

## PRESS COVERAGE OF VIETNAM AND IRAQ

### Is there significant change between *Time* magazine's coverage of the beginnings of the Vietnam War and the Second Gulf War?

Essay

by

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In the aftermath of the Vietnam War discussions erupted over the influence of American media on the defeat suffered by the U.S., as the military establishment put blame on public opinion against the war as a decisive factor in losing it. Extensive research has been undertaken to analyse the impact of press coverage in the war, yet the question can never be satisfactorily answered. It is, however, common consensus that an influence of the media on public opinion – especially in times of war – does exist.

Since the official end of the Second Gulf War – U.S. President George W. Bush declared “mission accomplished” on 1 May 2004 – more and more voices have been raised to compare it with America's war in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Even U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld publicly acknowledged parallels between the two conflicts.<sup>2</sup> And as U.S. forces, backed by British soldiers, stormed the city of Falluja in November 2004 to face insurgents organised in guerilla-like tactics, such analogy gains more and more ground. It is therefore of scholarly interest to analyse the press coverage of both conflicts to determine whether any similarities can be found in the reporting of the two wars.

Founded in 1923, *Time* magazine in 1965 was among the most influential and widely distributed news magazines in the world, and it still holds a market share of 44 percent today, effectively making it the market leader in its category.<sup>3</sup> Even tough former Vietnam war correspondent William Prochnau calls it “America's most successful journalistic aberration [...] bothering with only a perfunctory pass at objectivity,” he cannot deny that “the weekly newsmagazine was immensely

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1 See Walter Shapiro, “Iraq war may have same psychological effect as Tet offensive”, *USA Today*, 30 June 2004, Peter Mansbridge, “Iraq: A New Vietnam?”, *Macleans*, 17 Nov. 2003, Vol. 116 Issue 46, p. 24, “Is Iraq Another Vietnam?”, *Monthly Review*, June 2004, Vol. 56 Issue 2, p. 1, and William Greider, “Iraq as Vietnam”, *Nation*, 5 May 2004, Vol. 278 Issue 17, p. 5.

2 Shapiro.

3 Time-Planner.com, *Circulation*, <http://www.time-planner.com/planner/circulation/index.html> (26 Nov. 2004)

influential.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if one accepts the effect of the press on public opinion about war, it cannot be denied that *Time* magazine has played a significant role in the Vietnam War and continues to do so in the Second Gulf War. Furthermore, the editorial team of a weekly newsmagazine can arguably invest more time in research and is less likely to jump to conclusions under pressure of presenting up-to-date content as the first publication among its peers, in effect making it theoretically capable of producing articles of higher standard.

Based on these conclusions, this text analyses *Time's* coverage of both wars, concentrating on the months of February to April 1965 (on the front cover of its 19 February 1965 issue *Time* declared “Escalation in Vietnam”) and March to May 2003 respectively, to investigate if any significant changes in the coverage of the beginnings of the two conflicts can be found. Due to the limited scope of the text, photographic images will not be taken into account.

One of the most obvious factors in war coverage is frequency and prominence of articles pertaining to the specific war in any given issue of the magazine. Within the analysed range of *Time* issues (23 issues from 1965 and 36 from 2003), an average of 2.3 articles in 1965 discussed the Vietnam War or its wider implications, exceeded by only a small margin to an average of 3 articles regarding the Second Gulf War in 2003. For analytical purposes, these articles have been assorted into three categories:

- articles pertaining to the field of POLITICS, encompassing discussions of national and foreign policy, diplomatic relations, and analysis of war issues in their political context,
- articles pertaining to the field of STRATEGY, meaning discussions and analysis of war strategy of both the U.S. and their respective enemy's military apparatus, and
- articles pertaining to the field of COMBAT, reporting on troop-level experiences in combat zones or training environments, including dispatches from journalists travelling with ground troops concentrating on their respective outfit.

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4 William Prochnau, *Once Upon A Distant War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 59-60.

Whenever relating to the content of articles as *political*, *strategic*, or *combat-oriented*, those definitions are referred to.

Comparison between coverage of the two wars shows a shift in the frequency of articles from political issues towards both strategic and combat-oriented writing, as the latter two display an increase of 12 percent each, while politics-related articles have dropped in numbers by 19.6 percent. The balance of articles has therefore been redistributed from almost 70 percent politics-related articles in 1965 to 50 percent in 2003, with 25 percent each covering strategic and combat-related stories. However, one has to keep in mind that within the time frame looked at in 1965, there was arguably less activity in military terms than in 2003, naturally focussing editors' attention towards broader political themes and speculations regarding the implications of possible future widespread war. In contrast, military build-up prior to actual war in 2003, and international political campaigning by the U.S. towards a war with Iraq, seems to have prompted editors to almost accept an upcoming war as given, therefore spending less time on discussions of whether there should be any broader engagement in the first place.

