one more time I will resign repeat resign and I mean it repeat mean it." After a few tirades from Halberstam, the *New York Times* editors stopped complaining to him directly, but the doubts remained. Still, they felt he was too talented to transfer him out of Saigon directly and that it wouldn't look good for the paper if they were to fire a reporter who was critical. “Scotty” Reston, who had hired Halberstam at the *Times*, couldn't believe how often they doubted and sometimes spiked Halberstam’s

[68] Hallin, 48.
[69] Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: from Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 111.

reports. But despite Reston's efforts, the relationship between Halberstam and the *New York Times* was going downhill. Some editors were also getting tired of Halberstam's behavior. He was typically more direct and straightforward in terms of words and actions than many colleagues and unsurprisingly this didn't sit well with everyone. Whereas other journalists, such as his friend Neil Sheehan, tried to stay polite at all times and had a very different character, Halberstam made it known when he didn't like someone, even if that someone was an U.S. official. This made him beloved by some colleagues in Saigon, but hated by others.[70]

Halberstam, Sheehan and many others despised the work of Alsop and Higgins. They felt that they were simply puppets of from the U.S. government who were deliberately trying to make everything look better than it really was. The fact that they thought like this was not absurd. The U.S. government was more or less urging senior journalists to visit Vietnam in the company of U.S. officials in order to see the conflict with their own eyes. Both Alsop and Higgins went on such trips and as said, they heavily criticized reports by Halberstam. What does seem odd in all of this is that Alsop, who was at first critical of Kennedy for not giving Diem enough support, would criticize Diem upon returning to Kennedy in private.[71]

This is yet another example of Alsop being a reporter who really believed that negative reports in the media would undermine the war effort. Alsop's reporting reflected his close links to the Kennedy administration. As the Dutch war reporter Arnold Karskens says: "A good journalist doesn't have any friends." [72] The fact that the U.S. treated reporters such as Higgins and Alsop as guests makes it seem as if they actually sponsored these trips to make young, inexperienced reporters such as Halberstam look bad. No one has been able to prove that the government in Washington actually paid and sponsored these trips deliberately to hurt the integrity of young, critical reporters. But it is pretty clear that they only urged a select

[70] Sheehan, 347-350.
[71] Patricia W. Levering, Ralph B. Levering & Montague Kern, *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, The Presidency and Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 174-175.
[72] Interview with Arnold Karskens, *Kijken in de ziel*, Nederland 3, July 28, 2014.

group of experienced reporters, with a background of positive reporting on Washington, to visit Vietnam.[73]

However, when taking a look at the literature written by other journalists at the time it becomes clear that Alsop and Higgins were 'lone wolves', in the world of U.S. journalism and in Saigon. Their views were not shared by many others. Most of Halberstam's colleagues shared his views. Peter Arnett, a journalist from New Zealand who worked for the *Associated Press,* called David Halberstam one of the most influential journalists in Vietnam. According to Arnett, Halberstam had the guts to go where others didn't dare to go and despite the heavy criticism that this reporting received, the editors back home finally began to realize that these reports weren't fiction. Arnett also experienced doubts, which mostly stemmed from the fact that he was inexperienced, and that the only ones who confirmed his story were other young and inexperienced journalists. Editors looked at these reporters critically to make sure they weren't copying one another. But once their reports started to stack up, the editors began to realize that it was indeed a fact that the reports from U.S. officials weren't in line with actual events. Arnett also argues that Higgins'claim that many journalists wished to see the U.S. lose the war, was ludicrous. Reporters such as himself and Halberstam did not seek to harm the U.S.. In fact, he describes the situation in Saigon as one that got more tense once the conflict erupted. Just as in any branch of journalism, reporters were both colleagues and enemies at the same time. Everyone had their own sources and everyone protected these sources with the greatest care. Journalists always want to have a scoop and the situation in Vietnam was no different. Halberstam got the better of several other journalists on numerous occasions with his military analyses, but others such as Malcolm Browne, Arnett himself, Neil Sheehan and Ray Herndon also had their scoops. [74]

[73] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From Crimea to Vietnam, the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975), 379-380.
[74] Arnett, 111-112.

