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The Vietnam War at Home and Abroad: Soldiers, Military Leadership,  
and the Antiwar Movement

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
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## Introduction

The Vietnam era represents one of the most turbulent periods in American history; on the home front, the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, and political tensions shaped American politics and raised critical questions about the rationale that informed foreign policies and motivated military engagements in Southeast Asia. Growing domestic tensions shaped the decisions of American political leaders and military officials.

Today, popular memory of the 1960s and 1970s revolves around college students passionately engaging in antiwar and civil rights movements, and major political episodes like the Kennedy assassination, Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act, and the Watergate Scandal. Yet, soldiers' experiences in Vietnam and their responses to the rising tensions at home are often times overlooked. Most high school and college textbooks focus on the Vietnam War's political strife, the brutal fighting conditions, and the unrest at home. Americans internalize the war's history through popular conceptions including secondary textbooks' narrow perspectives that fall short in presenting soldiers' myriad views. As time pushes popular memory further from the conflict, the media has played a more significant role in defining the war—the war's objectives, the underlying political disagreements between public and military leaders, the strategic decisions, and public perception. Popular recollections discount the voices of the soldiers who were stationed abroad. This thesis seeks to enrich our understanding of the Vietnam War era by highlighting soldiers' war experiences and responses. Soldiers often pleaded for American trust in the military and expressed their own philosophical views about the meaning of war. For example, Captain James Polk Spruill articulated the similarities in aiding the South Vietnamese and our own fights for freedom in the American Revolution. He wrote, "It was

brought to my attention last night that we were once inadequately equipped and poorly trained [in the American Revolution], and that professional soldiers came from afar to aid the fledgling American Army in its fight for freedom and internal order... It is heartwarming to think that we now continue the tradition of sacrifice when they aided a nation in need.”<sup>1</sup> Many soldiers committed themselves to the American tradition of fighting for freedom, while other soldiers began to feel true freedom rested on the independence of the Vietnamese to decide on their proper course.

The myriad perspectives of Vietnam veterans highlight the intricate nature of the Vietnam War. Part of the difficulty in analyzing the Vietnam War is the complexity of prevailing notions about the war itself. Some scholars have questioned the role of the media, politics, and public preparedness in the failures of Vietnam. Others have interrogated military strategies and ideology. Others still, have gone further to analyze the moral underpinning and motivations of warfare in general. This thesis will digest many of those past perceptions and create a richer analysis of soldiers’ morale, and its effect on the war effort. The Vietnam conflict became a complex cycle of political and military endeavors while simultaneously striving to please an increasingly impatient public. As political promises faltered, and military action became more onerous, anti-war protests intensified. At times, Americans cast blanket-sweep expectations of the Vietnam War by comparing it to World War II. Thus, general unpreparedness for the realities of war caused bitter disappointments and frustrations within the public and military. Moreover, this era introduced the television into warfare, and therefore, illuminated the necessity for public

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<sup>1</sup> Captain James Polk Spruill, Letter to Wife, “The Line is Drawn: Extracts from Letters written by Captain Spruill,” Vietnam, 1963-1964, 3.  
[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/580591](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/580591).

responsibility acquiring information. Even today, the general public at times consumes information, blindly accepting its convictions. This problem especially intensified during the Vietnam War, placed in perspective the justification of waging limited, restrictive wars. In short, U.S. leaders began debating the advantages or disadvantages of total versus limited war. Limited war, for example, can be described as the avoidance of unrestrained warfare by focusing on political goals through limited military measures.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile absolute warfare would involve the enemy's unconditional surrender with the mobilization of an entire nation.<sup>3</sup> Both of these styles of warfare became heavily debated during the Vietnam War. Thus, this thesis will address the complexities of the Vietnam War by analyzing, specifically, the impacts it had on soldiers in Vietnam.

For example, this thesis will analyze why such contrasting opinions of pro- and anti-war arose in the military. Factors such as the public responses, media coverage, political restrictions and military decisions will be simultaneously addressed so as to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Vietnam War efforts. Thus, this research will examine the circumstances that contributed to a decline in the morale among soldiers during the Vietnam War and the years following military engagement in Southeast Asia.

Divided into four sections outlining the changes in soldiers' responses, this thesis focuses on the responses from the military, media, broader public, and politicians. To narrow the scope, this thesis will concentrate on one military campaign, the Battle of Hamburger Hill in 1969.

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Zarrar Haider, *Misconception of Limited War*, (San Francisco: Academia, 2019). [https://www.academia.edu/6948557/Misconception\\_of\\_Limited\\_War](https://www.academia.edu/6948557/Misconception_of_Limited_War).

<sup>3</sup> Brian W. Brennan, *Limited vs. Total War*, (Fort Benning: Armor Officer Basic Course, 2002). <https://www.ysmithcpallen.com/sites/default/files/sites/all/documents/Limited%20Vs%20Total%20War.pdf>.

Hamburger Hill is significant to our understanding of the Vietnam War in part because of similarities to the public reception of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Both campaigns were American victories, yet, the American public perceived the conflicts as irresponsible losses. Hamburger Hill, therefore, is an important focus in this thesis because it illuminates differences and disagreements between the military, public, media, and politicians. Likewise, it was famously abandoned after the victory—and much like the Tet Offensive, resulted in the ultimate drop in morale of the U.S. military. The first section provides an overview of the military decisions and procedures during Hamburger Hill, and documents the events leading up to and immediately following the altercation. The second section analyzes journalists' coverage of the battle and how this reporting shaped public responses, politicians' policies, and military decisions. Since the Vietnam War is considered the first televised war, a discussion of the role of the media will shed light on these issues, and the ultimate futility of the conflict. The third section examines veterans' responses to the war, including one particular fraction among soldiers who expressed their disappointment with inadequate public support and frustrations with media coverage that undermined their wartime efforts. Furthermore, this section will also illuminate the factors that caused consistent frustrations among GIs who joined the anti-war movement while others requested more support. The final section explores the effects of wartime media coverage on military leadership during the war, and top officers' growing frustrations in response to politicians' logistical restrictions. For example, U.S. forces were restricted from invading Cambodia or Laos to follow the enemy; military officials lacked authority to pursue military strategies; and troops were only permitted to fight when threatened by the enemy. This thesis seeks to understand the complexities of the Vietnam War and the factors that influenced soldiers' morale abroad and upon return to the United States.

Scholarship such as James Westheider's book, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experiences of the U.S. Soldier*, and Jonathan Caverly's article, *The Myth of the Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam* address key perspectives of the Vietnam War. Westheider argues that soldiers in Vietnam dealt with an immense number of outside factors during the war. While most focused on simply surviving by the time they arrived in Vietnam, many soldiers frequently faced the frustrations of media, restrictions, and public dissent. Westheider sectioned his book into soldiers' responses to a vast number of influences like journalistic coverage, public support, political restrictions, training, returning home, and many more. His examination of the common soldiers' different experiences creates a dynamic and detailed observation of their struggles. Furthermore, Jonathan Caverly's article presents a fascinating perspective of the problems waging a limited war within a democratic country. Caverly argues that, although democratic nations such as the United States are superior in modes of living, attempts to enter a small war in foreign lands is almost impossible due to the powerful role of the public in response to war efforts in Vietnam. His observation, therefore, revealed the futilities of the Vietnam War, and he acknowledges the influence of diminished public support. David Flores' article, *Memories of War: Sources of Vietnam Veterans Pro- and Antiwar Political Attitudes* compares the differences in pro- and anti-war attitudes, and how family upbringing impacted soldiers' opinions. Flores paid specific attention to the impact of U.S. success in World War II, and how children growing up with war heroes and parades expected similar experiences entering Vietnam. Thus, this work sheds light on the morale of soldiers and the many factors influencing their beliefs towards the war.

Examining sources ranging from newspaper clippings, interviews, and letters, this thesis will address the complex nature of the Vietnam War, and its impact on soldiers at the time, and

even today. Letters will reveal the attitudes of soldiers towards the war including frustrations, homesickness, and hope. In addition, interviews help paint a more complete picture of the event as many veterans have been able to think about their experiences in more context. Newspaper clippings will reveal a multitude of viewpoints including firsthand accounts, antiwar sentiments, and prowar attitudes. One of the most complicated and controversial events of the Vietnam conflict, occurred with the Battle of Hamburger Hill in 1969.

### **Section 1: A Battle Won but also Lost**

The United States entered the Vietnam War differently than in its past conflicts. The Revolutionary War, for example, was sparked by the Battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775—creating an exact moment for the start of a war. The Civil War began with Fort Sumter in 1861 and U.S. entrance into World War II was spurred by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 leading to a subsequent declaration of war. The Vietnam War, in contrast, had no fixed beginning. The United States, instead, eased into warfare between 1950 and 1965 due to the constant effort to balance world peace and defeat Communism. U.S. entrance into Vietnam occurred after the transition from French military occupation to active U.S. involvement with goals of effective counterinsurgency.

After the end of WWII in 1945, immediate tensions mounted between the two world powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Much of the disputes can be traced to the differing strategies of how to handle postwar European economic recovery and governance. The Soviet Union called for economic disabling of the Allies' enemies and taking control of those territories. The United States, however, asserted that a plan meant to aid the countries like Germany, Poland, and Italy would prevent further hostilities as these countries improved

economically. Thus, the Marshall Plan, an example of American postwar policy, was enacted to financially aid the countries struggling in the post-war climate. Both the Soviet Union and the United States accused each other of seeking global domination, and not long after political disagreements and threats of nuclear warfare surfaced. According to Michael Dockrill, a historian of the Cold War, “the possession of nuclear weapons of ever increasing and formidable power, and the appalling consequences of their use, did impose some restraint on the leaders of each side in their dealings with the other but, during the many confrontations between the two sides after 1946, the slightest miscalculation or overreaction might well have led to catastrophe.”<sup>4</sup> This divided American politics and inspired fear among Americans. The United States appeared to be in a constant state of paranoia and sought to stop the threat of communism. Unlike communist nations, the United States embraced individual autonomy, humanitarian principles, and limited government control. If communism continued to spread, U.S. officials feared the free market would suffer, national security would be at risk, and countless innocent civilians would lose their rights of humanity and freedom. U.S. fears were confirmed with the growing popularity of communism in Vietnam.

On September 2, 1945 the Vietminh group, led by Ho Chi Minh, declared independence from French rule. The French government responded by declaring martial law and began moving troops to Vietnam to contain rebellion. French and Vietminh forces continued to battle over control well into the 1950s. In May 1950, President Harry S. Truman authorized moderate military and economic aid to France.<sup>5</sup> Even with U.S. assistance, the Vietminh defeated French forces at Dienbienphu in 1954. As a result, the Geneva Conference decided upon a Communist

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Dockrill, *The Cold War: 1945-1963*, (London: MacMillan, 1988), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew J. Potter, “The Causes of the Vietnam War” (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1999).

state of North Vietnam and a “free” state in South Vietnam—each separated by a boundary at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Geneva Accords further stated, “so far as Viet-Nam is concerned, the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for the principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, shall permit the Viet-Nameese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions...”<sup>6</sup> The Geneva Conference allowed Vietnamese people to decide upon their political interests relying on a democratic system. This decision, however, dissatisfied U.S. officials as they feared Ho Chi Minh would win the elections and spread communism into South Vietnam.

