

# Did the news media, led by Walter Cronkite, lose the war in Vietnam?

By Joel Achenbach

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Until 1968, Walter Cronkite believed what his government told him about the Vietnam War. He was an old-school journalist, a patriot, a man who came of age covering World War II as a wire-service reporter and then taking over as the anchor of “The CBS Evening News” at the height of the Cold War. Like most journalists of his generation, he embraced the fight against communism and understood why the United States had intervened in the war raging in Vietnam.

When he’d visited Vietnam on a reporting trip early in the war, he’d been annoyed by the attitude of the young reporters who seemed to be “engaged in a contest among themselves to determine who was the most cynical,” he wrote in his autobiography.

Cronkite’s nightly newscasts helped shape public opinion about Vietnam, which became known as “the living-room war,” in the words of Michael Arlen of the *New Yorker*. Until 1968, network news operations tended to edit out the blood and gore and avoid direct criticism of military operations while American lives were on the line. There was no government censorship, but negative news reports infuriated President Lyndon Baines Johnson, and he didn’t hesitate to let the networks know it.

That had been the case in August 1965. CBS News correspondent Morley Safer and his colleagues had followed Marines into a hamlet named Cam Ne, which was allegedly infested with the communist guerrilla fighters known as the Viet Cong.

The Marines briefly encountered sporadic gunfire, which Safer later described as friendly fire. The Marines found no Viet Cong or firearms. Following orders, they burned down the hamlet. Safer’s report showed Marines using flamethrowers and Zippo lighters to ignite the thatching on the huts amid wails of despair from Vietnamese women and children.

The day after the report aired on the CBS Evening News, President Johnson called network executive Frank Stanton, according to a book Safer wrote many years later.

“Hello, Frank, this is your president.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Frank, you trying to fuck me?”

## The Tet effect

The Cam Ne dispatch by Safer is a classic moment in journalism, but an even more legendary report came from Cronkite. His trip to Vietnam in February 1968 and the hour-long prime-time broadcast that followed have been so mythologized among journalists that they call it the Cronkite Moment.

Like so much about Vietnam, the Cronkite Moment remains controversial, because it’s at the center of a seemingly endless debate about news coverage of the war, and whether the media exposed an unfolding debacle or undermined the American cause.

Journalists stationed full time in Vietnam had a contentious relationship with U.S. officials from the start. The U.S. intervention was built on a scaffolding of deception. The U.S. initially claimed, for example, that American military personnel were merely observers, not combatants. If wounded in the early years, they weren’t even eligible for a Purple Heart.

Much of the U.S. effort was aimed at rooting out communist guerrilla fighters in South Vietnam — the “pacification” effort. This became known as the struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. Meanwhile, a similar battle was happening on the home front. Public approval of the war effort gradually eroded.

Johnson vowed not to be the first U.S. president to lose a war. His generals claimed to see light at the end of the tunnel. In November 1967, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, declared, “The enemy’s hopes are bankrupt.”

Then came the Tet Offensive. At the end of January 1968, at the start of the Tet Lunar New Year, the Viet Cong broke a cease-fire by launching surprise attacks on dozens of cities across South Vietnam.

Until then, journalists based in Saigon had to go find the war. Now the war came to them. In Saigon, 19 guerrilla fighters entered [the U.S. Embassy compound](#) through a hole they’d blown in the outer wall. The embassy invaders were all killed, but more battles raged across Saigon and the rest of the country.

When the first bulletins arrived at CBS headquarters, Cronkite was aghast. “What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war!” he said.

In fact, the U.S. military and its South Vietnamese allies *were* winning at the tactical level, repulsing the attacks, killing tens of thousands of Viet Cong fighters. The communists failed to topple the government in Saigon or persuade the rice farmers in the countryside to join their cause.

Even so, images of street fighting in Saigon shocked the American public. This didn’t look like a war the Americans were winning. “Tet was the first sustained period during which it could be said that the war appeared on television as a really brutal affair,” wrote Daniel C. Hallin in his 1989 book “[The ‘Uncensored War’](#)”

[The Media and Vietnam.](#)”

On Feb. 2, Johnson said at a news conference that, when the American people knew the facts, “I do not believe that [the communists] will achieve a psychological victory.” He relied, like the other architects of the war, on the enemy kill count as the key metric of success. “They say 10,000 died and we lost 249 and the South Vietnamese lost 500. Now that doesn’t look like a communist victory. I can count,” the president said.

But as Lee Lescaze, a Washington Post reporter stationed in Saigon, wrote, “The casualty figures . . . are thrown into question by the incredibly favorable ratios claimed and by the assertion of precise figures in battles for which even the most general of details are lacking.”

The significance of the Tet Offensive was in doubt. Who was truly winning this war? At CBS News, Cronkite decided to go look for himself.

#### **Cronkite's verdict**

“Uncle Walter” had developed a reputation as the ultimate straight shooter, “the avatar of objectivity,” in the words of Richard Perloff, a professor of communications at Cleveland State University. He’d never taken a public position on the war. That, he thought, would give him special standing to assess what was really going on.