This last part is an important fact that many analyses of this subject seem to forget. Journalists tend to be people with reasonably large egos; they are not looking to make friends, they are out to be the first to get their hands on something newsworthy. David Halberstam was a young, enthusiastic reporter with a big future ahead of him and he was well aware of that fact. According to William Prochnau, others knew very well of Halberstam's reputation, and from the moment he arrived it was seemingly a showdown between him and Malcolm Browne. Browne had been there for a longer time and therefore had the better sources and the better stories. This frustrated Halberstam and he tried to get Browne to share some of his sources. Halberstam soon found out that it was every man for himself and that he would have to crack open this story on his own. According to Prochnau, Halberstam had to get used to the more competitive surroundings in Vietnam, especially since he was someone who enjoyed company. But eventually, Prochnau adds, Halberstam became more selfish as well, even though the literature depicts the Saigon press corps as a team. Although he was a social able person, Halberstam realized that one had to choose his own path in this jungle. There is no more telling example of Halberstam's selfishness than the scene in which Neil Sheehan, with whom he shared a desk, fell asleep while transcribing a story over the phone. Sheehan had been completely exhausted after he hadn't gotten any sleep the night before. Despite the fact that he and Sheehan were quite close, Halberstam picked up the phone and took the story from Sheehan. [75]

Editors were misled by experienced reporters such as Alsop and Higgins. But as the reports from Halberstam and his colleagues stacked up, they began to realize that there was indeed a different, more troubling, story. As James Reston said, the fact that Halberstam's reports were different from those of U.S. officials made them newsworthy. Still, doubts remained as experience seemingly played a huge role in the credibility process and that was

[75] William Prochnau, *Once upon a Distant War, Reporting from Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1996) 150-154.

something that Halberstam didn't have. He had been active in the Congo for a few years but he was still vastly less experienced than people like Alsop. However, Halberstam overcame the inexperience and eventually set a high standard for his reports which led to very positive reviews from colleagues such as Neil Sheehan and Peter Arnett who admired his work and his no-nonsense attitude. It is this same attitude that gave him trouble at the Times, but it also made it possible for him to become one of the most influential personalities in Saigon. One who wasn't out there to see the U.S. lose, and who wasn't in Saigon to make friends and cooperate with anyone (something which came after the 'rejection' from Malcolm Browne). Halberstam was simply a young, motivated and hardworking reporter who tried to do his job the best way possible, and just like in many other influential professions, that automatically means that people will doubt and criticize you.

Chapter 5

America's reaction to the supposed undermining of war support & Halberstam's explanation of the Vietnam conflict

"I don't think it is fair to blame the messenger for the content of what he carries"

- Peter Arnett, reporter for the *Associated Press*

Halberstam was one of the most polarizing reporters in Vietnam. In every piece of literature which discusses the Vietnam conflict and the influence of media, his name passes by on multiple pages. The U.S. officials in Saigon didn't like Halberstam that much; he knew too much and was saying too many things that would undermine support for the war. Was this fear realistic? When Halberstam arrived in Vietnam, Malcolm Browne, Francois Sully and Homer Bigart had already been in Vietnam for a year and were able to report on the U.S. increasing the amount of 'military advisers' and the fact that Americans were already getting killed in combat. Still, until the Buddhist crisis erupted, Kennedy succeeded in downplaying the conflict.

But not every journalist bought into this argument. Halberstam's predecessor, Homer Bigart, tried to make it clear to his readers that a war was in the making*:* "The United States is involved in a war in Vietnam. American Troops will stay until victory. That is what Attorney General Robert Kennedy last week. He called it 'war... in a very real sense of the word.' [...]

Actually the U.S. had been deeply involved in the fate of Vietnam since 1949."[76] A few weeks later, Bigart added: "The United States, by massive and unqualified support of the regime of President Ngo Ding Diem, has helped arrest the spread of Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. But victory is remote. The issue remains in doubt because the Vietnamese President seems incapable of winning the loyalty of his people. [...] However, no decisive turn in the military struggle is expected this year. [...] No one who has seen the conditions of combat in South Vietnam would expect conventionally trained United States forces to fight any better against Communist guerillas than did the French in their seven years. [...] Americans may simply lack the endurance - and the motivation - to meet the unbelievably tough demands of jungle fighting."[77] And also Halberstam's close friend, and colleague, Neil Sheehan, was very clear about the fact that America was waging a war, and not a very successful one: "'It was a miserable damn performance' was the way one American military man summed up the humiliating and costly defeat suffered by the South Vietnamese army at the hands of outnumbered Communist guerillas in the fight for the jungle hamlet (Ap Bac) 30 miles south of Saigon. It was perhaps the strongest criticism by an American military adviser, but others in the battle said it was not an unfair one."[78]