It has often been argued that the attention span of the average reader has significantly decreased in recent years due to the impact of fast-paced 24-hour television broadcasts and the advent of emailing and SMS text messaging, among other things. Therefore, it could be deduced that *Time* magazine's average article length would have been significantly reduced in 38 years of development. However, analysis shows that the average length of examined articles has in fact increased by 20.3 percent from 1,377 to 1,657 words. Statistically, most of this falls to articles in the category of strategy, where an increase of 130 percent in article length can be found, whereas a decrease of 60.8 percent has surfaced in combat-related stories (although this correlates with an increase of 12 percent in the number of combat articles).

Combat stories from 1965 show a striking familiarity to those of 2003. In both, the overall tone clearly projects a military and technological superiority over the enemy's capabilities, so much even that a battalion commander in 2003 is quoted as saying "If the Iraqis try to fight, we'll slaughter them. This is not going to be a fair fight."<sup>5</sup> The U.S. soldier is presented as a professionally trained hero,

<sup>5</sup> "Basra – Dispatches From The Front", *Time*, 31 March 2003, p. 54-55.

ready to sacrifice his life for the greater cause. Reports from both conflicts also make clear that soldiers on the ground are eager to engage the enemy, proud and willing to fight for their country, and certain of success:

“They are in Viet Nam not because they have to be, but because they want to be [...] almost to a man they believe that the Vietnamese war can be won – if only their efforts are not undercut on the home front.”<sup>6</sup>

This very concern of failing support at home is echoed by a young Marine in 2003: “Are the protesters going to spit on us when we go home?”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, textbook memories of the Vietnam War are ever-present.

The only obvious difference between combat-coverage of the two wars is the advent of articles written in the first person – a direct consequence of embedded journalism as used in the Second Gulf War.<sup>8</sup> One third of combat stories in 2003 present the point of view of the war correspondent as a separate entity in the conflict. The reporter cannot disassociate himself from the outfit he is travelling with in, and one writer even makes clear his pride in being a war correspondent. Furthermore, the journalist is presented as a target; he becomes part of the invading army and therefore part of the force the enemy is trying to kill. Whether this fosters objective reporting remains doubtful.

Political articles have undergone far more obvious change. If in early 1965 *Time* magazine editors quite conspicuously have their own idea about what to do in and with South Vietnam and, more important, what to do about North Vietnam, their successors in 2003 never clearly define their position. Calling American strategy in Vietnam – then confined to single retaliatory missions in answer to Viet Cong or North Vietnamese attacks – “dubious,” and that it “has deprived Washington and Saigon of the initiative,” the magazine in 1965 makes clear that America would be “far better off facing the issue.”<sup>9</sup> It even goes so far as to bluntly state that “the U.S. [...] cannot possibly win the war without a far deeper involvement.”<sup>10</sup> Discussing the problem of possible war with Communist China as a consequence of deeper engagement in Vietnam, the magazine presents arguments for a pre-

6 “The Fighting American”, *Time*, 23 April 1965, p. 14.

7 “Ready to Rumble”, *Time*, 3 March 2003, p. 9.

8 Martin N. Kriegl, *Television: The Modern Battlefield*, <http://www.p-mi.com/PostNuke/modules.php?op=modload&name=Downloads&file=index&req=getit&lid=6> (28 Nov. 2004)

9 “Foreign Relations”, *Time*, 19 Feb. 1965, p. 10, and

“Foreign Relations”, *Time*, 26 Feb. 1965, p. 15.