The perceived threat of communism informed President Dwight Eisenhower’s attempts to install a democratic government in South Vietnam with the Diem regime, while also training the South Vietnamese army in 1954. American support of the Diem government proved unsuccessful when it refused to adopt democratic principles. By “winning the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people, American politicians believed they could turn the war. This meant that military, political, and economic attempts would be made to pacify the people under the influence of the Viet Cong. Cold War tensions became especially pronounced in 1961 when President John F. Kennedy introduced counterinsurgency to simultaneously defeat and contain communist insurgency.<sup>7</sup> Although initial attempts to use counterinsurgency involved aiding security, political, and economic issues, John F. Kennedy’s strategy ultimately became more of a military approach with the use of Special Forces.<sup>8</sup> Following Kennedy’s assassination in 1963,

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<sup>6</sup> Geneva Convention, *Indochina—Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on the Problem of Restoring Peace in Indo-China, July 21, 1954*, as transcribed by Yale Law School, 2008. [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/inch005.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/inch005.asp).

<sup>7</sup> Potter, “The Causes of the Vietnam War.”

<sup>8</sup> Rufus Phillips, “Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Lessons for Today,” *American Foreign Service Association*, Last date modified 2018. <http://www.afsa.org/counterinsurgency-vietnam-lessons-today>.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration inherited wartime challenges. The closest to a war declaration of the Vietnam War occurred in 1964 when two U.S. warships were attacked by the North Vietnamese in the South China Sea. Thus, Johnson responded to the conflict with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which stated, "that the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."<sup>9</sup> Although this resolution enabled Johnson to respond with force when necessary, it maintained an overly loose commitment to Vietnam. This broad definition of the U.S. role in Vietnam ultimately led to more frustrations and disappointment from the American public, media, and soldiers. Even with Johnson's defensive measure, growing communist momentum in Vietnam resulted in his decision to enlarge American participation only a month after the resolution. Johnson attempted to avoid an all-out war by using aerial attacks and sustained bombing instead of a full invasion. Johnson pursued a limited war since a full declaration might have upset the American public, and worse yet, China or Russia could potentially jump to aid North Vietnam and start another world war. A full escalation certainly would bring severe consequences. Johnson's other option was to simply refrain from involvement entirely. This strategy, however, as Johnson's predecessors and Cold War believers claimed, would solidify the global spread of communism. Moreover, if the United States had chosen to abandon the South Vietnamese, this would have severely contradicted the reputation of the United States as guardians of human liberties and rights. These considerations explain the Johnson administration's decision to pursue a limited war that would attempt to simultaneously satisfy the American public, contain communist aggression, defeat insurgency,

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<sup>9</sup> Tonkin Gulf Resolution; Public Law 88-408, 88th Congress, August 7, 1964; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

and promote American ideologies—high expectations for a desultory strategy. Joint Chief of Staff member, General Maxwell Taylor, immediately voiced his hesitations with a limited war and claimed “in order to defeat insurgency in South Vietnam the U.S. must be prepared to put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our efforts, and to undertake bolder actions which may embody greater risks.”<sup>10</sup> Taylor’s remarks were directed towards the overly broad Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, attempts to militarize South Vietnam, and U.S. covert missions. In 1965, Johnson agreed that more commitment was necessary, but even so, he and his advisers came up with a limited policy. This policy concluded that “for any Viet Cong attack on a major American base (or South Vietnam), a reprisal will be undertaken within 24 hours against one or more selected targets in the North, and forces would be used to maximum extent.”<sup>11</sup> This responsive strategy forced the U.S. military to wait for the enemy to make their first move before American forces could attack. Consequently, marines in Vietnam were frequently waiting for a moment to retaliate, further restricting them from gaining momentum by employing attacks. In effect, the U.S. military was not utilizing the effectiveness of preemptive strikes or “first strike advantage.”<sup>12</sup> A preemptive strike would involve attacking the enemy first so as to surprise, overwhelm, and prevent the Vietcong from attacking. American military officials frequently requested preemptive attacks, but Johnson instead employed Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965 which would utilize sustained American bombing and increased troops to protect airfields.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> General Maxwell Taylor as translated by Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1973), 462.

<sup>11</sup> Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 462.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Gray, *The Implications of Preemptive and Preventive War Doctrines: A Reconsideration*, (Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower or the Limits of Strategy: The Air Wars in Vietnam and their Legacies*, (Washington D.C.: National War College, 2015), 111.

Mark Clodfelter, a professor at the National War College explains, “accordingly, they [political and military officials] designed an air strategy that gradually increased pressure on the North, allowing President Johnson to gauge reactions from the Chinese, Soviets, American public, and other global audiences while he slowly opened the bombing spigot.”<sup>14</sup> Essentially, Johnson was choosing a gradual entrance into war, but this strategy was ignoring the effectiveness of quick strikes which employed elements of both surprise and overwhelming the enemy. Johnson eased into a war, and many military officials voiced their frustrations with this method since it was not utilizing the strength of American forces. According to Clodfelter, the US strategy of gradual escalation was seriously flawed: “For most of his [Johnson’s] time in office, the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies rarely fought at all. Together, they fought an average of one day a month from 1965 to 1968, and as a result, their external supply requirements were minimal... No amount of bombing could stop that paltry supply total from arriving in the South.”<sup>15</sup> In effect, the Viet Cong’s inconsistent attacks created problems for the American forces since their strategy called for retaliating only when the enemy struck first. This meant that US forces frequently waited for the Viet Cong to attack, and according to Clodfelter, those attacks rarely occurred anyway. Aerial strikes, therefore, were ineffective against the small, mobile forces of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Military officials at the time persisted that if US forces attacked quickly and with complete power, the smaller Viet Cong army would be unable to absorb the blow. Finally, General Taylor convinced the administration to allow U.S. Marines to pursue the enemy after being attacked—but this also came with a restriction. U.S. forces were only permitted to follow the enemy 50 miles from their base. This further limited military success,

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<sup>14</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower of the Limits of Strategy*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

and, especially consequential, morale and momentum certainly suffered as a result. In all, sustained bombing of a decentralized economy, and efforts to militarize South Vietnam failed, but if Johnson escalated too sharply, he risked sparking another world war. Indeed, politicians and military officials were forced into a no-win situation, and as Johnson continued to gradually increase troop involvement, the home front continuously grew more frustrated with broken promises of a short war.

By 1969, the war in Vietnam had reached a boiling point in the eyes of the American public and within political circles. Johnson's promises of a short war did not materialize, and his frequent claims of US success fell short. Viet Cong's surprise attack in 1968, substantiated home front suspicions of Johnson's empty promises. Though it was a US victory, the 1968 Tet Offensive sparked a massive public outrage against the war. Due to growing public dissent, the US looked to gradually withdraw troops from Vietnam after 1968. Politicians, including Lyndon Johnson and later Richard Nixon, in an effort to please the military and the public, found themselves in a no-win corner. In other words, politicians attempted to fight for the protection of human freedom in Vietnam, so they mobilized the military, yet as US forces requested more commitment, the home front became dissatisfied with broken promises of a short war. As a result, politicians felt cornered as they tried to end a war for public appeasement, but also pursue victory as a military objective. Escalation would mean public outrage, and potential violent military reactions from China or Soviet Union. Meanwhile, drawing back would result in American embarrassment, failed objectives to aid South Vietnam, and a win for communism. American policy makers were forced to choose the latter. As US involvement gradually lost momentum, the military, more than ever, experienced a tightened leash by politicians. Search and destroy missions became the main strategy for US troops. It entailed exploring the area to

locate the enemy and withdraw as soon as the enemy has been destroyed. This tactic was introduced after US forces realized taking ground using full invasions against the guerrilla Viet Cong was impractical for protecting American lives and capturing a fleeting enemy. This tactic led to the 187th Infantry's attack on Dong Ap Bia Mountain—later to be coined Hamburger Hill.

In early May of 1969, a joint operation of soldiers combining South Vietnamese ARVN troops along with US Army soldiers from the 3rd Brigade, 101st Division were combing through the heavy forests of south-central Vietnam, a territory dotted with steep ravines, thick forest, and very few signs of civilization for miles in any direction. The US mission was to comb through the territory in search of any enemy activity. The troops had been busy establishing fire bases in and around the Dong Ap Bia Mountain territory when the enemy was sighted on an insignificant ridge numbered "937" by US Army maps. Small arms fire erupted all over Hill 937 on May 10 and Lt Col Weldon Honeycutt responded with artillery fire directly onto the hill. The 187th Airborne moved around the mountain searching for the enemy as artillery fire bombarded the hill until May 14th. By this time, the enemy had been recognized as the 29th North Vietnamese regiment, and under supporting artillery fire, three companies of the 187th began deliberate maneuvers up the mountain.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile the 1/506th Airborne, led by Lt. Roger Leasure reinforced the area by attacking the southern side of the hill.<sup>17</sup> After four days of heavy fighting, more reinforcements were called in to surround Hill 937, now being called "Hamburger Hill" by US troops, and began a complete attack. Along with continuous artillery support, the 187th

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<sup>16</sup> R.L. Reed. "Combat After Action Report (Apache Snow)." September 16, 1969, 17, box 00, folder 1, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/332187](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/332187).

<sup>17</sup> Reed. "Combat After Action Report," 17.

attacked the north, the 506th the south, the 501st from the northeast, and the ARVN from the southeast.<sup>18</sup> By noon on May 20th the hill was taken. An after-action report written by Control Headquarters Reporting Officer R.L. Reed, describes the objectives of the procedure: “the 101st Airborne Division is to occupy the northern A Shau Valley on D-Day, block enemy escape into Laos, and conduct operations in zone to destroy enemy forces and installations.”<sup>19</sup> The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne met these objectives. Another after-battle report written about a month after Hamburger Hill acknowledged the success of US military effectiveness. In his report, Major General John Wright Jr. “indicated the thoroughness of planning and preciseness of execution of the Division airmobile operation. The days’ activity pointed out the tremendous influence of the helicopter on modern military operations.”<sup>20</sup> Combat reports, using the military’s code name, ‘Apache Snow,’ described the exact effectiveness of the battle as follows:

RESULTS: The objectives of Operation Apache Snow were successfully carried out. A series of mutually supporting fire support bases from FSB Currahee to the south to FSB Razor on the north was established. The multi-battalion combined operation in the south was a campaign in which the enemy was found, fixed, and methodically destroyed. The 9th Marine regiment successfully blocked on the north, thus denying the enemy reinforcing entrance or withdrawal from the A Shau Valley along the Da Krong Valley Road, and interdicted the road to deter enemy use of it in the future. The result of this operation was the destruction of the combat effectiveness of the maneuver battalions of the 29th NVA regiment and its Headquarters and Technical Unites, which forced the broken elements to retreat across the border into Laos. It also denied them use of the northern A Shau Valley as either a staging area for attack or as a storage area for supplies.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jay Schaerrbutt, “An Account of Hill 937 Battle,” *Washington Newspaper*, May 24, 1969, as transcribed by Joseph B. Conmy, Office of the Commanding General, “Battle of Dong Ap Bia—Hill 937,” (San Francisco, May 24, 1969), 5, box 0008, folder 1508, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/539489](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/539489).