There were many more articles like this that reported the difficulties facing US policy in Vietnam, and how they might lead to a long and tiring military conflict. Despite these reports, the majority of the U.S. public didn't seem to panic. This was in large part because of the work of the Kennedy Administration. The administration continuously downplayed the involvement of American troops to Vietnam, and the papers took the bait, as in 1961, a press conference in which Kennedy acknowledged that more men and supplies were going to Vietnam, was featured in a small article on the bottom of the first page of the *New York*

[76] Homer Bigart, "A 'Very Real War' in Vietnam and the Deep U.S. Commitment", *New York Times*, February 25, 1962.
[77] Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem", *New York Times*, July 25, 1962.
[78] Neil Sheehan, "Vietnamese Ignored U.S. Battle Order", *The Washington Post*, January 7, 1963.

Times. Meanwhile, the main article was one about the ongoing conflict in the Congo...written by David Halberstam.[79]

Nowadays, we as individuals have so many free resources (social media, different news outlets) that we can use to check whether what we see is true and whether we want to believe it. In the period of the Vietnam war, times were different and many people were naturally inclined to believe official reports that came from the President, something which drastically changed after the *Watergate* scandal. At the same time, not all reporters shared the same opinion and this is a matter that has been discussed before. It has never been proven that Washington deliberately urged reporters to write positively, but they did know who to send to Vietnam and it was because of conflicting reports such as these that people were less inclined to believe Halberstam and his fellow journalists in Saigon. It is interesting to see, nevertheless, that even reports from Higgins and Alsop weren't necessarily always meant to calm people down back home. For example, Higgins shows this as she warns the American public that things are about to turn ugly if Diem is disposed "'A succesful coup d'etat against Diem would probably set the war back 12 months.' [...] The tragic irony of South Vietnam today is that its worldwide image is being tarnished at a period when the war is going better than ever. Its little people are more secure from Viet Cong attack and better fed at any time since the Communists unleashed their cruel military assault in 1961."[80] Although this demonstrates the unwavering support from Higgins towards Diem, it does show that reports from journalists such as Higgins weren't always positive.

Reports from experienced reporters such as Higgins and Alsop created doubts, not only amongst editors but most likely also amongst readers and therefore it doesn't seem illogical that many kept turning to the government for information on the war. Television would become a more powerful medium in the latter stages of the war and this would

[79] Prochnau 140.
[80] Marguerite Higgins, "The Diem Government, Pro and Con", *New York Herald Tribune*, September 1, 1963.

definitely change the sentiment in the U.S., but during the time of Halberstam, television was yet to become a big player on the Vietnam stage.

The Buddhist protests marked a turning point in how the Kennedy Administration looked at reporters like Halberstam. Before the beginning of the conflict, and at the start of it, the focus was mainly on selective openness. The administration was willing to share many details, and to give reporters lots of access, but only for its own good. Once the Buddhist protests started to erupt, the administration made an important change and this had to do with the position of the U.S. Ambassador. When Halberstam arrived in 1962 Fredrick Nolting was the ambassador to South Vietnam. However, in August 1963 Kennedy replaced him with Henry Cabot Lodge, the main reason being the erupting situation in Vietnam and the fact that Nolting, according to Kennedy, was too close with Diem to make a change. This change would mean a lot for the Saigon press corps and it sent a message to Halberstam and others. For the first time, the U.S. was seemingly not that interested in his work (in a good way). Nolting had often ignored him and was wary of many journalists who got too close to the story. Lodge was a pleasant surprise. Kennedy had sent him with a simple order: to persuade Diem to change his way of governing and to restore order in Vietnam. The 'problems' with the press were not his biggest concern anymore. Lodge even told Peter Arnett a story about him and president Kennedy talking about the Buddhist protests and his upcoming promotion: "I remember going into the Oval Office and there was the picture of this old man sitting cross-legged burning himself alive, and President Kennedy said, 'Look at that, look at what things have come to in Vietnam. I have confidence in you, I want you to go out there and see if we can't get the government to behave better.'"[81] Kennedy was no longer blaming messengers such as Halberstam for the message they were carrying, he was starting to focus on the main problem, Diem's behavior and the political tensions in South Vietnam.