He flew to Vietnam and at first stayed at the Caravelle Hotel, a favorite place for journalists who wanted to witness the war in comfort in a place where the bar stayed open late. But then he went to Hue, the ancient imperial capital, where the most intense urban fighting of the war was grinding along day after day, house to house, room to room. It took most of February for the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies to drive the communists from the city. Cronkite left Hue in a helicopter carrying the remains of 12 Marines in body bags.

“He was just doing the gumshoe reporting all over Vietnam, and the print reporters all swooned over Cronkite for doing it,” says historian and Cronkite biographer Douglas Brinkley.

U.S. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr. told Cronkite the war effort needed another 200,000 American troops. The general engaged in what Cronkite described in [his memoir](#) as a “brutally technical discussion of the fire power and kill ratios and the like. How, in effect, we could kill more Vietnamese. I wanted us to win the war, but this emotionless professionalism was hard to take.”

He flew home, and on Feb. 27, at 10 p.m. Eastern time, CBS News aired “Report from Vietnam: Who, What, When, Where, Why?”

The program opens with Cronkite, in a short-sleeve safari shirt, standing in harsh daylight in front of Saigon ruins. It looks like a home movie. Cronkite doesn’t talk about military casualties. There are no images of body bags. One would not know that 416 Americans were killed in Vietnam in the week ending Feb. 3 and another 543 in the week ending Feb. 17 — each a record to that point.

Instead, Cronkite and his producers assess the progress of the war on the terms set by U.S. commanders, such as whether the “pacification” program had suffered a setback from the Viet Cong.

“Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I’m not sure,” he says early in the report. “The Viet Cong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we. The referees of history may make it a draw.”

At the close of the hour, Cronkite, back at his desk in New York, delivers his verdict. He acknowledges that what he is about to say is “subjective.” It’s his *opinion*.

“[I]t seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate . . . [I]t is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.

“This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.”

#### **A swift reversal**

President Johnson was deflated by Cronkite’s report, saying, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

That anecdote from a presidential aide is, like so many things involving this war, [the subject of dispute](#). What’s certain is that political dominoes fell rapidly after Tet. The antiwar Democratic presidential candidate, Sen. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, had sudden momentum heading into the March 12 New Hampshire primary. Robert F. Kennedy, the heir to Camelot, for the first time delivered a speech attacking the administration’s dissembling about Vietnam.

Kennedy then had an important lunch, with . . . wait for it . . . Walter Cronkite.

Cronkite told Kennedy that he should run for president. Kennedy told Cronkite that the Democrats wanted him — Cronkite! — to run for a U.S. Senate seat in New York.

Shenanigans, maneuverings.

McCarthy ran a shockingly strong second to Johnson in New Hampshire. A few days later, Kennedy jumped into the race. On March 31, LBJ went on national television and announced a partial halt to bombing in North Vietnam amid new peace negotiations. Then he stunned the nation: “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.”

Journalists look for direct causality, while historians see complexity. Did the media coverage of Tet change the way Americans viewed the war? Not measurably. The [Gallup organization had been asking](#) Americans since 1965 if the U.S. made a mistake by getting involved in Vietnam. The responses were remarkably static in the first half of 1968, despite Tet, the Cronkite Moment and heavy U.S. casualties. Not until August 1968 did the Gallup numbers reveal a significant plunge in support for the war.

But something did pivot when Cronkite crossed the line into opinion. Cronkite mainstreamed antiwar sentiment. The U.S. intervention ceased to be framed by TV news reporters as “our” fight against the Viet Cong. The news media distanced itself from the government’s agenda, and that paved the way, a few years later, for the publication of the Pentagon Papers.

A Cronkite Moment is no longer possible, because the news ecosystem today is too fragmented. The role of the news anchor has been diminished. Many Americans would be hard-pressed to name the current anchor of “The CBS Evening News.”

Cronkite’s great persuasive power emerged from his long history of not attempting to be persuasive at all. That allowed him to fly to Vietnam like an intercontinental ballistic missile of objectivity. But the past half-century has seen a steady erosion in the trust Americans place in institutions such as the news media. Partisan journalists, wielding verbal flamethrowers, view their “objective” counterparts as retailers of false balance. The media culture no longer requires or wants someone with the authority to say, as Cronkite did every night at the close of his broadcast, “And that’s the way it is . . .”

And thus, today, Cronkite’s daring, historic, precedent-busting words about Vietnam would probably be greeted with hot takes of outrage, for one reason or another — in the brief moments before those words were lost in the noise.

### Shifting perspectives

Conservative pundits and historians have declared that Cronkite, who died in 2009, [bungled](#) the biggest story of his life by failing to see that the Viet Cong were clearly defeated in the Tet Offensive. Peter Braestrup, who worked for The Washington Post in Saigon during Tet, wrote in his 1977 book “[Big Story](#)” that journalists unfamiliar with combat or military tactics got the story of Tet wrong. Braestrup’s conclusion is embraced in many revisionist retrospectives.