<sup>19</sup> Reed, “Combat After Action Report,” 6.

<sup>20</sup> John Wright Jr. “Operation ‘Apache Snow’: 101st Airborne.” Military History Department. June 1969, 3, box 0008, folder 1462, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/539377](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/539377).

<sup>21</sup> Reed, “Combat After Action Report,” 9.

U.S. forces carried out all missions successfully and only “cost the lives of 48 Americans and nearly 600 North Vietnamese.”<sup>22</sup> Although the number of casualties continues to vary (with a discrepancy between 48, 50, or 65 Americans versus 600 or 630 North Vietnamese), all sources cite a drastic difference between American and North Vietnamese losses. According to the troops that fought in the jungles, the battle was a success. Arthur Wiknik, a soldier who took the hill on May 20th described his satisfaction with the victory: “Once we had taken the hill there were GIs everywhere and I felt pretty good. You know, we had been part of a—we didn’t realize that at the time but, you know, when I think back now that was part of history so it’s pretty neat to be a part of history.”<sup>23</sup> Combat reports, high ranking military officials, and soldiers frequently echoed the battle’s success. Yet, even so, controversy in the home front arose almost immediately. Journalist coverage and public reaction paint a different picture of the victory. Many reporters like Ward Just and David Hoffman of the *Washington Post*, Terence Smith of the *New York Times*, and *The World* questioned the tactical significance of the battle and the use of conventional tactics rather than simply utilizing modern airstrike technology. Some soldiers on the hill even voiced their opinions. Specialist SPC, Anthony Toll commented, “after all these air and artillery strikes, these gooks [North Vietnamese] are still in there fighting. All of us are wondering why they [the Americans] just can’t pull back and B-52 [bomb] the hill. I’ve lost a lot of buddies up there. Not many guys can take it much longer.”<sup>24</sup> No one can dispute the brutality of the battle. It makes sense that some soldiers felt more airstrikes could have been used to save

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<sup>22</sup> Conmy, “Battle of Dong Ap Bia—Hill 937,” 30.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Wiknik, “Oral History Project, Interview with Thomas Petty,” interview by Kelly Crager, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, January 19, 2009, 45. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/430416](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/430416)

<sup>24</sup> Conmy, “Battle of Dong Ap Bia,” 5.

human life as they trudged up the hill. After all, the nickname, Hamburger Hill, comes from the meat grinder appearance of the hill from constant combat and artillery fire. Toll's remarks revealed the trauma of warfare and the American questioning of war as a problem solver, but the use of bombing had already been a prominent feature of the battle. The US military used artillery strikes and napalm every day—over 1,100 tons of artillery during the span of the ten-day battle.<sup>25</sup> Air support was in frequent use, yet, the North Vietnamese had dug into concrete bunkers making airstrikes less effective. This is why generals argued that conventional, raiding tactics were necessary to take the hill. General Melvin Zais contested; “I don't know how many wars we have to go through to convince people that bombing alone can never do the trick. They [the NVA] were dug in too deep, they were protected.”<sup>26</sup> The military felt strongly that they had successfully taken Hill 937 with comprehensive strategy. In contrast, politicians and journalists perceived the battle as brutal and senseless, which caused the American public's opposition. Meanwhile, soldiers struggled to maintain morale for a controversial war. Therefore, newspaper outlets, television and radio broadcasts, and magazine articles played an important role in the Vietnam War. The media created an intricate web of awareness between politics, the public, and the military—each influencing and shaping one another to create a highly controversial historical period. Perhaps the most significant factor during the Vietnam War was journalist's coverage of different events informing the American home front.

Due to the controversial results of the Battle of Hamburger Hill, this event marked an important obstacle for the US military in the Vietnam War. In 1968, the Tet Offensive sparked, perhaps, the beginning of a collective American disregard for continued military efforts in

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<sup>25</sup> Conmy, “Battle of Dong Ap Bia,” 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 31.

southeast Asia. One year later, Hamburger Hill further solidified the general sense of futility. Despite the victory for US forces, the public and politicians focused on the descriptions of destruction, death, and senselessness. The media, politicians, and military were simply too disconnected, and each were focusing on entirely different objectives. Humanity was continuing to be a feature of debate, and meanwhile, there was still a responsibility to fight for traditional American ideologies. This inadequate balancing act between the three parties resulted in different perceptions of the battles, and therefore a disappointing response to an American victory. Both the Tet Offensive and Hamburger Hill create a solid portrayal of the complicated nature of the Vietnam War. As US forces fought hard to achieve victory in Vietnam, the most challenging battle to come was the support from the American public and politicians—a continuous challenge for military staff. Eventually, the U.S. military decided to abandon the Hamburger Hill. This decision further suggested the futility of the Vietnam War. Parents, family and friends of those lost and injured on Hamburger Hill surely took no comfort in relinquishing a geographic landmark at such a high human cost. It showed that even as successes occurred in the war, victory depended on a comprehensive effort—both militarily and on the home front. Obstacles obstructing military success far outweighed advantages. The Battle of Hamburger Hill illuminates the obstacles including: journalist’s coverage, political limitations, and public dissent.

### **Section Two: ‘Aid to the Enemy:’ Reporters and Sensationalized News**

As the United States witnessed the escalation of a war that divided the nation, journalistic coverage influenced the perspectives of the public, politicians, and soldiers. While civilians at home experienced the realities of war through their television sets, soldiers abroad became

increasingly frustrated with antiwar news coverage. In 1969, Col. James Campbell stated, “it is my contention that such irresponsible reporting is absolutely devastating to the morale of all soldiers. It is also my contention that such reporting in the *Stars and Stripes* of all publications is of tremendous aid and comfort to the enemy.”<sup>27</sup> Newspaper editorials caused, according to some military staff, the public to lose faith in US forces, and this undermined some GIs’ morale. Military officials like Campbell cast blame on the media, whose news coverage of American suffering and senselessness seemingly bolstered Viet Cong momentum. One soldier expressed his frustration claiming: “They [protestors] took it out on the warriors instead of the politicians that, you know, created the situation. It was just anti-war sentiment. That anti-war sentiment was carried over and aimed at the kid that got drafted...”<sup>28</sup> Throughout the Vietnam era, the public, politicians, and military inadequately worked together. As antiwar movements intensified, politicians were forced to attempt pleasing every party including American citizens, military goals, and the world image. As a result, the military experienced strategic limitations so as to satisfy the public and maintain a stance in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the soldiers abroad faced the consequences of a limited war. General Fred Weyand warned, “what the military did not realize was that the American public had always been the greatest limitation on the use of military force.”<sup>29</sup> Antiwar sentiments increased, and President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not

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<sup>27</sup> James Campbell as quoted in “USARV Colonel Attacks Pacific Stars and Stripes,” *Stars and Stripes*, September 29, 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/215961](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/215961).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Petty, “Oral History Project, Interview with Thomas Petty,” interview by Kelly Crager, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, December 2, 2008, 35. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/429138](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/429138).

<sup>29</sup> Fred Weyand as quoted by Col. Harry G. Summers, “Hamburger Hill proved to be the telling battle of the Vietnam War, as Pork Chop Hill was for the Korean War,” *Vietnam Magazine*, [http://1stbn4thmarines.net/operations/history-folder/hamburger\\_hill.htm](http://1stbn4thmarines.net/operations/history-folder/hamburger_hill.htm)

pursue re-election in 1968. He explained, “I felt I was being chased on all sides by a giant stampede coming at me from all directions.”<sup>30</sup>

The Vietnam War forced many military and political officials to make decisions to appease the public, the media, the soldiers, and the rest of the watching world. For example, in the 1969 Battle of Hamburger Hill, the military frequently felt pressure from politicians and the public. Although the battle was a victory for the United States, the opening sentence in the *Washington Post Foreign Service* newspaper the next day wrote, “the Army commanders who ordered, approved and led what Sen. Edward M. Kennedy described as a ‘senseless and irresponsible’ charge up Hamburger Hill disputed the Senator today.”<sup>31</sup> This statement was misleading in that U.S. forces lost about 50 men, whereas the NVA lost over 600. Combat reports consistently stated this figure, yet, media outlets posted instead the frustrations of the war. Ted Kennedy lamented, “how can we justify sending our boys against a hill a dozen times or more until soldiers themselves question the madness of the action?”<sup>32</sup> Kennedy was frustrated with the military’s decision to continue attacking the hill even after a dozen attempts. In addition, some newspapers made a point to reveal the tactical insignificance of the hill, likely to question the overall morality of fighting wars. The battle may have resulted in comparatively fewer American losses, but reporters, citizens, and politicians alike began to question the humanity of war. To many people during this time period, a U.S. victory with few losses mattered little since war as a whole was being questioned as both senseless and irresponsible. Another article written by Ward Just from the *Washington Post* pointed out the uselessness of the war. He argued, “[It

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<sup>30</sup> “Antiwar Fringe Grows to Majority Force,” *Focal Point*, 1975.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/197805](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/197805)

<sup>31</sup> David Hoffman, “Hamburger Hill: The Army’s Rationales,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, May 23, 1969, 6. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/214356](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/214356)

<sup>32</sup> Hoffman, “Hamburger Hill: The Army’s Rationales,” 6.

is] simple enough to speak of the futility of such enterprises like Hamburger Hill, where too many men are killed and wounded to no discernible purpose... Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais should leave the hill to the enemy, for whatever good it will do him; give it a run with B-52s, then leave it alone. Hamburger Hill: not worth a single dead American. But that is not the way it goes in South Vietnam. It never has. An army is fielded, and if it is a good army it fights.”<sup>33</sup> Just articulated his frustration with warfare in general, and he pointed out the cruelty of letting American boys die on the front lines. His sentiments address the American unfamiliarity regarding the realities of war. A war’s brutal nature and acceptance of lost life is often a challenging aspect to accept, and much of the U.S. population was shocked to experience this firsthand through the television. Moreover, Just claimed too many American soldiers were killed at the battle, yet roughly 50 were reported dead in the combat report. Just sought an outcome in which no American lives were lost, and this further reveals the level of unpreparedness in the U.S. public for the realities of warfare. In addition, this article conveys the growing questioning of war in general. More Americans began to discuss if war was a humane practice at all, further dividing the nation in an already controversial conflict.

