

The Legacy of Tet

By J. R. Dunn, December 20, 2005, American Thinker

Military historian J.R. Dunn analyzes the communist Tet offensive of February 1968, showing how an adversarial U.S. media misrepresented a decisive American and South Vietnamese military victory as a disastrous defeat.

Among many other things, J.R. Dunn was the editor of the International Military Encyclopedia for twelve years.

It was with Tet '68 that the American media first knew sin. Anyone seeking to understand the character of consistently negative media coverage of the Global War on Terror must understand Tet.

The Tet offensive of February 1968 is widely regarded as one of the turning points of the Vietnam War — though not for the customary military reasons. Tet had its origins in the plans of North Vietnamese commander Vo Nguyen Giap, a competent general given to flights of overconfidence. Giap decided to throw all available assets, both PAVN (People's Army of North Vietnam) and Viet Cong, against every major target across South Vietnam. He anticipated a massive revolt by the South Vietnamese populace, who would overthrow the government, set out the welcome mat for their Communist liberators, and leave U.S. and allied forces sitting high and dry. The attack was scheduled to begin on the night of January 30, the beginning of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. Tet was normally considered a truce period, when the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was at its lowest level of alertness.

The result of all Giap's efforts was a total rout. The South Vietnamese, utterly horrified by the prospect of a Communist takeover, sat tight while U.S. and government troops crushed the attack in a matter of days. The sole holdout was the old imperial citadel at Hue, which required three weeks to be retaken. The government stood firm, the ARVN, once recovered from its initial surprise, did a creditable job.

The Viet Cong, on the other hand, were ruined as a military force, their rural infrastructure left in tatters. They never fully recovered, forcing the PAVN to take over the bulk of combat duties. Giap, his reputation saving him from the usual fate of failed generals in communist societies, went back to the drawing board. (Though not very fruitfully — his next scheme was a 'mini—Tet' in April, which ended much the same way.)

But that's not how the U.S. public saw it.

American readers and viewers were presented with a disaster nearly beyond comprehension, with U.S. forces hanging on by their fingernails, ARVN troops tossing guns aside and running for safety, government officials given over to complete panic, Viet Cong and PAVN forces running wild with no losses to speak of, while General Giap, the 20th century Napoleon, nodded in approval at seeing his plan unfold. Tet ended up being a major success for communist forces after all.

It was the first time in history that the news media overturned a victory won by forces on the ground.

One observer struck by the dichotomy between what occurred and how it was reported was a journalist named Peter Braestrup, chief of the *Washington Post's* Saigon bureau. Braestrup had also worked for *Time* Magazine and *The New York Times*. In later years he became a fellow of the Smithsonian's Woodrow Wilson International Center and editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*. Not the CV of any sort of conservative, and in fact Braestrup was an establishment liberal of the type that scarcely exists any longer.

But he was also the kind of reporter who treats a story as personal property. After ten years work, Braestrup produced his book ***Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington***, an analysis of every major news report concerning the Tet Offensive, along with the military, political, and social results that ensued.

Big Story is sui generis, a book as remarkable as the event it describes. The book punctured not only the myth of Tet, but also the myth of the news coverage surrounding it, revealing exactly how the national media acted as a catalyst for the loss of a war.

Braestrup portrayed a press corps living a privileged, near—aristocratic existence in Saigon, feeding off of gossip and rumor, cynical about the country, the government, and prospects for victory. Most were ignorant of military affairs. None could speak Vietnamese or had any deep knowledge of the country.

When the attack came, the press corps responded with shock. The first stories were written in a state of panic, expressing reporter's own confusion rather than anything occurring in the quotidian world. As the picture began to coalesce — a picture that completely contradicted early dispatches — most of the journalists, out of stubbornness, fear of looking foolish, any mixture of human frailties, stuck with their original reports, aided and abetted by editors back home who knew a great story when they saw one.

Many of the names involved are still well—known today. The *New York Times'* Charles Mohr, once a supporter of the war effort, was among the first to cast doubt on claims of Allied success. The *Washington Post's* China expert Stanley Karnow wrote a front—page appreciation of Giap as a 'military genius,' followed a few weeks later with another piece claiming that the offensive had 'scored impressive gains.' His *Post* colleague Ward Just played the 'unidentified official' angle to draw pessimistic conclusions. Hanson Baldwin, the *Times'* resident military expert, consistently overrated North Vietnamese capabilities while downgrading allied forces. Even Robert Novak (at that time partnered with Rowland Evans) added his bit of alarmism from 10,000 miles away.

