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Good morning. I also will launch right in without a lot of preliminaries because, as you know, it is very difficult for a professor to stick to twenty minutes and we have been told that we should work very hard to keep within the time!

For the last couple of decades, from about the Falklands War through the First Gulf War, media-military relations have been dominated by the shadow of Vietnam and, in particular, by a conventional wisdom about the role of the media in the Vietnam War. This conventional wisdom developed in the wake of the war in the late 1970s and is related to this idea of the media as a central player in wartime. Interestingly, this conventional wisdom is shared across the political spectrum in the United States and has both liberal and conservative versions. It holds that the media played a decisive role in turning the public against the Vietnam War and thereby influenced the outcome of the war.

According to the conservative version, the media were the villains of the Vietnam War. They covered it in a contentious and negative way, turning the public against it and leading the United States to withdraw from a war that it could and should have won. In this version, the media’s coverage led to a breakdown of US will in Vietnam.

According to the liberal version, the media were the heroes of the Vietnam War. This version is actually widely shared among journalists themselves, particularly journalists belonging to the generation that actually covered the war in Vietnam. It holds that the media was responsible for telling the people the real truth about the Vietnam War, a truth that the government wanted to cover up. In that sense the media’s coverage led the country eventually to get out of a bad war that it never should have started.

This conventional wisdom is rooted, obviously, in the fact that the Vietnam War was the first clearly unsuccessful American war of the modern period. It is also rooted in two special characteristics of media coverage of the Vietnam War that should be noted here. One of them is that it was the first modern war that journalists covered without censorship. There were periods during the early part of the Korean War when there was no censorship, but it was later reimposed. By contrast, during the Vietnam War, journalists were not censored and were also granted considerable freedom of movement within the war zone.

Let me say a couple of things here about why there was no censorship in Vietnam. First, censorship was judged to be unnecessary. In order to accompany military forces, journalists were asked to follow voluntary guidelines. These, it was believed, generally worked well to protect operational security. Indeed, William Hammond, Office of Military History, who has done the most systematic after-action review of this policy, has

found that there were just really a handful of violations of those guidelines, all of them quite ambiguous and none of them of great consequence.

Second, censorship was also judged to be politically impractical and unwise. The Johnson administration did not want to acknowledge that the Vietnam War was a major war. To impose censorship would be to show that it was. Furthermore, since the US was fighting in Vietnam technically as a guest of the South Vietnamese, censorship would have to be administered by the South Vietnamese. This would be a problem especially if it was imposed on third party nationals as, for example, Japanese reporters or French reporters. Since the South Vietnamese government was authoritarian, it was thought that this would lead to more political problems than it would solve. So there was no censorship in Vietnam.

The other important characteristic of the Vietnam War, of course, was that it was the first televised war and this led to a very important corollary of the conventional wisdom on Vietnam. This is the idea that any war that is televised will lose public support. This is a view that, I think, was widely held, again, from the Falklands War through the first Gulf War and has faded as a part of the conventional wisdom since the first Gulf War. This conventional wisdom did have a profound affect on the policies put in place up through the first Gulf War.

I, along with a number of scholars who have actually systematically studied the media in Vietnam, have argued that this conventional wisdom is incorrect and distorts the role of the media in the Vietnam War. In the first place it forgets that the coverage of the Vietnam War was actually highly supportive of the war in the early years, basically up until the TET offensive in 1968. There were certain incidents in which there was negative coverage where conflicts occurred between the administration and the media. But in general, the coverage was highly supportive of the war. Politically, it was understood, in terms of the Cold War, as a struggle between the free world and totalitarianism. Militarily, each operation in the early days, if you would listen to Walter Cronkite's narration, would be described as another great victory for the Americans.

As for television coverage of Vietnam, it was, in fact, highly sanitized. Contrary to conventional wisdom, there were only very few occasions on which people saw the "true horror" on their television screens. On those occasions—during the TET offensive in 1968 and during the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972—the war became somewhat more conventional and actions took place where journalists with their television cameras were easily present. But most of the time there was little blood and gore on the television screens.

There were a number of reasons for that. One of them simply had to do with the nature of most of the action in Vietnam; that is, that the average operation in Vietnam was, as the journalists said, a long hot walk in the sun. Journalists would typically go out and would get footage of the troops advancing and maybe air strikes being called-in in the distance and see the puffs of smoke, and that didn't lead to particularly dramatic coverage. But television was also very wary about showing anything that would offend

the audience. A lot of the bloodiest footage was left on the cutting room floor. And here I should also say, and this is something that I will come back to later on, that television also tends to be particularly wary of political controversy and television not only tended to stay away from footage that would offend audiences or advertisers, but also from more controversial issues. Atrocities by US troops, for example, were something that you could read about in the *New York Times*, but until the My Lai trial, were absent on television except for one occasion in 1967, and that's partly because television is generally wary about anything that will be politically controversial. I would say that the same is true today; that is, that there is a fairly large gap between what you read in the *New York Times* and what you see on television. It's not quite as extreme as in the case of Vietnam, but you still see that today. I'll come back and say a little bit more about the nature of television coverage in a moment. But in general, the idea that you saw the true horror of war on the television screen night after night during the living room war is clearly false.

Now it is true that in the later period of the Vietnam War there was definitely a change in tone with news coverage. The change began in about 1968 and it continued on through 1969, as the policy of withdrawal and Vietnamization began and as American policy on Vietnam changed. Most news coverage didn't become actively critical of the US efforts in Vietnam, but it became more sober, more skeptical, in the sense that operations were not longer described as great military victories. Often there would be an observation by the journalist that troops had gone through this area years before, many times before, and that the North Vietnamese would certainly be back a year later. There was also greater emphasis on casualties, not with any kind of graphic footage, but more interviews with the soldiers about that kind of thing. So there is certainly a significant kind of change in news coverage in the later period.