A similar article described the hopelessness many soldiers felt. An unnamed soldier claimed, “There were lots of people in Bravo Company [which had born the brunt of the casualties] who were going to refuse to go back up again. There’d been low morale, but never before so low—because we felt it was all so senseless.”<sup>34</sup> Many soldiers on Hamburger Hill, no doubt, felt fearful during the battle, and as newspaper articles stressed soldiers’ insubordination

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<sup>33</sup> Ward Just, “The Reality of War on Hamburger Hill,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/246813](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/246813)

<sup>34</sup> “The Battle for Hamburger Hill,” *The World*, May 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/246799](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/246799).

and trauma, the military criticized the journalist's coverage. If the public was already questioning the morality of war, viewing miserable soldiers likely increased efforts to end the conflict. In addition, this soldier's opinion illustrates the controversial nature of the Vietnam era. Combat, in general, is a harrowing endeavor for any young soldier. The ethics of nation pursuing war has frequently been a heavily debated topic on morality and basic humanity. The Vietnam War, for the first time, popularized and illuminated the common soldier's realization of war. Television was articulating every emotion a soldier felt, and even if this reality is simple truth that must be swallowed, the U.S. was, nonetheless, shocked to witness the details of war. The media's focus on dismal soldiers and traumatic experiences, more than anything, reveal the lack of American preparedness for the realities of war. But this did not deter many soldiers' expectations for a supportive nation and a heroic war. When their experiences failed to meet their expectations, many GIs began to lose morale. As a result, sensationalized reports led to U.S. military disappointment and anger with the media and lack of support back home. Col. R.D. Heinl pointed out, "In this war—at least as seen by most experienced soldiers—U.S. television has wittingly or unwittingly served in considerable part as a weapon for mass destruction of national will and morale...Some would say that, in the Vietnamese War, we have in fact been defeating ourselves by television."<sup>35</sup> These are strong statements to make about the impact of the media and antiwar sentiments on the result of the Vietnam War, and Heinl's comments express the perspectives some military personnel had of the media. According to some military officials, the media was affecting American morale.

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<sup>35</sup> Col. R.D. Heinl Jr., "American TV Helps to Destroy National Will and Morale," *University of California Press*, March 1970, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/216270](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/216270)

Six months after the Battle of Hamburger Hill, Col. Rodger Bankson gave a speech to the New Jersey Press Association. He addressed the contradictions of having so many reporters in Vietnam, yet, the public remained uninformed about some factual realities soldiers experienced. Bankson explained, “Anywhere from 450 to 650 news media representatives from every branch of public communications and from two to three dozen countries may be accredited to the Government of Vietnam and to our military command there at any given time...But despite their efforts and the efforts of dedicated and aggressive newsmen, the American public is singularly uninformed or ill-informed about that many-faceted war. Why is this so? Why is there confusion and doubt when by every valid, meaningful measurement we are winning in Vietnam, and have been for more than three years?”<sup>36</sup> Bankson argued that sensationalism in news, amateur reporters, and even laziness in the American public caused a degree of misinformation.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the Vietnam War introduced televised news coverage into the battlefield, and now viewers would be able to see exactly what happened at certain events. As a result, this required a more educated public that was capable of skepticism and questioning the information they received at the time. The general public in the 1960s and 1970s—as well as today—often blindly accepts what is presented to them on the television which creates a problem of acquiring full knowledge in controversial topics. In both senses, publicly and through the media, the military functions in Vietnam were inadequately understood.

Military officials frequently voiced their frustration with the reporters in Vietnam. James Westheider, an author of the Vietnam War claims “many soldiers blamed what they considered to be biased reporting for influencing the general public, and ultimately, the government into

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<sup>36</sup> Rodger Bankson, “Before the New Jersey Press Association,” November 14, 1969, 2.  
<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/107/1070319002.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Bankson, “Before the New Jersey Press Association,” 3.

believing that the war was unwinnable... One valid criticism of the media was that many reporters rarely left the relatively safe confines of Saigon [and] wrote about the war as if they were in a combat zone.”<sup>38</sup> Military personnel criticized journalists for reporting dramatic stories of battle when many rarely ventured from the safety of American bases. Thus, many military officials questioned how media coverage could be completely accurate. In a 1982 interview, General William Westmoreland pointed out the influence the media had on the public with numbers of inaccurate and sensationalized stories. According to Westmoreland, “Without censorship in war, things can get terribly confused in the public mind, and when you add that to another first for Vietnam—television—you have an instrument that can paralyze this country, absolutely paralyze it to where the president is unable to do what he thinks is in the national interest.”<sup>39</sup> Westmoreland, acknowledging America’s inexperience with a television war, still asserted that censorship was sometimes necessary in wartime—even with excellent journalists. This statement reveals the controversial nature of the media in the Vietnam War. In effect, the main debate was how much detail of military functions should be revealed to the public. This created a difficult dispute. Press freedom and the right for the public to acquire information is a fundamental aspect of the United States. Yet, it must also be considered how complex and even brutal military information can be. If the public receives too much detail, it could cause discontent and a breach of security. In all, this complication simply exposed just how prepared a country needs to be for war—both mentally and physically. A democracy should have the right to give information to the public, but this also means citizens must be prepared for the

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<sup>38</sup> James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experiences of the U.S. Soldier*, (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2011), 149.

<sup>39</sup> William Westmoreland, “Opinion and Commentary: A Reply to Walter Cronkite”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1982, 1.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/62870](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/62870)

heinousness of war and educated in practices of skepticism. Even today, this controversy is still debated.

Other military officials cited the issues with staged scenes on the television. Col. Heinl described,

a soldier wearing the U.S. uniform states his emphatic dissatisfaction with the war and says in effect, that if he gets out of Vietnam, he would never obey an order to return. What the viewer saw did not just happen. The circle of soldiers had to be positioned and assembled. For the one soldier whose views hit the desired chord, a dozen GIs may have talked into the mike...The reporter was getting what he was asking for. He wasn't looking for signs of morale, discipline, fighting spirit, or patriotism. What CBS succeeded in registering and must therefore have sought, was war-weariness, gripes, disaffection, and soldier discontent.<sup>40</sup>

Heinl asserted that journalists were creating the messages and stories they wanted the public to view. He argued that the media was looking for an end to the war, and thus, they purposely worded stories to fit that message. Meanwhile, as the military became increasingly displeased with the reporting, American citizens back home witnessed scenes of violent engagements, demoralized soldiers, and a losing war. As a result, antiwar sentiments soon skyrocketed. Even the manner in which military generals were portrayed was frustrating to the military. After the Battle of Hamburger Hill, news reporters cited General Melvin Zais who justified the attack. He claimed, ““that hill was in my area of operations, that was where the enemy was, that’s where I attacked him.””<sup>41</sup> This portrayal of Zais made him out to be a gruff individual who cared little about human life and, likewise, did not put much thought into decisions. Perhaps Zais did hold these characteristics, but such descriptions paint a picture of inhumanity in warfare—which was a popular conception of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>40</sup> Heinl, “American TV Helps to Destroy National Will and Morale,” 1.

<sup>41</sup> Melvin Zais as quoted by David Hoffman, “Hamburger Hill: The Army’s Rationales,” 1.

Thus, this theme of inhumanity and moral decency had become a major question of both the public and media. Throughout the war, the media and military were constantly disconnected. The military stressed victory over its enemies, patriotism for troops and country, and a firm grasp on the realities of war. Meanwhile, journalists—as well as the public—were grappling with the moral soundness of war, brutality, and killing. It is not necessarily a matter of biased or false reporting. It is more a different focus on the practice of war. For example, the Battle of Hamburger Hill was an evident victory for the United States. The military and reporters on site essentially witnessed the same events. Yet, as the military focused on victory over its enemies, the media questioned the sense of it all. This attitude frustrated some troops, but as the U.S. population grappled with war's humanity, journalists similarly described violent scenes of battle, exhausted troops, and dense jungles. Maybe this does make the reporting sensationalized, but it also does not make it false. Instead, it shows how perspectives on certain events—while all true in their own rights—can be completely different according to specific focus and objectives. In short, the media and military were grappling with opposing obstacles during the Vietnam War, and this created a divided United States.

For example, some reporters during the Vietnam War even chose to depart from journalism. Howard Smith of the *Hall Syndicate* publisher announced, “in past periods around our entry into World War II, I had the exhilarating feeling of being a tiny part in a great age of journalism. I miss that feeling now. I believe too many reporters today are not rising to the demands of a time that calls for especially perceptive reporting and especially judicious interpretation of events... I believe that a big contributing factor to the confusion and frustration

now damaging the nation's spirit is the poorly balanced diet of journalism it is getting."<sup>42</sup> Smith expressed his disapproval of the journalistic coverage against President Johnson and antiwar sentiments, so he decided to leave the profession. No reporter, however, faced as much scathing criticism than Walter Cronkite.

Walter Cronkite was a journalist who gained immense popularity in the media during World War II. His pro-military stance, however, suddenly shifted in 1968. After the Tet Offensive he asserted the Vietnam War was unwinnable. Americans, shocked at Cronkite's expressions of personal opinions, joined his side while others bitterly opposed his anecdotes. Ed Moffitt, for example, wrote a letter to Cronkite years later targeting him for the altered media coverage. Moffitt asserted, "While the damage done to your own reputation is certain, it pales when compared to the damage done to the valiant men who fought in Vietnam and especially the people of South Vietnam who suffered greatly under the victorious Communist troops after our government followed your advice and withdrew."<sup>43</sup> Cronkite certainly carried significant influence in shaping American public opinion. President Lyndon Johnson stated, "if I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America."<sup>44</sup> Some contemporaries claim that Johnson ultimately decided to not run for reelection due to Cronkite's followers who were dissatisfied with the war. During the Vietnam era, many citizens who trusted Cronkite, at times embraced his assertions against the war efforts. Meanwhile, another group of individuals began to question Cronkite's

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<sup>42</sup> Howard K. Smith, "Great Age of Journalism Gone?," *Hall Syndicate*, February 19, 1968, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/214356](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/214356).

<sup>43</sup> Ed Moffitt, "Letter to Walter Cronkite" (January 15, 2008), 2, box 1, folder 1, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/431571](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/431571).

<sup>44</sup> Chester Pach, "The Way it Wasn't: Cronkite and Vietnam," *History News Network*. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/104635>.

influence. This shift in public opinion showed the power and responsibility reporters have during wartime. For example, because of journalistic coverage, public opinion continuously plummeted, and this forced political officials into a corner. They somehow had to please the public who vehemently called for an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, yet, simultaneously win the war or else suffer a communist overthrow in the East. American officials sought to appease different political perspectives.

Even as late as 2013, political and military officials expressed their animosity towards Cronkite. Moffitt, in an article arguing the United States lost the war due to media coverage. He opined,

imagine if CBS News and Cronkite had reported the truth about our military's valiant victory at Tet? Instead, most network commentators, journalists and press editors followed the CBS anchorman's lead and turned against the war. Most wrote under the banner of 'impartiality' when in fact, many had openly lent their names and influence to the antiwar movement. It is my honest and humble opinion America's mainstream media collaborated in a concerted effort to promote an 'antiwar agenda' which eventually eroded American public opinion and support for the war.<sup>45</sup>

Moffitt placed specific blame on Cronkite and the media for public support to plummet, and therefore, causing the defeat in Vietnam. After a string of letters and requests for answers, Cronkite finally responded to Moffitt. Cronkite stated, "Regarding the TET broadcast, I made clear that my closing comments were a personal opinion and that the previous hour-long news broadcast was as unbiased as we could make it. I recognized sometime after the fact that the North Vietnamese had suffered a military defeat, but this does not dictate an apology on my part for following the precepts of responsible journalism in reporting the situation as I saw it at the

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<sup>45</sup> Ed Moffitt, *America's Defeat in Vietnam was by Choice*, (October 2013), 17.  
[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/581493](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/581493).

time.”<sup>46</sup> Cronkite argued that he stated an opinion, and had not realized, then, that Tet was a U.S. victory. This point raises the theory that perhaps the American public passive when obtaining information about the war. Cronkite’s admittance of being his unawareness of a U.S. victory probes further questions about the role of national television played in American lives. Responsible journalism calls for well-educated reports on events, not personal opinions.