But there is revisionism to the revisionism. In the 2017 book “[The Myths of Tet](#),” Edwin Moise pushes back, saying the news media largely got it right. And Mark Bowden, author of a new book on the Battle of Hue, wrote in [an op-ed in the New York Times](#), “Cronkite was right. The war was not being won, nor would it be.”

Cronkite, who retired from his anchor position in 1981, worked on a 1987 documentary series on the Vietnam War. In the episode on Tet, he addressed the criticism that reporters got the story wrong.

“Let me show you what we *did* report,” Cronkite says, cutting to a clip from “The CBS Evening News” on Feb. 14, 1968. There’s Cronkite in Saigon. He says to the viewer, “First and simplest, the Viet Cong suffered a military defeat.” And then he goes on to explain multiple ways the Viet Cong failed to achieve their objectives.

When you root around in the history books, you realize there’s little consensus about anything. Something as simple as the notion that Vietnam was a “TV war” incites academic blowback. Barbie Zelizer, professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, says news photos — such as the famous Eddie Adams photo of the national police chief executing a Viet Cong fighter — were just as central in shaping public opinion.

That photo incited revulsion, depicting a callous disregard for human life. Except that the executed fighter had just killed the police chief’s close friend and the friend’s family. Adams, whose photograph won the Pulitzer Prize, later said he felt his photo [unfairly tarnished the police chief](#).

And was it really a “living-room war”? When Michael Arlen coined the term, he didn’t say that television brought the reality of the war into people’s homes. He argued the opposite. He said that, because of the scale of a television, the war is “a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, and trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household.”

The disputed narrative of the Vietnam War, and what it meant, and why it unfolded the way it did, highlights the genius of the wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall. There are no dubious metrics of enemy deaths, no media reports, no speeches. There are just the names of the Americans who lost their lives in Southeast Asia.

More than [58,000 U.S. military personnel](#) died in the Vietnam War, and by far the bloodiest year was 1968, when 16,899 Americans perished — an average of 46 a day.

The east and west ends of the memorial feature the names from the very midpoint of the war, as measured by Americans killed. It was May 25, 1968.

When Cronkite reported from Vietnam earlier that year and predicted the conflict would end in a stalemate, he did not imagine that this terrible war was not even half over.

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Walter Leland Cronkite Jr. (November 4, 1916 – July 17, 2009) was an American broadcast journalist who served as anchorman for the CBS Evening News for 19 years (1962–1981). During the 1960s and 1970s, he was often cited as "the most trusted man in America" after being so named in an opinion poll. Cronkite reported many events from 1937 to 1981, including bombings in World War II; the Nuremberg trials; combat in the Vietnam War; the Dawson's Field hijackings; Watergate; the Iran Hostage Crisis; and... Cronkite did not just mindlessly recite the news each evening; Cronkite took a personal involvement in his work, and encouraged his audience to do the same. Perhaps the greatest risk Cronkite took as a television reporter was when he made the decision to speak out against the Vietnam War. Cronkite's no-holds-barred assessment of the Vietnam War led then-President Lyndon Johnson to utter the following comment, which underscores the (potential) powers of the fourth estate: "We've lost Cronkite, we've lost Middle America." Did the American people have a real opportunity to question the war in Iraq in a public, democratic debate? 50 Years Ago, Walter Cronkite Changed a Nation. TV star led a country against the Vietnam War. By Kenneth T. Walsh. | Feb. 27, 2018. Cronkite's pronouncement, which came after he made a special reporting trip to Vietnam, "was a significant departure," wrote Mark Bowden in a New York Times essay Monday. "It struck like a revelation. From the pinnacle of TV's prime-time reach, he had descended to pronounce" the war a deadlock. Americans believed Cronkite would "report the news fairly and accurately," Steinhorn told me, and this gave him special influence. The contrast between his credibility and the media's current reputation among many for fakery and falsity is startling and, to media advocates, sad and depressing. CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite went to Vietnam to provide viewers with an assessment of the war's progress. His one-hour special report aired on Feb. 27, 1968. His trip to Vietnam in February 1968 and the hour-long prime-time broadcast that followed have been so mythologized among journalists that they call it the Cronkite Moment. Like so much about Vietnam, the Cronkite Moment remains controversial, because it's at the center of a seemingly endless debate about news coverage of the war, and whether the media exposed an unfolding debacle or undermined the American cause. Journalists stationed full time in Vietnam had a contentious relationship with U.S. officials from the start. The U.S. intervention was built on a scaffolding of deception. Walter Cronkite, American journalist and pioneer of TV news programming who was known as "the most trusted man in America." He was the longtime anchor of the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite (1962–81), for which he reported on many of the most historic events of the latter half of the 20th century. Upon his return Cronkite departed from his usual objectivity, declaring that the war could end only in a protracted stalemate. U.S. Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson told his staff, "We've lost Cronkite, we've lost Middle America," and some held that Johnson's decision not to run for reelection that year was a direct result of Cronkite's reporting. Walter Cronkite and Lyndon B. Johnson. Walter Cronkite (left) interviewing Lyndon B. Johnson, 1971.