

Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Washington and Vietnam, by Peter Braestrup

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The perceived wisdom of many Vietnam War veterans is that the media was uniformly anti-military and anti-war, and that this bias was a major factor in America's loss of the war. But as newspaper critic H.L. Mencken once said about such certitudes, they tend to be "neat, plausible, and wrong." The truth is that "the media," like "the military," is an abstraction that does not exist in concrete form. What do exist are specific individuals—soldiers, sailors, Marines, war correspondents, camera crews—doing specific jobs at specific times. To make generalizations based on individuals is always a risky business. Just as the military in Vietnam was not the baby-killer William Calley, so the media in Vietnam was not the Communist toady Wilfred Burchett.

It is the rare reporter who can discriminate between an institution like the military or the media and the people within that institution who do or do not measure up. But Peter Braestrup, a war correspondent for The New York Times and The Washington Post, was one reporter who could do just that. A Marine lieutenant wounded in the Korean War, Braestrup had a special insight into the workings of the military and a genuine love for the grunts fighting the war. But like World War II's Ernie Pyle, he could be scathing in his attacks on what he saw as military incompetence. He could also be brutal on what he saw as incompetence among his fellow journalists. Braestrup was the Saigon bureau chief for The Washington Post during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and his book, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Washington and Vietnam*, was so unsparing in its criticism that many in the media never forgave him for it. Be that as it may, 20 years after its initial publication, Braestrup's book remains the definitive history of that battle.

First published in a two-volume, hardbound edition by Westview Press in 1977, *Big Story* was republished by Anchor Books as a one-volume paperback in 1978, by Yale University Press in 1983, and in an unabridged and updated version by Presidio Press in 1994. Now out of print, it nevertheless remains the essential reference work for serious research on the Tet Offensive.

Big Story takes a critical look at South Vietnamese performance in the war. Beginning with a prediction from Harvard Professor John Kenneth Galbraith that the South Vietnamese Army "would either disappear into the woods or join the Viet Cong," Braestrup notes that Galbraith's pessimism was due in large measure to the gross inadequacies of U.S. media coverage by the wire services, TV networks, newspapers and news magazines. Unreported was the fact that the South Vietnamese did most of the fighting at Tet, took most of the casualties, and—contrary to Galbraith's prophecy—did not break under the pressure.

Another valuable insight is Braestrup's assessment of the domestic political reaction to the crisis: "What was striking—and important—about the public White House posture in February and March 1968 was how defensive it was. In retrospect, it seemed like President Johnson was to some degree 'psychologically defeated' by the threat to Khe Sanh and the onslaught on the cities of Vietnam." This reaction would have a profound, some say determining, impact on the future conduct of the war.

"Rarely has contemporary crisis-journalism turned out, in retrospect, to have veered so widely from reality," Braestrup concludes. "Essentially, the dominant themes of the words, and film from Vietnam...added up to a portrait of defeat for the allies. Historians, on the contrary, have concluded that the Tet Offensive resulted in a severe military-political setback for Hanoi in the South. To have portrayed such a setback for one side as a defeat for the other—in a major crisis abroad—cannot be counted as a triumph for American journalism."

Braestrup would devote the rest of his life to fostering a better understanding of the Vietnam War. We first met in January 1983 at a symposium on the war held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., where he was serving as the founding editor of the Wilson Quarterly. We last met at another such symposium in March 1997.

Peter Braestrup died of a heart attack on August 10, 1997. He never failed to speak up bluntly and forcefully to set the record straight. He will be sorely missed.