10 Ibid.

emptive U.S. attack before China's nuclear weapons programs yield any significant results, refuting however any such notion by declaring that "such preventive war goes too heavily against American morals," and that "the West certainly cannot impose capitalism or democracy on Asia with the air of a crusader."<sup>11</sup>

In 2003, *Time* magazine does not play such a blunt game of "manufacturing consent."<sup>12</sup> While by and large patriotically supporting U.S. President George W. Bush, writers and editors pose as critical observers of their own Administration. Describing Bush as "a man of clenched jaw and moral clarity," the magazine reminds him that "diplomats believe a U.N. mandate for military action is essential if a war is not to be seen as a crude display of American power."<sup>13</sup> Predicting the need for high numbers of military personnel in Iraq after war, the Administration is accused of having said "barely a word about managing the perilous aftermath" and of never having detailed how "the wave of democratization" the U.S. predicts to happen in the Middle East would actually occur.<sup>14</sup> Despite all this, there is never a discussion whether war is justified at all: *Time* does not take a stance. But once war is under way, the magazine picks up the theme of imperialism and questions whether any such notion is present in the Bush Administration. Stating that "imperialism is having one heck of a comeback" and that "in the sacred texts of neoconservatism, imperialism is everywhere," it reminds Bush that "imperialism may be chic, but it's not the American way."<sup>15</sup>

Falling in line with its political stance, *Time's* strategic analysis and suggestion in 1965 is simple and straight-forward: vigorously attack North Vietnam. When the U.S. finally does step up its air raids into the north, the magazine simply comments that "increased U.S. participation was in order" and that, even though "it may not be enough just yet [...] it was a considerable improvement."<sup>16</sup>

This frame of mind is contrasted in 2003 with an almost entirely detached look at what is or may be happening strategically in the war. At the outset, the magazine acts as a *tourist's guide* to the war, demonstrating to its readers what the U.S. plan is and how it might unfold, bearing well in mind

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11 "Asia", *Time*, 26 Feb. 1965, p. 21-25.

One cannot help but wonder whether contemporary America would do good to take heed.

12 Kriegl.

13 "Who's With Him?", *Time*, 3 March 2003, p. 27, 29.

14 "After Saddam", *Time*, 10 March 2003, p. 30, 35.

15 "Why Empires Strike Out", *Time*, 12 May 2003, p. 45.

16 "A Tale of Two Airports", *Time*, 5 March 1965, p. 18.

however that “as with all wars, some of what generals leak may be information designed to intimidate, deceive or divert the enemy.”<sup>17</sup> The American military is again pictured as an utterly overwhelming force of “near omniscience” which the Iraqi regime cannot possibly overcome.<sup>18</sup> Not so consistently defined however is the ultimate goal of an attack: at one point clearly stating that “the U.S. target is Saddam, not the Iraqi people,” a U.S. official is later cited saying “the ultimate objective is not Saddam Hussein,” only to be refuted again two weeks later by a declaration that “the principal target of Gulf War II is not the Iraqi military but Saddam himself.”<sup>19</sup> Whether this echoes an uncertainty of policy within the Administration or displays a lack of research on *Time's* part is open to discussion. But when U.S. forces are confronted with the reality of invading a country, and things don't turn out to deliver on military commanders' predictions, the magazine quite calmly analyses what went wrong. Admitting that hoped-for mass Iraqi surrenders “had yet to materialize,” it is put forward that “the battle for the hearts and minds of 22 million Iraqis will remain impossible to win so long as the country is under relentless U.S. bombardment.”<sup>20</sup> Discussing the politically sensitive issue of civilian casualties, *Time* delineates both the arguments for military self-restraint in order to limit collateral damage, and the dangerous consequences for U.S. forces of applying such “handcuffs,” without giving a recommendation or drawing decisive conclusions.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the tone of writing and employment of connotations, it is not surprising that in 1965 *Time's* blunt political statements frequently feature matching colloquialisms. Any official statement by the Soviet Union is attributed to Russia's Communist “propaganda machine,” and when students in Moscow “spatter the [American] embassy's yellow pastel façade” they reportedly can do so “under the benign eyes of hundreds of Russian cops,” whereas students in Washington “picketed the Soviet embassy [...] in orderly fashion,” being kept at safe distance by “police.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, while South Vietnam is referred to as “the little country hovering between tragedy and farce, [...] the growls that emanated from Hanoi and Peking” are said to have had “all the gruff timbre of true paper tigers.”<sup>23</sup> And when international pressure on the U.S. to engage in negotiations with North Vietnam rises,

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17 “Opening with A Bang”, *Time*, 17 March 2003, p. 32-39.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, and

“Awestruck”, *Time*, 31 March 2003, p. 38-47 respectively.

20 *Ibid.*

21 “Sticking To His Guns”, *Time*, 7 April 2003, p. 32-39.

22 “Foreign Relations”, *Time*, 19 Feb. 1965, p. 10.

23 “Vietnam”, *Time*, 26 Feb. 1965, p. 26, and

“North Viet Nam”, *Time*, 23 April 1965, p. 22 respectively.