One of the most pronounced responses to the Tet Offensive and the damaging narrative of Walter Cronkite resulted in the intensification of anti-war protests. Scholar Mark Barringer’s explains, “after Tet, American public opinion shifted dramatically, with fully half of the population opposed to escalation.”<sup>47</sup> Much of the increase in antiwar activity, however, is due to the credibility gap of the era. President Johnson continuously promised a short and winnable war, yet, when the public views clips of exploding buildings, exhausted troops, and a strong enemy force, many began to question the credibility of Johnson’s promises, and the need for war to contain communism. Johnson’s credibility became a focal point in the media and public dissenters. So much so that even reporters like Howard Smith from the *Hall Syndicate* called out the animosity towards Johnson. He stated,

In the realm of government, the reporter’s term, ‘credibility gap,’ is one of the most distorting over-simplifications of the time. The President is dealing with unutterably complex situations in which the very facts on which to base judgement may not be in for weeks; yet we tend to call it calculated deception if he does not instantly provide conclusive facts and admit failure... To cite a random example, I find it hard to adjust to the suggestion of a famous TV commentator the other day that it is becoming easier to

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Cronkite, “Letter to Ed Moffitt,” (September 2000), 1, box 1, folder 3, *Vietnam Center and Archive*, Texas Tech University.

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/581493](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/581493).

<sup>47</sup> Mark Barringer, *The Antiwar Movement in the United States*, (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1999). <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/antiwar.html>

believe an Oriental tyrant (Ho Chi Minh) than it is to believe the President of the United States.<sup>48</sup>

Smith argued that both the media and public took dissent too far—even opposing their own country and President. This shows the varying nature of what it means to be American for different people. Some, like Smith, believe loyalty and patriotism for one’s country is a crucial role of being American. In contrast, other Americans argue that revolution and dissent are fundamental values of American culture since rebellion is, after all, what granted American independence in the 1700s. Both arguments contain elements of being American, but it is this distinction that played a significant role during the Vietnam War. While Smith’s arguments for President Johnson remain valid, it is also crucial to recognize that the administration also misled the public. Indeed, protestors and journalists were critical towards the administration which complicated decisions, but Americans became increasingly frustrated with the conflicting information, broken promises, and vague objectives. Many military officials cast blame at the antiwar movement for a failed military effort, but it is also crucial to recognize the impact of Johnson’s credibility gap. Military endeavors need public support, but when announcements are made that the war will be short, simple, and heroic, public dissent will follow when those promises are unfulfilled. In all, Johnson unintentionally created too large of a credibility gap with empty promises of a short war.

While the media’s role in affecting public perception of the conflict played an important role during the war, broken promises and political endeavors also sparked strong dissent. Columbia University students rallying against the war and civil rights issues, for example,

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, “Great Age of Journalism Gone?,” 1.

occupied five campus buildings before being broken up by police.<sup>49</sup> The Democratic National Convention in August of that year turned violent when peace activists were disbanded with tear gas and police force. The broken promises held by politicians and the violent images of warfare on television screens forced anti-war sentiments to spread, and as a result, public distrust of the government intensified. The public began opposing the war, but this did not come without responses from the military. Private First-Class Michael Brown, for example, wanted “all the people back home to know that protesting the war will do no good. It’s too late to protest, so stop marching and give us a little more support.”<sup>50</sup> As college students and activists fought their own battles for peace and equality on the home front, young men risked their lives in Vietnam—all while feeling a lack of support from back home. Indeed, as protestors raged over the political shortcomings back home, and passionately called for an end to the war, soldiers still fought a foreign battle in Southeast Asia.

### **Section 3—Anti-war and Pro-war Perspectives among Vietnam War Soldiers**

“I feel that there is too much talk of despair. I warned you of that before I left. Above all, this is a war of mind and spirit. And it is a war which can be won no matter what present circumstances are. For us to despair would be a great victory for the enemy. We must stand strong and unafraid and give heart to an embattled and confused people. This cannot be done if America loses heart. Please don't let them back where you are [United States] sell me down the river with talk of despair and defeat. Talk instead of steadfastness, loyalty and of victory—for we must and we can win here. There is no backing out of Vietnam, for it will follow us everywhere we go. We have drawn the line here and the America we all know and love best is not one to back away.”<sup>51</sup>

—Captain James Polk Spruill, Letter to his Wife, 1964

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<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, *At Columbia, Revisiting the Revolutionary Students of 1968*, *New York Times*, March 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/arts/columbia-university-1968-protest.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Private First-Class Michael O. Brown, “Our Men in Vietnam,” *Sepia*, June 1968, 58-59.

<sup>51</sup> Captain James Polk Spruill, Letter to Wife, “The Line is Drawn: Extracts from Letters written by Captain Spruill,” Vietnam, 1963-1964, 8. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/580591](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/580591).

The ranging perspectives of the soldiers during this turbulent time remain understudied in the literature of the Vietnam War. With every year the war raged on, public sentiment diminished, and frustrations were vocalized both in political circles and among journalists. Many soldiers became disenchanted with the military and war efforts in Southeast Asia, but other soldiers also expressed frustrations with the lack of support back home. Soldiers criticized political pressure and policies that undermined military decisions and strategies that resulted in low morale. For example, after U.S. Command halted bombing and muzzled its troops in November of 1968, George Gensel Special Fourth Class expressed his concern: “Look what happened when we slowed the bombing before. Things got a whole lot worse. I don’t think this is the right move. There should be another way, but I don’t know the answer.”<sup>52</sup> In many ways, this individual expression from a soldier in Vietnam, highlights the complexities of the war. While many GIs in Vietnam felt American strategy was inefficient, the resolution was too complicated for any one amendment. The Vietnam War caused challenges for different parties, whether it be the military, politicians, or the public at home. Furthermore, the war’s procedures became even more complicated with the role of media.

In the Vietnam War—the first televised war—antiwar sentiments overshadow American collective memory.<sup>53</sup> Some military officials expressed their dissatisfaction with the media and opinions at home for skewing interview comments and representing the military in a negative light. In a 1982 interview, General William Westmoreland maintained, “during the Vietnam conflict the media played a role in turning public sentiment against the war with numbers of

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<sup>52</sup> “Criticisms from Troops in the Field,” *South China Morning Post*, November 1, 1968, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/174710](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/174710).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *Vietnam: The Television War*, (Massachusetts: Daedalus, 1982), 1.

inaccurate and sensationalized stories. Walter Cronkite ought to understand that point very well since his network, CBS, did much to paint our Vietnam War in negative terms.” He continued, “note that 14 years later, Mr. Cronkite was still describing Tet as a defeat for our side, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. That is inexcusable.”<sup>54</sup> Westmoreland’s interview highlights the military’s growing frustration with the media representations of the war and the lack of support from home. Westmoreland certainly had his own failures and mistakes in the Vietnam War ranging from lack of creativity and focus on conventional tactics, but he asserted that the media caused problems between the military and public support. Airman Richard W. Harper lamented that he did not “appreciate the fact that Americans are being killed, while our government at home is making half an effort to win this war... We need more motivation from our fellow Americans back home, and we also need to fight this war like it should be fought.”<sup>55</sup> Harper was disappointed with both the U.S. government and the American public’s lack of commitment. This shows an expectation for World War II mobilization and support. Many soldiers, like Harper, felt the war could not be won due to the imposed political restrictions and a halfhearted commitment. While some soldiers criticized political restrictions, others cast blame at the protestors. Private Floyd Evans requested that “the people back in the states would cut out some of that protesting against the war. Everybody should get together and give us men a helping hand over here.”<sup>56</sup> Evans argued that the protesting in the states was useless, and that providing support and assistance to the American troops would be more purposeful. Another soldier revealed his frustration with protestors by admitting he “would rather fight to stop

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<sup>54</sup> William Westmoreland, “Opinion and Commentary: A Reply to Walter Cronkite”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1982,

[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/62870](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/62870).

<sup>55</sup> Airman Richard W. Harper, “Our Men in Vietnam,” *Sepia*, January 1968, 78-79.

<sup>56</sup> Floyd Evans, Letter in “Our Men in Vietnam,” *Sepia*, February 1968, 71.

communism in South Vietnam than in American cities like Kincaid, Humbolt Blue Mound, or Kansas City.”<sup>57</sup> More still, in a letter to his pen pal, Sgt. David Miller explained, “this mail we get really helps the morale of the troops, especially from the college students since all we hear about is the stupid Communist students protesting.”<sup>58</sup> Miller’s assumption shows that many protestors were characterized as communists simply for dissenting an American endeavor. Indeed, there were some communist sympathizers in antiwar movements, but most simply desired peace. Thus, Miller’s criticism reveals how the military viewed antiwar movements. Many soldiers learned about the problems back home and believed wherever they went, conflict surrounded them. In addition, soldiers understood the conflicts at home such as the civil rights movements, political scandals, and antiwar protests indicated a lack of focus by the American people. As the number of casualties skyrocketed in the dense jungles of Vietnam, the military lost its direction and experienced a decline in soldiers’ morale.

Many soldiers experienced conflict both on the battlefield and on the home front. Some, like Lance Corporal Jack Swender, saw an opportunity to educate the South Vietnamese. He asserted, “Communism cannot thrive in a society of people who know the whole truth. This war is not going to be won in a day or even a year. This war and others like it will only be won when the children of the nation are educated and can grow in freedom to rule themselves. Last year alone 4,700 teachers and priests in South Vietnam were killed. This we are trying to stop – this is our objective.”<sup>59</sup> Swender was inspired to give other civilizations the opportunity to be free like

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<sup>57</sup> Jack S. Swender, “Letter to Swender to Aunt and Uncle 1965,” (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc. From *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*). Accessed November 9, 2017. <http://jackiewhiting.net/Collab/VietnamDocs/VNLetters.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> David Miller, “Letter to Carol Thompson,” December 15, 1965, Accessed through Carol Thompson Collection, Folder 3, *Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University*. <https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/resources/1967>.

<sup>59</sup> Swender, “Letter to Aunt and Uncle,” 1.

