

Smokescreens, Lies and Deceptions: The Media and the Vietnam War.

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By

Richard L. Simonson

Capstone Committee:

Kevin Stein, Ph.D, co chair

Lee Byers, M.A., co chair

Art Challis, Ed.D

Abstract

This rhetorical criticism analyzes Couturié and Bird's (2005) film *Dear America: Letters home from Vietnam* using framing elements from Jim A. Kuypers' (2006) agenda extension theory. His framing elements were developed to enable the researcher to pick out the ways in which bias is enacted upon viewers and readers by the media. This article views claims made by the film's producers and statements made within the content of the film. Three agendas or underlying messages are discovered. The critique examines two of these agendas to explain the techniques used to establish them. The exposé then compares claims made in the film with North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, American and Communist Chinese historical documents along with memoirs of many important players to ascertain their accuracy. The second part of this project is a screenplay that expands upon and illuminates the media's use of framing, agenda setting and agenda extension techniques, while correcting certain myths about the Vietnam War, through fictional depictions of historically documented occurrences. Additionally this work introduces the concept that incorrect media handling of the coverage of the Vietnam War, or of any war, may exacerbate the affects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on combat veterans.

Keywords: *Dear America: Letters home from Vietnam*; Vietnam War; Vietnam War myths; Vietnam Veterans; South Vietnam; North Vietnam; communism; Vietnamese Communism; communist insurgency; agenda extension theory; agenda setting theory; media framing; war correspondents; news bias; media bias; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; Paris Accords; antiwar protesters

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Smokescreens, Lies and Deceptions: The Media and the Vietnam War.

Information, including memoirs and recently declassified American, Vietnamese and Chinese Communist documents, found in separate works by many notable authors, reveals that miscommunication between official sources and American journalists may have cost the Allies an eminent victory in Vietnam. Case in point: Following the devastating defeat suffered by the Communists during the Tet offensive of 1968, (Robbins 2010; Ky, 2002; Ky & Wolf, 2002; Cosmos 2007; Zhai, 2000) the United States media including *New York Times* bureau chief R.W. Apple and Walter Cronkite reported that the war “is mired in stalemate” (Brinkley, 2012, pp. 378-379) that General Westmoreland and President Johnson lacked credibility, and other defeatist rhetoric. “A flow of undigested, often alarmist, early reports from lower echelons of [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] MACV and the U.S. mission intensified official concern and undermined the credibility of General Westmoreland and Ambassador Komer’s assessments” (Cosmos, 2007, p. 85). Cosmos and many other noted persons criticized the media’s handling of the 1968 Tet Offensive and the Vietnam War.

North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin, (1995) acknowledged that preparations for the 1968 Tet Offensive began at least three quarters of a year prior to the offensive itself (pp. 61-62). The media failed to acknowledge that these communist attacks were repelled, some within hours, most within days by quick Allied response. Hue City, Khe Sanh and some areas of Saigon took longer to contain, but were contained decisively. Media spokespersons also failed to acknowledge the relocation of troops before Tet, (Robbins, 2010, pp. 115-116), which placed them in the best position to counter these attacks, indicates General Westmoreland and other high level U.S. commanders had advance knowledge of the offensive. The general could not reveal this in advance because he did not want the enemy to be aware that the Allies were prepared for the attack. Cosmos (2007) explains, “by the end of January 27, U.S. maneuver battalions were operating within 30 km” (p. 50) of Saigon in preparation for the Tet Offensive. Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky explains that Tet was not a surprise; it was classified (Ky & Wolf, 2002, pp. 259-260). The media’s claim that the Tet Offensive caught the American command structure off guard appears to lack merit.

Smokescreens, Lies and Deceptions: The Media and the Vietnam War.