[81] Arnett, 108.

Before the switch to Lodge, the U.S. administration had endorsed a different tactic and, as John Mecklin says, it was aimed at keeping the journalists away from the news. The U.S. officials were urged to keep newsmen away from military activities that had a risk of leading to 'undesirable stories'. If they could manage to keep these 'undesirable stories' away from the public, then the U.S. mission, they thought, would become a lot more easier. A subcommittee was formed within the U.S. congress and this committee, consisting of several congress members, was the first to read this new strategy. The committee didn't like what it saw, and criticized it : "The restrictive U.S. press policy in Vietnam unquestionably contributed to the lack of information about conditions in Vietnam which created an international crisis. Instead of hiding the facts from the American public, the State Department should have done everything possible to expose the true situation to full view." Still, despite the criticism from Washington itself, the strategy was put into place in 1962 in a time when Halberstam had just arrived in Saigon.[82]

As time passed, the U.S. realized that its problems with the press could be reduced by simply taking care of the biggest problem, which was the instability of South Vietnam. This meant that Halberstam had more freedom to do his journalistic work, but it did not undermine support for the war because the majority of the American public remained ignorant and uninterested. As U.S. official John Mecklin stated to ambassador Fredrick Nolting: "The reality [is] that the newsmen here will continue to find access to very much the truth of what's going on, regardless of what we may do. I think it's futile to try to 'control' them, or cut off their sources. Americans, even in the military, simply don't work that way." Mecklin added that it would be more useful to cooperate as the government was now losing all influence over the reporters by shutting them out. Kennedy was not convinced when he spoke to Mecklin himself, but promised him that he would start to make some minor changes to alter their

[82] Mecklin, 111.

relations with the press, for he knew just how important a good relationship with the press was. By replacing Nolting with Lodge, Kennedy eventually acknowledged that Mecklin was right in his assessment. [83]

When we add all of this up it seems illogical to conclude that David Halberstam was responsible for undermining the war effort. The majority of the U.S. didn't care about the Vietnam conflict when he arrived and even when he was active during one of the first crises in Vietnam the public opinion seemingly didn't change much. At first, the U.S. officials did seem to see the Saigon press corps and Halberstam as a legitimate threat but the fact that Kennedy changed course during Halberstam's stay in Vietnam is a clear signal that they realized that journalists such as Halberstam couldn't be blamed if public opinion turned on them. They could only blame themselves. Still, as media-expert Graham Spencer concludes, the entire Vietnam conflict would eventually be a lesson for the American administration in how to manage the news during a war. In Vietnam, in its own eyes, it had largely failed and, according to Spencer, this 'Vietnam Syndrome' can be seen back in all of the conflicts that the U.S. has been involved in after Vietnam. He describes the 'Vietnam Syndrome' as a fear that complete freedom of the press had made the U.S. reluctant to embark on foreign interventions, especially if they risked or involved war. The U.S. administration therefore tried to manage the news much more carefully.[84]

What did Halberstam himself think of all this? How did he respond to the criticism that was thrown his way? And how did he explain the controversy surrounding the media and the Vietnam war? In *Making of a Quagmire*, the first book that Halberstam wrote on the Vietnam War, he makes an interesting prediction and says that the Vietnam War would surely not be the last conflict of this kind. And in this he was right. What is also telling is how critical Halberstam was of the government's tactics and approaches during the Vietnam War.

[83] Wyatt, 124.
[84] Graham Spencer, *The Media and Peace, From Vietnam to the 'War on Terror'* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005), 55-56.