I think, however, that it would be wrong to interpret that change in news coverage as having a dramatic causal impact on either public opinion or on US policy. I make that argument in my book on the media in Vietnam, in part, in terms of the timing of the change in media coverage in relation to other changes in American society. What I argue is that, in fact, the media were more followers than leaders in the change of opinion and policy on the Vietnam War. What did the media follow? What forces did they respond to? I would say, primarily, they responded to three other kinds of factors, three other kinds of changes.

In the first place, they responded to changes in public opinion. If you look at the trends in public opinion on the Vietnam War, what you see is that Americans are initially skeptical (Americans tend to hesitate to enter a war before it begins). After a period of initial skepticism, you had a "rally-around-the-troops" phenomenon and so public support for the war jumped up late in the fall of 1965, when Lyndon Johnson first made his speech saying, "We are going to war in Vietnam," and began sending large numbers of American troops overseas. Public support peaked soon after in the 1960s and then began a steady decline, basically in a straight line that went through 1975 and the end of the war. In the spring of 1967 we reached a milestone in the sense that a majority of the American public disapproved of President Johnson's handling of the war. By the fall of that year a majority of the public said that they thought it had been a mistake to enter the

Vietnam War. Polling data was a little thin, but by that measure (that is the primary time series) that's the point by which you can say that a majority of the public disapproved of the Vietnam War.

The change in media coverage, however, mainly occurred after that decline of public opinion in 1968 and '69. I think that it was, to a significant extent, a response to the change in public opinion, which was manifested among other things in the success of antiwar candidates in the Democratic primaries in 1968 and the growth of protest movements later on, something that journalists felt and responded to in a variety of ways.

Another extremely important influence in the news was the change in elite opinion, the growing divisions among American policy makers both in America and in Saigon. It's one of the basic findings of sociology of communication studies that journalism in the United States is highly source-driven and there's a very close relationship between the tone of the news coverage, the boundaries of debate in the news, and the main lines of division among political elites, among policy makers in Washington. What happened with the news coverage, particularly from Washington, is that as the journalists' primary sources—in the Defense Department, in the State Department, in the White House—began to increasingly disagree about the war and to doubt whether American policy was working. That obviously began to show up in the news. This occurred particularly in 1967, when you would see it first of all in the elite media that actually served that elite community, like the *New York Times*. It occurred a little bit later in television coverage, and it accelerated in 1969. Very sharp divisions began in the Nixon administration over whether to follow the policy of Vietnamization or various kinds of escalation, and those divisions led to a lot of leaks to the press that affected the character of news coverage.

The final influence that had a profound effect, especially on television but on all of the media, had to do with the morale of American troops. And here let me say a little bit more about the nature of television coverage and the "living room war." The main characters in television's portrayal of Vietnam, in this living room war, were the American soldiers in the field. In this sense Vietnam coverage was no different from traditional American war coverage. It was in some sense the Ernie Pyle tradition of war reporting—not quite as gritty as Ernie Pyle, but similar in the sense that it, too, focused on American soldiers in action. That was the main content of television coverage of Vietnam.

In the early days, the morale of American troops was very strong and this was very powerfully reflected in television coverage of the war, and in war coverage in general. So this period saw lots of interviews with soldiers saying how ready they were to do the job and to go out and fight. It was a lot like coverage of the current conflict, in the sense that there was a very strong emphasis on the professionalism and the bravery of American soldiers. In the later part of the Vietnam War, that kind of personalization that is characteristic of American war coverage began to cut the other way as the morale of American War forces began to break down. This was particularly true in the period when troop withdrawals began, when it became increasingly clear to the troops that the United

States was no longer committed to the war in Vietnam. It was when you had this growing fear of being the last causality in a war the rest of the country increasingly didn't care about that morale collapsed. And that was reflected in news coverage very clearly. You would begin to hear soldiers saying how much they wanted to just wait out their time and go home, rather than saying how much they were ready to go out and do the job. Finally, by about 1971, you were actually hearing soldiers say they considered this a senseless war and wanted out. All of the way through, I would suggest, the journalists bonded with the American troops with whom they were sharing the field much of the time, and they portrayed them extremely sympathetically. But obviously the point of view of those troops was very different over time, and that shift changed the tone of the coverage.

Let me say here that this focus on American troops is absolutely fundamental to understanding the nature of war coverage and also to understanding the dynamics of public opinion in wars. You might ask, "How did it happen that in the first Gulf War the American public was divided just about 50-50 at the eve of the war, but within a few days after the war started the polls showed 80% support for the war?" Did the people change their opinions about the war as a political policy? Well, I think what changed was the *object* of their opinion; this was a rallying to support the troops. Media coverage both reflects and reinforces that factor in its focus on the troops. The troops belong to what I've called in my book "the sphere of consensus," which journalists treat as really above political debate. This is one of the greatest dilemmas that journalists feel after a war actually starts: the tension between that kind of sphere of consensus reporting on the troops—a kind of sacred American commitment that we must support them—and the normal role of the journalist as a skeptical observer of political policy. Unless a war lasts a long time, leading to a lot of division, it is usually that more sacramental kind of coverage that wins out in wartime in the United States.

Let me finish up by saying that my own argument is not that the media were purely passive as a player in the Vietnam War. I think that they played various kinds of roles. In the early days they played an important role in mobilizing public support and in doing what they always do in wars; that is, cementing the bonds of sentiment between the soldiers in the field and the public back at home. Later on they played a role in the snowballing process by which the support eroded. But I think it is wrong to say that they were the decisive factor in that process. It is crucial to understand that they were responding to other, I would even say more fundamental, forces behind the change of American opinion and policy on Vietnam.

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