

Getting it Wrong

Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism

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Chapter 5: Debunking the Cronkite Moment

“Mired in Stalemate?” How unoriginal of Cronkite and hardly exceptional

Those are ways to characterize Walter Cronkite’s famous assessment, offered in a special televised report in February 1968, that the U.S. war effort in Vietnam was “mired in stalemate.”

Cronkite’s characterization supposedly represented a moment of such stunning clarity and insight that it forced President Lyndon Johnson to realize his war policy was a shambles.

“If I’ve lost Cronkite,” Johnson supposedly said to an aide or aides after seeing the special report, “I’ve lost middle America.”

And a month later, Johnson announced he was not running for election, a decision often linked, if erroneously, to Cronkite’s “mired in stalemate” about Vietnam.

I dispute the power and impact of the so-called “Cronkite Moment” in my latest book “Getting It Wrong,” which addresses and debunks 10 prominent media-driven myths. I point out that Johnson didn’t even see the Cronkite program when it aired on CBS on February 27, 1968.

I further note in “Getting It Wrong” that “stalemate” had been invoked months before the “Cronkite Moment” to describe the war in Vietnam. Notably, the New York Times published a front-page analysis on August 7, 1967, that declared, “The war is not going well. Victory is not close at hand.” The Times report was published on its front page beneath the headline:

Vietnam: The Signs of Stalemate:

And that wasn’t the only occasion in 1967 and early 1968 when the Times turned to “stalemate” to characterize the war.

A review of database articles reveals that “stalemate” was raised not infrequently, and that the Johnson administration disputed the characterization.

And all this was months before the supposed insight offered by Cronkite.

For example, in news analysis published July 4, 1967, the Times said of the war effort: "Many officers believe that despite the commitment of 466,000 United States troops now in South Vietnam ... the military situation there has developed into a virtual stalemate."

The Times report of August 7, 1967, which was filed from Saigon, elaborated on that view and included this observation: "'Stalemate' is a fighting word in Washington. President Johnson rejects it as a description of the situation in Vietnam. But it is the word used by almost all Americans here, except the top officials, to characterize what is happening. They use the word for many reasons."

Johnson was confronted with that "fighting word" during a news conference August 18, 1967. He was asked whether "we have reached a stalemate in the Vietnam war."

The president gave a rambling answer, but ended up rejecting the characterization of stalemate as "nothing more than propaganda."

Johnson also said, apparently in reference to the communist North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies: "I think that our—there are those who are taking a pretty tough drubbing out there that would like for our folks to believe there's a stalemate."

Moreover, four months before Cronkite's report, the Times said in an editorial that the Johnson administration should embrace stalemate in Vietnam as a way of enabling peace talks and a negotiated settlement of the war.

The logic was intriguing if not entirely persuasive. Here's what the Times said in that editorial, published October 29, 1967:

"Instead of denying a stalemate in Vietnam, Washington should be boasting that it has imposed a stalemate, for that is the prerequisite—on both sides—to a negotiated settlement. That settlement, if it is to be achieved, will have to be pursued with the same ingenuity and determination that have been applied to fighting the war."

Three months later, the Times anticipated Cronkite's "mired in stalemate" commentary, stating in an editorial published February 8, 1968:

"Politically as well as militarily, stalemate increasingly appears as the unavoidable outcome of the Vietnam struggle."

Cronkite said in wrapping up his special report on February 27, 1968:

“To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.”

So why does all this matter? Why is it important to trace the use of “stalemate” to describe a long-ago war?

Doing so demonstrates how unexceptional Cronkite’s commentary was, and how middling it was, too. It’s scarcely the stuff of dramatic insight, scarcely the sort of comments that would have decisive effect.

Tracing the use of “stalemate” also serves to underscore the inconsequential nature of the purported “Cronkite Moment, which nonetheless remains among the hardest myths of American journalism.

Media-driven myths “tend to minimize or negate complexity in historical events and other simplistic events and offer simplistic and misleading interpretations instead.”

So it is with the mythical “Cronkite Moment,” one of the most tenacious myths of American journalism. An important reason for the myth’s hardiness is that it presents a simplified version of a supposed turning point in the long political career of President Lyndon Johnson.

The “Cronkite Moment” has it that CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite told truth to power in reporting that the U.S. military was “mired in stalemate” in Vietnam.

Supposedly, Johnson watched Cronkite’s special report on Vietnam, which aired on February 28, 1968. Upon hearing the anchorman’s “mired in stalemate” assessment, the president switched off the television set and told an aide or aides, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America, after the beloved journalist called the war unwinnable.”

“A newsperson had told a simple truth, and it helped change history,” but Cronkite’s report on Vietnam had no such effect on history.

There is quite simply no link between the “Cronkite Moment” and Johnson’s decision announced at the end of March 1968, not to stand for reelection that year. For starters, Johnson did not see the Cronkite report when it aired. As I note in “Getting it Wrong,” the president at the time was in Austin, Texas, attending the 51st birthday party of Governor John Connally, a longtime political ally.

At about the moment Cronkite was intoning his “mired in stalemate” interpretation; Johnson was offering lighthearted banter about Connally’s age, saying, “Today you are 51, John. That is the magic number that every man of politics prays for, a simple majority. Throughout the years we have worked long and hard, and I might say late, trying to maintain it, too.”

So at the time of the purported “Cronkite Moment,” Johnson wasn’t agonizing about having lost Cronkite’s support, and wasn’t overcome with angst about the war effort in Vietnam. Johnson was telling a joke, and it’s hard to argue that the president could have been much moved by a television report that he didn’t see.

Not only that, but Johnson may have decided in 1967, or even earlier, not to stand for reelection in 1968. He wrote in his memoir, *The Vantage Point*: “Long before I settled on the proper forum to make my announcement, I had told a number of people of my intention not to run again.”

Given those factors, Cronkite’s show at the end of February 1968 recedes into trivial insignificance as a reason for Johnson’s decision, announced a month later, not to stand for reelection.

It certainly is an appealing notion that a newsman, such as Cronkite, could tell a simple truth, and by doing so help change history. But such a notion is more often the recipe for a media driven myth that it is the foundation of historical accuracy.

Not long after Cronkite’s program, Johnson delivered a rousing speech in Minneapolis, where he urged “a total national effort” to win the war in Vietnam. That speech was given on March 18, 1968, and in it, the president declared: “We love nothing more than peace, but we hate nothing worse than surrender and cowardice.”

Seldom if ever, do the news media exert truly decisive influences in decisions to go to war or to seek negotiated peace. Such decisions typically are driven by forces and factors well beyond the news media’s ability to shape, alter, or significantly influence. So it was in Vietnam, where the war ground on for years after the “Cronkite Moment.”

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