Americans; he argued that education was the key for Vietnamese children to pursue freedom. In his mind, the war would achieve this objective. Others, like Staff Sergeant Benjamin Estes, were hopeful for true peace. He commented, "I just can't see letting all those sacrifices be in vain. I'm willing to stay longer to get the thing really settled. If the war stops, it has to truly stop so there will be a permanent peace."<sup>60</sup> Estes revealed his sense of duty to complete the job so that the many men who lost their lives would not be in vain. Another Captain commented how much the South Vietnamese appreciated America's military presence. He maintained, "You can't imagine the comradeship and gratitude of these men when an American stands with them through danger. It seems to bring heart to them. They cheer and wave and yell 'Dia-uy,' which is their word for Captain."<sup>61</sup> According to this Captain, South Vietnamese, at first, embraced the American presence. At the beginning of the Vietnam War, Americans supported the mission, some South Vietnamese were appreciative, and the goals were clear. But with time, these objectives faded and appreciation for American troops steadily subsided. Thus, American morale began its gradual decline. Likewise, South Vietnamese responses to American military presence varied. Some, like the Captain described, were satisfied with the assistance, while others openly criticized the invasive presence. Even so, some soldiers like W.O. Thomas Minerva felt it was their duty to fight communism. He wrote in a letter: "We all miss our families. We all feel though that if we don't stop the Communists here, our children will be fighting them in the U.S.A."<sup>62</sup> Minerva acknowledged the fear of the spread of communism during the time. Many

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<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Estes as transcribed by "Criticisms from Troops in the Field," *South China Morning Post*, November 1, 1968. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/174710](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/174710).

<sup>61</sup> Spruill, "The Line is Drawn," 3.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Minerva, "Letter to Carol Thompson," December 1, 1965, Accessed through Carol Thompson Collection, Folder 7, *Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University*. <https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/resources/1967>.

Americans felt if communism was not actively subdued, then it would inevitably spread into their western culture. Thus, Minerva argued that there was a just cause to protect future generations of America.

While many soldiers maintained optimism during the war, others began to feel bitter about the vague reasons for American involvement in Vietnam. Corporal George Skakel wrote to a student newspaper explaining; “most guys harbor some notion of duty—what’s gotta be done gotta be done. The main issue is personal survival. A few of us, like myself, hate the war for its own sake, as a war, a human travesty, for the sake of unscrupulous motives.”<sup>63</sup> Some soldiers like Skakel entered Vietnam and experienced the true horrors of war—a common response in any conflict. The distinction in this attitude is that soldiers began to lose sight of the objective. For example, while the enemy in World War II was clear, the true “enemy” during the Vietnam War remained far less evident. It did not take long for the media, the public, and even soldiers to question the necessity of American involvement. In his book on differing opinions of the military, historian David Flores noted, “tensions over support or opposition to the Vietnam War were due in part to the complex ways in which the war was rationalized politically and fought militarily. As the rate at which casualties in Vietnam accumulated, and local communities began to feel the human impact of war, individuals grew to question political justifications for continuing to fight in Vietnam.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, many soldiers who became frustrated with public

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<sup>63</sup> George Skakel, “Skakel Letter to University of California, Santa Cruz,” *The City on a Hill Press*, February 16, 1968. Transcribed by Alexander Bloom, Wini Breines, *Takin’ it to the Streets*. “One Soldier’s View: Vietnam Letters,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 183.

<sup>64</sup> David Flores, *Memories of War: Sources of Vietnam Veterans Pro- and Antiwar Political Attitudes*, (New Jersey, Wiley, 2014), 101.

support, directed their grievances at the general war effort. For example, some soldiers struggled to compare the tragedies at home to the tragedies in warfare.

After losing his close friend, Lt. Scott, in combat, Sergeant Philip Woodall wrote, “tonight the nation mourns the death of Martin Luther King. Not me, I mourn the death of the real leaders for peace, the people who give the real sacrifice, people like Lt. Scott.” He continued, “tonight as the nation mourns Dr. King, they drink their cold beer, turn on their air conditioner and watch their TV. We who mourn the deaths over here will set up ambushes, pull our guard and eat our C-rations.”<sup>65</sup> Soldiers like Woodall struggled to compare the tragedies back home with the losses in Vietnam. To Woodall and many others, the true heroes of the United States were the men who fought and died for their country. The reality of war stripped many young men of their idealism, leaving some soldiers, like Woodall, bitter over the nation’s mourning of Martin Luther King Jr., and not the thousands in Vietnam. In effect, the U.S. military staff believed that had abandoned the military’s priorities abroad. While the public witnessed brutal warfare and distant jungles through their televisions, American GIs were also keenly aware of the American population viewing their military engagements alongside domestic events like the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination and the debates surrounding presidential campaigns. This gave soldiers the opportunity to witness the dissent towards the war, and news reports of American war efforts. Fractions of soldiers supported the antiwar agenda while other groups of the military became frustrated with the meager political and public support.

The unique perspective of the Vietnam War represents the group of soldiers who decided to join the antiwar movement. Many soldiers started to question the war’s objectives, arguing the

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<sup>65</sup> Sgt Philip Woodall, “Letter to Dad April 5, 1968,” (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc. From Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam).  
<http://jackiewhiting.net/Collab/VietnamDocs/VNLetters.htm>.

war was a misguided and unjust political endeavor. Soldiers found refuge sharing their perspectives at coffeehouses and in underground newspapers. For example, in an unofficial newspaper called *Counterpoint*, soldiers argued that political decisions were unjustified, blaming politicians' capitalistic motivations and their disregard for soldiers' achievements abroad. An article describes, "the Brass [high ranking officials] are only out for their own gain, and maybe a profitable kickback. Of course, if asked about it, the lifers scream patriotism and national defense."<sup>66</sup> Many antiwar soldiers argued that high ranking officials cared only about making money and their own personal gain, making many GIs feel, even more so, that military endeavors were futile. Similarly, soldiers' coffeehouses near their bases allowed GIs to discuss the war with other antiwar activists.<sup>67</sup> The transition from a patriotic soldier to an active member of antiwar movements highlight the complexities of the war. Soldiers began questioning long-held traditions of discipline and authority in the military. In the *Counterpoint*, antiwar GIs argued, "American soldiers die in Vietnam every day, yet when a GI chooses to speak out against such senseless slaughter, he is labeled a 'troublemaker' or a threat to morale. Vietnam means trouble for any GI. We didn't make the war. A president's foreign policy did it."<sup>68</sup> American soldiers were increasingly casting aside traditional military expectations and instead boldly pointed out: "the present administration and the military-industrial complex... are the

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<sup>66</sup> "Editorial: When will it All End?" *Counterpoint*, April 5, 1970, 1. From University of Washington Archives. <http://depts.washington.edu/labpics/zenPhoto/antiwar/gipaper/Fed-Up-April-15-1970-vol.-1-no.-5/p.-3.jpg>.

<sup>67</sup> Derek Siedman, *Vietnam and the Soldiers' Revolt: The Politics of a Forgotten History*, (New York: Monthly Review, 2016), 49.

<sup>68</sup> "Statement of Ft Jackson GIs.," *Counterpoint*, Ft. Lewis, Washington: n.p., June 2, 1969, 2. From University of Washington Archives. <http://depts.washington.edu/labpics/zenPhoto/antiwar/gipaper/Counterpoint-June-2-1969/p.-2.jpg>.

troublemakers, not us.”<sup>69</sup> Though it is not uncommon for soldiers to wish for the conflict to end, the Vietnam War is unique with its organized movement of GIs joining the antiwar protests. Lieutenant General James Gavin recommended, “we bring hostilities in Vietnam to an end as quickly and reasonably as we can, and that we devote those vast expenditures of our national resources to dealing with our domestic problems.”<sup>70</sup> Not only were citizens protesting the war, but also a number of GIs organized to end the conflict as quickly as possible. This not only reveals the futility of the war effort, but it also displays a powerful example of how support in general represents a crucial component of winning a war. Vague motives, American unpreparedness for the realities of war, and media coverage certainly played a role in the minds of the citizens at home, but all of these factors also affected the GIs in Vietnam. As a result, the American military experienced one of the most organized and widespread opposition movements during antiwar protests.

The problems of media coverage and scarce public support during warfare came to light even more so after the Battle of Hamburger Hill in 1969. After fighting for ten brutal days, American troops were exhilarated to have finally taken the hard-fought hill. Yet, shortly thereafter military officials decided to abandon the hill and kept moving. This severely damaged the morale of soldiers’ like Arthur Wiknik who fought at the hill and lost comrades along the way. He recalled, “Shortly after that, we were kind of disappointed. We figured that the location could have been used as a fire base or some military installation, you know, American military installation could have been placed on that hill. Something could be done there because we fought very hard for that piece of ground. Roughly sixty-five Americans lost their lives there, so

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<sup>69</sup>“Statement of Ft Jackson GIs,” *Counterpoint*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> James Gavin, “Generals Denounce Viet War,” *Veteran’s Stars and Stripes for Peace*, June 2, 1969, 1.

to just abandon it like that was a real kick in the pants. That was very, very discouraging and some of the guys voiced that right away.”<sup>71</sup> American troops were demoralized after abandoning a hill they fought so hard to win. Wiknik struggled to understand the sense in losing comrades if the strategy was aimed at abandoning the hill anyway. Thus, many troops, journalists, and politicians alike began to question why military officials decided to leave the successfully won hill. Colonel Harry Summers believed the site was abandoned because of the reactions at home. He argued, “given the public and political reaction to Hamburger Hill, a change in war-fighting policy was not long in coming. In order to hold down casualties, what had been a policy of keeping ‘maximum pressure’ on the enemy was changed to one of ‘protective reaction’—fighting only when threatened by enemy attack.”<sup>72</sup> Public and political reactions were at times negative in response to Hamburger Hill, and military officials regarded public opposition as an obstacle to their decision-making. Private Robert Scales later commented: “I mean Ted Kennedy is going ballistic in the halls of the Senate over this wastage of lives in Hamburger Hill. So then you had the additional pressure, political pressures, that I didn’t feel but our bosses felt, that to back away without taking the hill, with all the grief we were getting back home—and remember what ‘69 was like...By August we were out of there, because the price of losing soldiers on these hills was just too high a price to pay after the publicity of Hamburger Hill.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Arthur Wiknik, “Oral History Project, Interview with Thomas Petty,” interview by Kelly Crager, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, January 19, 2009, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/430416](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/430416).

<sup>72</sup> Col. Harry G. Summers, “Hamburger Hill proved to be the telling battle of the Vietnam War, as Pork Chop Hill was for the Korean War,” *Vietnam Magazine*, 1. [http://1stbn4thmarines.net/operations/history-folder/hamburger\\_hill.htm](http://1stbn4thmarines.net/operations/history-folder/hamburger_hill.htm).

<sup>73</sup> Robert H. Scales, “The Will to Fight Hamburger Hill,” 2015, 1. <http://www.westpointcoh.org/interviews/the-will-to-fight-hamburger-hill-the-revitalization-of-the-army-and-the-contours-of-american-military-policy/transcript.pdf>.