Halberstam himself was full of hope when he first entered Vietnam, and he even saw merit in the 'domino theory'. *Making of a Quagmire* was written in 1965, which meant that the Vietnam War was still ongoing at the time. At the end of his book, he describes in great detail how his optimism faded throughout his stay in Vietnam: "As I began to write my final piece before leaving the country, I had never been so pessimistic about Vietnam's future. I suppose that the only thing that made me at all hopeful was the fact that I was an American [...]. Many American friends whom I greatly respected, still believed that there was a chance to save the country, and this assuaged my pessimism somewhat."[85]

In the last quotation, Halberstam more or less responds to the criticism of conservatives that he was 'betraying' his own country. Halberstam explains that he actually believes that his American background made it impossible for him to be completely objective in this conflict, and that he always tried to see a bright spot. But he adds that he simply didn't see any change, except for the fact that the faces changed. What is even more interesting is the solutions that Halberstam himself proposed in 1965 in order to 'solve' the conflict. Conservatives would make the claim that Halberstam, being a critic of the war, would support withdrawal. But in *Making of a Quagmire* Halberstam makes it clear that withdrawal of troops has some clear disadvantages. He mentions the image of the U.S. which would be badly tarnished if it would leave, and adds that withdrawal could easily lead to other countries being encouraged to follow the example of Hanoi. In other words, the domino theory hadn't completely left Halberstam's mind, and he believed that complete withdrawal would send the wrong message to the world. [86] As the title of the book states, Halberstam himself struggles immensely with the question 'how to solve the Vietnam conflict', and states that the U.S. is caught in a quagmire.

[85] Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 308.
[86] Ibidem, 315.

One book that isn't broadly discussed in the literature written on the subject is Halberstam's book on Ho Chi Minh. It is a rather small book, consisting only of 120 pages and it explains how, in his eyes, Ho Chi Minh was able to be successful and how the U.S. was unknowingly fighting one of the most inspiring leaders in the world. He also explains that he believes that it was sheer arrogance that cost the U.S. a chance of victory, viewing themselves as being superior to the French, whom Americans regarded as weak, discredited colonialists.[87] In his first book, *Making of a Quagmire*, Halberstam also refers to the French colonial period, saying that it left a legacy that assured that it was a lost cause from the start. Although he doesn't use the same words in his first book, between the lines he more or less says that the Americans could have learned from the 'French experience'.

Throughout the book *Ho*, Halberstam praises the methods of the Communist government in the North and its willpower while acknowledging the many mistakes that the U.S. government made. Just as in *Making of a Quagmire*, David Halberstam doesn't mention the media criticism at all, as if he is completely sure that he and his journalist colleagues couldn't be blamed. For others, a book such as this is a great example of Halberstam being a communist sympathizer, and there seem to be signs of the U.S. government being suspicious of that. In 2008, several students at the City University of New York's Graduate School of Journalism did a research and asked for FBI documents showing whether there was any history of government institutions following Halberstam. The documents showed that from 1965 onwards, when Halberstam had begun to cover the Cold War in Poland, the FBI had been closely monitoring his reports and his whereabouts. And in 1971, they were even thinking about conducting a series of interviews with Halberstam itself, the same year that he wrote his book on Ho Chi Minh. The report doesn't state why they wanted to have to talk to him, and the conservations eventually didn't take place. But it does seem very coincidental

[87] David Halberstam, *Ho* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971), 113-117.

and the files do show that they at least thought that Halberstam's reports, books and overall behavior was suspicious enough to spy on him. Though it must be said that the FBI in this day and age was spying on just about everyone.[88]

In Halberstam's following book, *The Best and the Brightest*, he touched on the very core of U.S. problems in Vietnam: the failing foreign policy of the U.S. government. Halberstam criticized U.S. foreign policy on every level. He also detailed how big the fear for the Saigon press corps was, arguing that the government was convinced, from the beginning that this war could only be lost if the media got too close. Fredrick Nolting frequently complained to Washington that reporters like Halberstam were harmful to the U.S. policy with their sensationalized reports. [89] Halberstam also discussed Joseph Alsop, one of his fiercest critics, asserting that Alsop was one of the proponents of the so-called 'domino theory.' Alsop, he says, was very critical of the U.S. government 'losing' China to communism. Halberstam in return says that these Alsop articles weren't 'particularly thoughtful or deep' and that they created the false illusion that America could lose countries that didn't even fall under their control. [90] Compared to his previous books, *The Best and the Brightest* is the first in which Halberstam openly talked about the criticism that he and his colleagues received for their supposed biased reporting. He explains how the U.S. administration was disappointed how the Communists managed to 'control' their journalists, whereas they couldn't control theirs. When looking at his own criticism of Alsop, it has interesting to see that Halberstam had definitely taken a clear turn against the 'domino theory.' In *Making of a Quagmire*, he acknowledged that withdrawing from Vietnam completely carried a risk because other countries could see it as a sign that a civil uprising such as in Vietnam could work in their own country as well. Overall, the tone of criticism in his later