President Johnson appears “to be getting fed up with all the unsolicited advice pouring in from nervous Nellies.”<sup>24</sup> William Prochnau calls this ardent journalistic style “*Time*-speak.”<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, this kind of writing can still be found in 2003. Discussing the role of the United Nations regarding Iraq, the magazine comments that it “wastes gazillions on bureaucracy and inane conferences [...] the sappy rhetorical globaloney of the place is gagging, the wimpy blue flag is a metaphor.”<sup>26</sup> Commenting on the wider implications of the Second Gulf War, it establishes that Bush “has plainly scared the bejeezus out of North Korea, Iran, Syria – and, oh yes, out of the Democrats too, who seem to be on the precipice of one of their periodic, nausea-inducing journeys into self-loathing and anomie.”<sup>27</sup> However, this kind of commenting is not exclusively targeted at the anti-Bush camp: wondering what has happened to American conservatism, *Time* states that “on the domestic side, there is the sugarplum delusion of endless tax cuts,” and the Administration's foreign policy is labelled as “a wildly idealistic pro-democracy jihad.”<sup>28</sup>

Prochnau resolves that *Time* in 1965 was a “propaganda organ” for which “Vietnam had become a cause.”<sup>29</sup> Concluding from the analysis presented here, this was indeed the case in 1965, though its propagandistic message was not in support of its contemporary government, but in support of that very cause. As long as the Administration was not following what the magazine perceived to be the best policy, it was criticised and pushed according to the editors' convictions. Voice in form of quotations was almost exclusively given to those who supported its views. Not only did it have a clear mission, but also a simple and straightforward strategic proposal. In 2003, *Time* had matured considerably. It was patriotic, yet it practised self-inspection into its own countries' policies. Obviously, it had come to change its self-image as part of the Fourth Estate and shifted its focus to a more objective point of view. This materialised not only in the way it treated policy issues, but strategic analyses as well, were it now mostly refrained from trying to tell military leaders how to do their job. However – probably in a careful bid not to lose its widespread readership – it kept some of that harsh voice with which it had taken “middle America.”<sup>30</sup>

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24 Ibid.

25 William Prochnau, *Once Upon A Distant War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 64.

26 “Two Cheers for the Peacekeepers”, *Time*, 24 March 2003, p. 23.

27 “How To Make The Victory Stick”, *Time*, 28 April 2003, p. 31.

28 “Two Cheers for the Peacekeepers”, *Time*, 24 March 2003, p. 23.

29 Prochnau, p. 60, 62.

30 Prochnau, p. 60.

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## Appendix – Time Magazine Statistics

Comparison between 1965 and 2003

Number of Articles pertaining to the respective war

<b>Issue 1965</b>	<b># of Articles</b>	<b>Issue 2003</b>	<b># of Articles</b>
05/02/1965	3	03/03/2003	3
12/02/1965	2	10/03/2003	1
19/02/1965	2	17/03/2003	3
26/02/1965	3	24/03/2003	2
05/03/1965	2	31/03/2003	4
12/03/1965	4	07/04/2003	9
02/04/1965	1	14/04/2003	5
09/04/1965	2	21/04/2003	3
23/04/1965	2	28/04/2003	2
30/04/1965	2	05/05/2003	1
		12/05/2003	2
		26/05/2003	1
<b>Sum</b>	<b>23</b>		<b>36</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>2.3</b>		<b>3</b>
<b>% Change</b>			<b>+0.70%</b>

Number of Articles in each category

<b>Category</b>	<b># 1965</b>	<b>% 1965</b>	<b># 2003</b>	<b>% 2003</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Politics	16	69.9%	18 (50%) = -19.6%	50.0%	-19.60%
Strategy	3	13.0%	9 (25%) = +12%	25.0%	+12.00%
Combat	3	13.0%	9 (25%) = +12%	25.0%	+12.00%
Unspecific	1	4.3%	0 (0%)	0%	

Article Length

<b>Category</b>	<b># 1965</b>	<b>Average 1965</b>	<b>#2003</b>	<b>Average 2003</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Politics	7782	1112	25971	1443	+29.8
Strategy	3804	1268	26255	2917	+130
Combat	6138	2106	7418	824	-60.8
Overall	17904	1377	59644	1657	+20.3

Number of References to Vietnam War in 2003 articles

<b>Category References</b>	
Politics	1
Strategy	3
Combat	2

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