The Battle of Hamburger Hill demonstrated the American military's strength; Americans lost roughly 50-65 men while the NVA suffered 630 casualties. In addition, the mission's objectives of conquering the hill and cutting off connecting roads were met, yet, American newspapers continued to portray the event as a senseless effort. This coverage would be especially frustrating due to the number of journalists at the battle. Roger Borroel of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne noted that by the "time the fact that the major fight was on, the whole place was filled with Associated Press correspondents."<sup>74</sup> Many military officials, thus, began to question how such a strong media presence reported exaggerated and inaccurate stories. Colonel Joseph Conmy articulated in a 1990 interview that the "the controversy surrounding the battle was generated stateside by politicians and members of the press who wanted the war to end but seemed to have no real solution for ending it. However well-intentioned their criticisms, the net results were the enshrinement of inaccuracy, harassment of the troops and denigration of Vietnam service."<sup>75</sup> Conmy argued that the press and politicians unintentionally undermined the morale of soldiers in Vietnam. Indeed, some soldiers were quick to complain about the media, but even with the journalistic coverage, more American GIs were disappointed toward the range of responses back home. When men on leave like Thomas Petty ordered a beer in California, they were told the military would not be served there. Petty criticized the 'anti-war sentiment' and explained, "They didn't like military people in San Francisco in 1969."<sup>76</sup> Another soldier

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<sup>74</sup> Roger Borroel, "With the 'Screaming Eagles' in Vietnam: A Personal Narrative", *La Vallita Publication*, 1989, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/36997](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/36997).

<sup>75</sup> Col. Joseph B. Conmy, "I Led a Brigade at Hamburger Hill," *The Washington Post*, 1990, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/27/i-led-a-brigade-at-hamburger-hill/6a4699a8-89ef-4736-b40e-e87b44863373/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.7e443b267362](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/27/i-led-a-brigade-at-hamburger-hill/6a4699a8-89ef-4736-b40e-e87b44863373/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7e443b267362)

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Petty, "Oral History Project, Interview with Thomas Petty," interview by Kelly Crager, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, December 2, 2008, 35. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/429138](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/429138).

like Gonzalo Baltazar described the disappointment many soldiers felt when their excitement to return state side was met with public animosity. He explained, “we’re getting off the plane and there was a fence around there and protestors out there throwing tomatoes at us, yelling at us, ‘Baby killers,’ and ‘War mongers,’ and I thought, ‘Man this is our home country right here’... So you really got a bitter feeling towards the Americans who were knocking us down.”<sup>77</sup> Both returning soldiers experienced the public animosity towards the American military. The two descriptions highlight the effect antiwar sentiments had on soldiers’ morale. As dissent towards troops intensified, American soldiers struggled to find purpose in serving their country.

Some of these statements illustrate how the Vietnam War became to represent the disconnect between the American public and the military. By 1969, a growing number of American citizens opposed the war and became increasingly bitter and distrustful of the military. Likewise, American forces continuously experienced mounting frustration with public support, and a growing number of dissatisfied troops. Both the public and the military are in a constant balancing act of support. The American military requires the backing of fellow Americans to succeed, and the public expects a stable and strong military to protect American values. In the Vietnam era, the balancing act struggled to carry the weight. The disconnect between the military and public can especially be articulated through the fact that most of the public—even today—was unaware of how important morale was for military success. In general, many civilians are far removed from the experiences, functions, and personalities of the military. Therefore, a disconnect in simply understanding the impact of public support for the military is a problem that surfaces in the past as well as today.

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<sup>77</sup> Gonzalo Baltazar, “Oral History Project, Interview with Steve Maxner,” interview by Steve Maxner, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, March 23, 2001, 36. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/36583](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/36583).

Soldiers returning home displayed a wide range of different perspectives on the war. David Flores explains, “many veterans do describe simply ‘getting over it,’ and remaining strong in their conviction that the war was a ‘just cause,’ vital to preserving democracy and the American way of life. But other Vietnam veterans argue that they returned completely opposed to the war.”<sup>78</sup> Much of the opposing opinions among veterans can be attributed to the American glorification of World War II heroes. Americans cast warfare in a black-and-white manner. The United States fought for freedom, democracy, and glory on the battlefield and thus, the enemy was perceived as a clear “bad-guy.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, many soldiers became disillusioned with the realities of war when they arrived in Vietnam. Likewise, public support for Vietnam differed compared to American memories of World War II parades and movies. While some Americans respected warfare and understood the realities of battle, others did not understand the full scope of what war was truly like. Therefore, Americans began to question objectives in Vietnam and the Cold War as a whole.

Shifting political aims and a growing number of casualties during the war resulted in negative opinions of the Vietnam conflict. Even so, historians today are left pondering what the outcome may have looked like in Vietnam if U.S. support at home had remained strong. The perspectives of soldiers in Vietnam who felt their sacrifice for their country was not appreciated or supported add a critical dimension to our understanding of the war and the military.

#### **Section 4—Military Leadership and Fighting a Political War**

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<sup>78</sup> Flores, *Memories of War*, 105.

<sup>79</sup> Flores, *Memories of War*, 107-109.

Military leadership shaped important stages during the Vietnam War. While antiwar movements continued to place pressure on politicians, military leaders also confronted many challenges, including limitations to decision-making during battles in addition to managing U.S. troops on the ground. Thus, military officials dealt with intricately difficult decisions that shaped the outcomes of the war. Meanwhile, politicians sought to silence negative publicity and maintain dominance in Vietnam by attempting to please the public and win an unpopular war.

The military and political leadership failed to work together as an effective unit. After the 1969 Battle of Hamburger Hill, many military officials condemned Senator Ted Kennedy's comments about their "senseless and irresponsible" actions. In a *New York Times* piece, journalist Terence Smith explained, "They believe he is criticizing them for following orders. 'His complaint should be registered with the White House, not the military,' one officer said. 'We have no orders to carry out even a partial stand down.'"<sup>80</sup> Following political criticism, many officers were forced to defend their decisions at Hamburger Hill. When asked why they did not retreat and simply use bombs, three officers replied that retreating would have invited the enemy to increase reinforcements, improve stockpile supplies, and give up territory they had fought hard to win.<sup>81</sup> In addition, General Melvin Zais asserted, "To order the three-mile pullback...Would have demoralized men who had fought hard for the already occupied hillside. Such a retreat would have also made it easier for the enemy units to escape back to Laos."<sup>82</sup> Numerous officers remained adamant that the decisive attack at Hamburger Hill was a crucial

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<sup>80</sup> Terence Smith, "U.S. Command Defends Aphia Battle as 'Maximum Pressure' on the Foe" *New York Times*, 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/214356](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/214356)

<sup>81</sup> Col J.B. Conmy as quoted in "Fresh Paratroopers Relieve Hill Conquerors," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/90439](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/90439)

<sup>82</sup> Melvin Zais as quoted by David Hoffman, "Hamburger Hill: The Army's Rationales," *Washington Post*, May 23, 1969, 1. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/246829](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/246829).

victory and that retreat was not an option. Meanwhile, newspaper and television coverage voiced their concerns about these military decisions and inadequately conveyed the strategic challenges military personnel faced on site.

Instead, news coverage centered more on the brutality of the battle, focusing on the casualties, tragedies, and senselessness. Although the battle was certainly a brutal endeavor, such reporting left military officials like General Zais reiterating that they “didn’t consider them [casualties] high at all. The fight was a tremendous, gallant, victory. We decimated a large NVN unit and people are acting as if it were a catastrophe.”<sup>83</sup> Even years later, officers like Colonel Joseph Conmy insisted on the significance of the battle and greater need of public support. He commented, “I believe it would be unfair to let the families of the dead believe that their loved ones were killed in a senseless operation, the main purpose of which was to win promotions for career officers.” He continued, “we did not take the hill only to abandon it, as it is often claimed. It was used continuously as a landing zone after the battle, though nothing was to be gained by sitting on a barren hilltop... It probably saved thousands of American and South Vietnamese lives. When US troops were called home, they were able to withdraw in good order from a secure area.”<sup>84</sup> Conmy argued that, contrary to popular belief, the hill was not abandoned. It was, instead, used as a landing zone to send American troops home or to secure bases. Conmy’s statement brought to light that the interpretations of Hamburger Hill varied widely. Popular memory of Hamburger Hill recalls a total abandonment of the hill, making the battle appear senseless, but Conmy argued it was used as a crucial landing zone. Similarly, Major General

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<sup>83</sup> Zais quoted by Hoffman, “Hamburger Hill: The Army’s Rationales,” 1.

<sup>84</sup> Col. Joseph B. Conmy, “I Led a Brigade at Hamburger Hill,” *The Washington Post*, 1990, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/27/i-led-a-brigade-at-hamburger-hill/6a4699a8-89ef-4736-b40e-e87b44863373/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.7e443b267362](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/27/i-led-a-brigade-at-hamburger-hill/6a4699a8-89ef-4736-b40e-e87b44863373/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7e443b267362).

Robert Scales also argued the hill's significance and success by explaining, "It was an attempt by the 101st Airborne Division to control the routes of entry from Cambodia off the Ho Chi Minh Trail into the arteries that led into Quay and so forth. So it was a key battle, and it was fought very tenaciously because the NVA regiments that were there were very good. The 29th Regiment, of course, comes to mind. They were very professional and very dedicated—hard, hard, hard soldiers."<sup>85</sup> These military representatives argued the hill was a tremendous victory and tactically significant for the United States. Many newspapers, however, portrayed the battle as a futile attempt that cost the lives of many soldiers. Both arguments hold a grain of truth. While the military victory was apparent, in the grand scheme of the war, the battle ultimately achieved little. If anything, it created heightened dissents against the war. Yet, the battle was a success, and if coverage had been more favorable toward the engagement, perhaps momentum could have shifted in the United States' favor.

In all, the military did not work effectively with the media, and thus, the public increasingly lost faith in the war. The media and military each had different obstacles to overcome—the military sought victory and American support, while the home front struggled to find a purpose for the war and its morality. The military's transition from justifying decisions to the public was a new factor to fighting wars. Military officials required the approval of not only politicians, but the public at home before implementing decisions. In his article on the politics of Vietnam, Jonathan Caverley argues that this trend has become typical of democracies fighting small wars. He asserts that "democracies build firepower-intensive, low-manpower militaries to reduce the number and/or exposure to risks of soldiers, but consequently they must rely on

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<sup>85</sup> Robert H. Scales, "Lessons of Vietnam: Hamburger Hill," interview by Harry Kreisler and Thomas Barnes, *Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley*, 2004, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people4/Scales/scales-con5.html>.

higher and less discriminating levels of violence, a policy that leads to criticism from the educated middle class. This cost aversion results in a ‘post-heroic warfare’ employed by Western democracies conducting non-existential wars in which their readiness to sacrifice is relatively low.”<sup>86</sup> In short, countries like the United States often rely on expensive firepower in small wars to simultaneously save American lives and please voters. Yet, this leads to inefficient mobilization for support and ineffective tactics against guerrillas or terrorists. In the late 1950s, General Maxwell Taylor echoed this point stating that the United States required enough “political, military, economic and moral strength sufficient to the Communist Bloc to renounce or refrain from all forms of aggression.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the United States could not simply rely on military power to win a war. Countries needed the combined strength of its economy, political support, public morale, as well as soldiers’ morale. In order to achieve this, military officials like Taylor have theorized that the military should work more cohesively with the media. If a solid relationship of both promotion and responsible truth can be attained, then future conflicts and patriotism may be more successful. Either way, this recommendation did not materialize during the 1970s.