[88] Nick Graham, "FBI Tracked David Halberstam For More Than Two Decades", *Huffington Post,* August 8, 2008, accessed September 30, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/11/08/fbi-tracked-david-halbers_n_142403.html.
[89] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 205-206.
[90] Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 115-116.

books is much fiercer of American policy than it is in his first book on Vietnam. Halberstam attributes this change to the many interviews he conducted with government officials as to find out more about the political reasoning behind the decisions made with regards to Vietnam.

Halberstam seems to downplay his own influence even more in the book *The Powers That Be*, a detailed study of four major media institutions (*Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Time-Life*, and *CBS).* In his chapter on *CBS* he criticized television news for having no "memory," meaning that an image will be shown and one second later it is gone and mostly forgotten. From 1964 on, he believes, the government started to pay more attention to television, with newspapers becoming less important. Even though this book doesn't put as much focus on government decision-making than his previous works, it does show that these big media-companies were very influential. The growth of television journalism drastically changed the landscape of wartime news management. [91]

What the books show, and what Halberstam himself explains, is that he, at first, saw merit in an America mission in South Vietnam. But during his stay he got to see the other side of the story. Later on he did a lot of investigating, interviewing government officials, fellow journalists, and editors who had experience with the Vietnam conflict. And as he found out more, he became more negative. This becomes clear when reading his books where it seems that over the years Halberstam was definitely becoming more and more negative about the Vietnam War, especially when it came to the U.S. government and its policies. And one can't blame him for doing so when looking at the facts.

[91] Halberstam, *The Powers that be*, 407-408.

Conclusion

‘Over the next ten years, as the little war grew larger and uglier, America's self-destructive obsession in Vietnam would come to be known by many possessive nicknames: McNamara's War, [...] Johnson's War, [...] Nixon's War, [...] and, eventually, Television's War [...]

But all that came later, over the next year, during the first great Vietnam crisis, the one that led the United States into the muck for a decade, the war would not even become known as Kennedy's War. It would take on a different nickname, a pejorative one that came out of the White House and the Pentagon.

They called it Halberstam's War.'

- William Prochnau in *Once Upon a Distant War*

Halberstam, like many other young reporters, came to Vietnam as a *carte blanche*. He didn't know a lot in terms of details and he believed that the Americans were doing the right thing in protecting South Vietnam. In other words, when Halberstam arrived he supported the policy of the American government. American officials in return tried to make sure that young reporters such as Halberstam stayed on their side. They tried to build a relationship by immediately sharing lots of information, the idea behind it was that it would make a reporter feel special and that he wouldn't go out and search for more information on his own. The American government wanted the reporters to rely on their information. This was an idea that can be traced back to the beginning of the Kennedy administration, where the White House was more open than ever. That was, until you did something to cross the line and at that point you would soon become a persona non grata in Washington.

It was a strategy that, in the case of Halberstam and many others, only worked for a short period of time. Halberstam was soon warned that American officials were trying to get him on their side and were therefore trying to make him feel special. And indeed, he noticed how every young reporter was nicely approached by an American official who would share a load of information and act as if it was the way that business was handled in Saigon. The problem with such a strategy is that journalists, and especially young journalists with a bright future such as Halberstam, are curious. Curious to seek out information and to go beyond boundaries to get this information. Whereas the 'old-timers' such as Higgins and Alsop were critical of these young journalists and continuously supported the Diem administration, the new generation consisting of Halberstam, Sheehan and others were following their own path.

Experienced journalists such as Higgins and Alsop, together with government officials, soon claimed that David Halberstam was an unpatriotic weakling who didn't understand that his reports were hurting the cause. However, it is telling that even an American official such as John Mecklin admitted that this criticism was unfair. Mecklin did believe that Halberstam was too critical at times and he also believed that he didn't mind to see the Americans fail. But during Buddhist crisis, which would be one of the most important events during Halberstam's stay, Mecklin believed that the journalists weren't to blame. The Diem administration and the American officials were shooting themselves in the foot, and people like Halberstam were simply reporting it. As Peter Arnett said, it isn't fair to blame the messenger for the content that he is carrying.