Braestrup was the first to identify Peter Arnett as a serial prevaricator. Arnett was the source of *the* story that became emblematic of the entire offensive: that the Viet Cong had shot their way into the U.S. Saigon embassy and held it overnight. In truth, the VC sappers who penetrated embassy grounds were quickly dispatched before entering any buildings, a fact that went unmentioned by Arnett and many later histories of the war. Shortly afterward Arnett reported a quote from an American major concerning operations in the town of Ben Tre:

'We had to destroy the town in order to save it.'

Nobody, not Arnett, not the reporters who accompanied him, not his employers at the AP, were ever able to produce this 'major,' which didn't prevent the line from becoming the leading catchphrase of the antiwar movement. (Braestrup's research uncovered the fact that the phrase was already in the air — almost identical words were used by the *Times*' James Reston in an editorial appearing the *same day* as Arnett's report.)

Alternately, all reports calling the disaster narrative into question were downplayed. A mid-February analysis by counterinsurgency expert Douglas Pike concluding that Communist forces had overextended themselves and been badly whipped was either ignored or dumped onto the back pages.

Media coverage of Tet destroyed public confidence in the war effort.

The antiwar movement, until then little more than a freak show, exploded in size and influence. Various rebel Democrats began scheming. The Johnson Administration, already off balance, was effectively shattered. Within weeks Walter Cronkite, speaking *ex cathedra* from his CBS anchor's chair, pronounced judgment on both the war and the administration, prompting Lyndon Johnson, with the spinelessness of a lifelong bully, to withdraw from the 1968 presidential campaign.

Of course, after the offensive was put down and calmer days returned, the papers and networks examined the reports, uncovered the facts, disciplined those responsible, issued corrections, and instituted procedures to assure that such a situation would never recur.

Actually, no. There are errors so vastly wide—ranging that they can't ever be admitted to, and Tet was one of these. No such actions were ever taken. Quite the contrary — the type of distortion so evident during Tet became *standard procedure* for Vietnam reportage. Within a few months, the battle of Khe Sanh, a hard-fought, undeniable U.S. victory, which accounted for something on the order of 40,000 North Vietnamese casualties, was reported as a defeat of American arms.

As the years passed, Giap—worshipper Stanley Karnow achieved fame as author of the war's standard history. Ward Just became noted for topical, well-written, and extraordinarily dull political novels. Arnett pursued a long and varied career until events caught up with him in the form of the Tailwind scandal, appropriately involving lies concerning a U.S. operation in Vietnam.

Braestrup was reluctant to draw any conclusion as to reasons behind the media distortion. He did not buy an ideological explanation, and found claims that media coverage led to allied defeat to be 'highly speculative'. As is true of most historical events, a single explanation is unlikely to be adequate. A list could start with cynicism, an embrace of the anti-authoritarian ethos of the period, journalism enduring a period of decadence as every human endeavor eventually does), and continue from there. It scarcely matters at this point.

What *does* matter is that the Tet style became accepted practice. Journalism was becoming 'professionalized' at the time, with the press thinking itself an elite, and the attitudes and procedures surrounding Vietnam reportage were institutionalized. Virtually every military confrontation since 1968 has been covered from the same adversarial stance that marked the Tet reports. (And not only wars — Katrina coverage was just as distorted, hysterical, and harmful as any recent war reportage.)

Big Story is not considered suitable for Vietnam scholarship, and is very rarely referenced or even mentioned. College students studying the era are rarely if ever exposed to its contesting of the conventional wisdom. But it remains one of those rare volumes that actually does a service, by identifying a malady, giving its origins, and listing its symptoms. It is a book of value, and will eventually find its place.

Not the least of its virtues is how much light it sheds on events in Iraq. To read Braestrup is to understand fully why current war reportage is so relentlessly downbeat. Why stories in the legacy media are at such variance with sources such as warblogs or Iraqi websites. Why reporters appear to take on the role of advocate for the enemy. Why Cindy Sheehan and Jimmy Massey — both almost pure media constructs — get the coverage they do. Why bogus issues involving Guantanamo Bay, prisoner interrogation, and 'torture' receive such attention. Why Coalition successes go virtually unmentioned. Why the unfolding of a political miracle, an Arab democracy, has been greeted with near—indifference.

And why the media will never again play a useful role until the legacy of Tet is eradicated.