This problem affected both the Korean War and the Vietnam War—and continues to shape conflicts today. During the 1960s and 1970s, military officials were quick to voice frustrations with public support and political restrictions, but they did not necessarily link their concerns to a critique of small wars. For example, early during the war Captain James Spruill accepted that “one of our biggest enemies now will be impatience and despair in America

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Rosen as translated by Jonathan D. Caverly, *The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam*, (Massachusetts: International Security, 2009), 126.

<sup>87</sup> Maxwell Taylor as quoted by Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, (California: Chapman University, 2014), 1.

itself.”<sup>88</sup> According to other military officials, this statement rang true. Terence Smith, a military reporter for the *New York Times* explained, “[military] officers in particular, seem to feel strongly that continued conventional military action is worthwhile, and that it is producing increasingly valuable results in Vietnam. They still rankle about the restrictions that were placed on them from the beginning, at the fact that they have not been permitted to pursue the enemy into base areas in neighboring Cambodia and Laos, and at the fact that the bombing of the North was halted.”<sup>89</sup> Public and political outcries caused battle tactics to shift after Hamburger Hill. The “maximum pressure” on the enemy had transitioned into protective responses. American forces were ordered to employ search and destroy missions and retaliate only when the enemy presented threatening intentions. Furthermore, helicopter pilots could only return fire on the enemy if the targets were in the open, and clearance for B-52 support involved a “laundry list” of checkpoints before authorization.<sup>90</sup> Even so, military officials insisted they were “still under orders to pursue the enemy relentlessly, using every tactic and weapon at their command, [and] to deny the North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops any strategic advantage as a result of the halt in bombing.”<sup>91</sup> This statement reveals a passive military strategy in Vietnam. Denying the enemy strategic advantage differs from actively pursuing a victory. Since American troops were only permitted to pursue the enemy 50 miles from their base, many times Viet Cong forces would escape into Cambodia or Laos to recuperate and further frustrate U.S. forces. Soldier, John

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<sup>88</sup> Captain James Polk Spruill, “The Line is Drawn: Extracts from Letters written by Captain Spruill” (Vietnam, 1963-1964), 11, box 01, folder 21, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/580591](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/580591).

<sup>89</sup> Smith, “US Command Defends Apbia Battle, 1.

<sup>90</sup> James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experiences of the U.S. Soldier*, (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2011), 148.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, “US Command Defends Apbia Battle, 1.

Bellweg criticized that the American troops should have fully mobilized and pushed forward with the mindset that anything north was the enemy, and the south was friendly.<sup>92</sup>

Morale of military personnel diminished with the strategic limitations and the intensification of antiwar protests, thus, the war efforts in Vietnam lost momentum. The war in itself had evolved into a political dilemma. After the decision to halt further bombing, a political spokesman maintained, “the bombing halt was a political matter, not military.”<sup>93</sup> This statement highlights the political focus on the Vietnam conflict, and it reveals the obstacles military officials faced with strategic decisions. Nevertheless, many American soldiers regarded bombing as an ineffective strategy, and conventional methods of warfare would secure more success. Another soldier, Gerald Kumpf, lamented “the whole bombing routine was just a wasted exercise, a waste of money and time.”<sup>94</sup> Kumpf explained that they were restricted on the targets they were allowed to destroy, and the joke around B-52 bombers was they were only intended to make the “rubble bounce.” He continued, “I mean here you are... Trying to win a war and there are all these restrictions, all these rules, yet the Viet Cong, they don’t have any rules.”<sup>95</sup> Too many American soldiers believed their efforts were undermined.

The restrictions and criticisms placed on military leaders in the Vietnam War inspired frustrations toward the war, politicians, and a lack of support at home. David White, for example, commented he “didn’t have much respect for U.S. policy at the time. Actually, I think they were scared they were going to get another China [intervention]... It’s disheartening to think you’ve

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<sup>92</sup> Bellweg as quoted in Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam*, 147.

<sup>93</sup> “Criticisms from Troops in the Field,” *South China Morning Post*, November 1, 1968, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/174710](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/174710).

<sup>94</sup> Gerald Kumpf, “Oral History Project, Interview with Gerald Kumpf,” interview by Richard Verrone, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, March 10, 2003, 49. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0276/OH0276-1.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Kumpf, as quoted by Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam*, 148.

got an excellent military, you think you're doing an excellent job and they put a leash on you."<sup>96</sup> Even today, many military officials continue to assert that one of the main factors leading to defeat involved political restrictions, limited media representations, and declining public support.<sup>97</sup> Military officials observed the war's shift to an institution through which "political considerations frequently outweigh[ed] military ones."<sup>98</sup> Military leaders continue to disapprove of this change. Due to this evolution in the relationship between the military and political leadership, officers experienced significant challenges, on top of dealing with the complexities of fighting guerrilla tactics in Vietnam's jungles.

It is worth noting that military and political objectives are often fundamentally different. Throughout history, military and political leaders have frequently disagreed on proper courses of action. Politicians' priorities focus on the wellbeing of the American people, and the military commits itself to the protection of the United States, but both their paths to achieve these goals are often different. These disagreements, although common in historical events, highlight the complicated relationship between military and political leaders during the Vietnam War. These circumstances are intensified given the lack of a declaration of war during the conflict. The vague objectives and desultory mobilization formed a problem of cooperation between military and political officials. Therefore, the two parties frequently disagreed on strategy and foreign policy.

General William Westmoreland, for example, consistently balanced political, public, and military success. Westmoreland simultaneously managed the containment of enemy forces, the

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<sup>96</sup> David White, "Oral History Project, Interview with David White," interview by Richard Verrone, *Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University*, NPR, October 14, 2002, 28.

<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/OH/OH0227/OH0227.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam*, 147-150.

<sup>98</sup> Smith, "US Command Defends Apbia Battle, 1.

militarization of South Vietnamese forces, and the protection of South Vietnamese citizens. Westmoreland held numerous responsibilities. Some historians argue Westmoreland simply failed to comprehend the regional and political context in Vietnam, and simply resorted to a narrow strategy of attrition. Westmoreland's strategy focused on attrition and firepower, but with pressures to spare American lives, maintain a limited war, and restrictions on tactics, Westmoreland had very little options to pursue victory. Gregory Daddis, a scholar of Vietnam military history, maintains, "Their [military officials] strategy, while comprehensively planned and faithfully implemented, was not sufficient in itself for securing victory in Vietnam. It seems that the one common failing of most military officers and senior civilian officials—among them MACV's commander—was their faith that military power, broadly defined, could achieve political objectives in post-colonial states during the Cold War era."<sup>99</sup> Daddis argues that even talented generals equipped with a comprehensive strategy can still lose a war, as many officers simply focus their hopes on the effectiveness of military strength. This point, again, reinforces the idea that countries fighting small wars cannot achieve success without the public, economic, and political support on the home front. Sheer military strength alone cannot secure a victory. William Westmoreland agreed, "the big lesson we should learn from Vietnam is that this country cannot pursue a war unless the American people are in overwhelming support."<sup>100</sup>

The Vietnam War lost the overwhelming support of the American people. Many Americans became convinced that the motivations for war were too vague, making long-standing support unattainable. Growing military costs and broken political promises of a short war

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<sup>99</sup> Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, (California: Chapman University, 2014), 14.

<sup>100</sup> William Westmoreland, "Opinion and Commentary: A Reply to Walter Cronkite", *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1982, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/62870](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/62870).

solidified American opposition to the Vietnam war. Many Americans failed to understand the realities of war even as television reports presented the scenes of brutality and carnage to an unsuspecting public eye. American dissent steadily grew, and politicians now confronted the management of winning a war without sparking a world conflict, while also appeasing the public's concern about casualties and military costs. All of these factors contributed to military staff's difficult strategic tasks. Military officials frequently criticized restrictions, media coverage, and student protests. The strategies to conciliate ultimately resulted in futile tactics and disillusioned American troops abroad. Politics and military endeavors became too conjoined in this period of American history, and as a result, efforts in foreign policy suffered.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis focused to on the relationship between the media, general public, and political restrictions on the changing morale of soldiers. It examines how public reactions can affect political decision-making, and how the media can create a surge of changing perspectives across the home front. As politicians, the public, and the media influence one another's outlooks, the military is tasked to win a war. In addition, this thesis highlights the complex nature of the Vietnam War with the division of the American public as well as the military. Historians show that Americans became divided over the role of the United States in foreign affairs; this thesis illuminates the split in the military. As antiwar activity continued to escalate on the home front, many members of the military formed an organized antiwar movement of their own. The emphasis on the role of democracy as part of post-World War II expectations helps explain the American failures in the Vietnam War such as the disconnect between the public, politicians, and the military. This thesis focused on the crucial role of general support to win a war. Public unpreparedness, vague political motives, and dramatic media coverage ultimately diminished

support and, therefore, affected the efforts and morale of soldiers in Vietnam. While the shortcomings of political and public support are important factors to understand the American loss in Vietnam, this thesis does not extensively examine these military failures. Many scholars discuss the lack of creativity in General William Westmoreland's military strategy. This thesis argues that Westmoreland's strategy was due to political restrictions and the practice among democratic nations focusing on expensive firepower. Historians may consider the perspectives of military personnel across rank and social background. This thesis simply frames members of the military in a broad category. However, historians may analyze, for example, the pattern between pro-war generals and anti-war enlisted men. Rank and social background of military officers versus enlisted soldiers may have played a role in the differences in opinions during the war.

Contemporary literature on the Vietnam War concentrates mainly on the politics of the conflict. Research on the impact of Presidents Johnson's and Nixon's policies, respectively, highlight the tensions and miscommunication between the public and the military. Broader themes of America's role in foreign disputes and fighting for democracy are widely addressed in the secondary literature. In general, Vietnam War historians frequently question American intervention, and critique politicians on their broken promises and vague motives. The social and cultural influences of the failures of Vietnam are integrated into more recent wartime debates. Scholars and journalists address the role of race and class war as well as the revolutionary role of American youth in the withdrawal from the war. Contemporary research focuses on the failures of Vietnam by illuminating growing dissent toward the end of a complex war, and the rise of American voices for change.

While secondary literature and contemporary coverage on the Vietnam War offer valuable insights to this discussion, this thesis concentrates on the understudied opinions of

soldiers in Vietnam. By placing a specific emphasis on the military's diminishing morale, broader lessons of the era can be observed such as the role of a democratic society during a limited war, the disconnect between different parties in the conflict, and a lack of preparation both mentally and strategically. This thesis discovers a history of wartime support during the Vietnam War often understood as an era of dissent. Especially during a limited war, the general public, political leaders, and even the military must be prepared for the realities of war. General unpreparedness and uneven expectations may inspire the potential for future frustration and hopelessness. Since the public, politicians, media, and military pursue fundamentally different objectives and strategies, this thesis can offer greater perspective on future conflicts to mobilize the efforts of different parties in a more efficient manner.

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