Still, Halberstam's behavior angered not only the Kennedy administration but also his editors; the latter started to doubt whether he wasn't trying to push his own pro-communist agenda. This is a theme that is also still very popular with conservative critics, who also point to the fact that experienced journalists such as Alsop and Higgins held vastly different opinions. Halberstam's editors were also struggling with this fact, why was their own, young

and unproven reporter coming back with all these negative stories while other, more experienced reporters were saying that it wasn't going that bad? The fact that Halberstam, despite all these doubts, still managed to get his stories across, says a lot about his confidence and determination as a journalist. Besides that, it has also become clear that one of the most critical journalists in this story, Joe Alsop, can hardly be taken seriously as an objective journalist considering his extremely close relationship with Kennedy and Ngo Dinh Diem.

Throughout the literature one doesn't get the sense that Halberstam was indeed pushing his own agenda. He was simply an example of a young, promising reporter who was trying to be the best there was in Saigon. As explained before, journalists are typically egocentric personalities who will reach for unorthodox measures to get their information. This also frustrated the American officials, as Halberstam would frequently get information at a faster rate than they would. The fact that Halberstam worked so fast, and that his reports weren't always that positive, made him unpopular figure amongst the government. But the shift in American policy (e.g. the switch from Nolting to Lodge as ambassador) shows how even the American administration was starting to realize that it's previous policy hadn't been working. Instead of shutting out reporters that were, in their opinion, too critical, they were now realizing that it made no sense to fight a war against the media, as it was only distracting them from the actual war against the Viet Cong. They understood that someone like David Halberstam had a lot influence, but they also understood that it wasn't helping their own cause if they were continuously trying to wage a public relations war with him.

In terms of undermining the war effort it becomes clear that despite Halberstam's influence, the majority of the American public still didn't care about the conflict in South-East Asia. Even before Halberstam arrived, critical reports had come out and found their way into American newspapers. And once Halberstam was actually in Vietnam, the critical content only grew. Still, the American public was largely uninterested in the topic and perhaps this

could also be the reason for the shift in the American public relations policy in Vietnam. Even though they despised Halberstam, they also realized that they may have been overrating his influence in terms of war support. Next to that, as said before, it doesn't seem like Halberstam was deliberately critical, although conservatives will point to Alsop and the fact one of his books was one on Ho Chi Minh. In terms of undermining war support, Halberstam was certainly influential but not really creating a change of mentality amongst the American public. One could say that he was raising awareness, but that the Kennedy administration, together with the New York Times editors, made sure that his reports wouldn't get extra attention that could have possibly undermined war support in the USA.

Throughout the years, Halberstam continued to criticize the American government in the books that he published. These were much more critical than the actual reports that came out of Saigon (which shouldn't be a surprise, since a journalist should always try to remain objective). This has also been used as a piece of criticism, as it could possibly show that Halberstam had been a fierce opponent of the American government the entire time. But when reading the books, and also reading different literature about Halberstam's journey, one doesn't get this impression. He has received praise from numerous colleagues, something that he probably would not have done had he really been functioning as a subjective, anti-government, communist-sympathizing journalist. Next to that, the facts stated in his books on the course of the Vietnam war are also backed by other books written on the Vietnam conflict and the influence of the media. It is fair to say that David Halberstam was probably one of the most critical journalists that had been active during the Vietnam War, and as shown by the quote at the top of this final chapter, his presence and influence didn't go unnoticed in Washington. But in the end, it is unfair to claim that he undermined the war support in America. The numbers show that interest in the Vietnam conflict was still quite low during his stay in Vietnam, and in terms of deliberately trying to sabotage the American war effort it

simply came down to Halberstam doing his job. The American government, and colleagues such as Alsop and Higgins, believed that a journalist always had to think about what is best for his own country. Alsop and Higgins didn't think and work like journalists, they worked and reported as Americans. David Halberstam however, wasn't an American first. He was a journalist first, and an American second.

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