It is important to examine the events that spawned and perpetuated media assumptions in order that future communicators may see the danger of getting locked into ideas without consistent and thorough reassessment as situations change. Conrad and Poole (2005) warn against groups getting caught in Irving Janis' groupthink, where the majority of the members buy into the ideas of a few dominant group members, (p. 298). For the group of Vietnam combat reporters and their editors, one wonders if the conclusions of a few leading journalists affected the reporting of the majority of journalists. Veteran Vietnam reporter David Halberstam (1988) stated, "too much policy and too deep a commitment had already been made in Vietnam on the basis of too little factual information" (p. 155). There were not enough reporters in the early years which may have led to each one having more clout than one person rightfully ought to have (p. 155). Former Ambassador to Vietnam, Robert Komer stated that Washington was "swayed far more by the press than by our own reporting. It has counseled with its fears rather than its hopes. As a result, all too many see cutting our losses as the only way out of a painful impasse" (Cosmos, 2007, p. 88). North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin (1995) stated, "Thanks to the [U.S.] media which exaggerated the damage caused by [the 1968 Tet] offensive, the American public was bedazzled" (p. 62). Considering this ability of the media to manipulate public and official opinion, this extra clout Halberstam spoke of, puts control of public action in the hands of a disproportionately few members of society.

If a few reporters in the early part of an American conflict can have such a determining effect on government policy, it is worth discovering the ways variant assumptions can be disseminated. This will help to caution journalists and the public against forming inappropriate conclusions. Sixty-year Washington press corps veteran journalist, Helen Thomas (2006) states, "Journalists, as purveyors of information, are the watchdogs of democracy. Without an informed people there can be no democracy" (p. xiii). She continues, "without a free press there can be no democracy" (p. xv). Because the media are the purveyors of information, if they form and present incorrect conclusions, the people can be led astray. The dangers of forming and adhering to suppositions formed with incomplete information, simply

because those suppositions came from trusted journalists, can be tragic as hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese can attest.

This examination of the phenomenon is offered in two parts. The first is a rhetorical criticism that analyzes Couturié and Bird's (2005) film *Dear America: Letters home from Vietnam* using framing elements from Jim A. Kuypers' (2006) agenda extension theory. This part of the work views claims made by the film's producers and statements made within the content of the film.

The second part of this project is a screenplay that expands upon and illuminates the media's use of framing, agenda setting and agenda extension techniques. Through fictional depictions of historically documented occurrences, it attempts to correct certain myths about the Vietnam War. The screenplay demonstrates, by example, how some of the same techniques used in the *Dear America* artifact can be similarly be used to express viewpoints that are in opposition to the material in that artifact.

Literature Review

Innumerable articles have been written concerning news media bias in Vietnam. Among those relevant to this research is an article by Tallman and McKerns (2000), which discusses bias in early news coverage from the early years of the Vietnam War and its affect on public attitudes toward the War. "Studies have found that the angles, cultural frames, personal beliefs of reporters, and conventions of reporting, among other factors, combine to construct the news. These news constructs become images of reality for those who read and use the news" (Tallman and McKerns, 2000, p. 109). Also explained is that disagreement exists among researchers about the extent of media's role in forming American society's opinions.

The Kennedy policy of news management was that of "emphasizing that it was a Vietnamese, not an American war ... downplaying U.S. involvement" (Tallman and McKerns, 2000, p. 111) while playing up the anti-Viet Cong successes of Diem and his troops and avoiding coverage that could be potentially damaging. American officials in Vietnam "defer[ed] all final judgments on information policies to the host Diem government. In the process they withheld or altered information, and sometimes lied to the

resident correspondents about what was really going on” (Tallman and McKerns, 2000, p. 111). Therefore only positive news about the Diem regime was to be covered.

A credibility gap, alternately termed “the ‘press crisis’ or ‘press mess’” (Tallman and McKerns, 2000, p. 112) occurred between high-level government sources and news media as that policy of news management caused reporters to doubt Diem’s ability to lead South Vietnam. The authors relate how this eventually developed into an anti-government bias in the reporting of the news. Their article describes that bias and how it developed.

Peter Arnett, the reporter who gained fame from his photograph of the bonze who burned himself with gasoline in the streets of Saigon, wrote an article about his reporting experiences in the Saigon Bureau of Associated Press during the Vietnam War. Arnett (1999) expresses doubts about “whether [journalists] performed the classic American press role of censuring government policy or whether we botched the whole job and aided and abetted the enemy” (p. 191). Colonel Bui Tin, a North Vietnamese army journalist, alludes to the latter when he states, “we continued to manipulate public opinion in the United States to our advantage” (Bui Tin, 1995, p. 70). Robbins (2010) states, “The Hanoi regime followed American reportage on Vietnam very closely” (p. 69). Arnett and Robbins seem to indicate in their works that the U.S. media may have worked contrary to American national interests.

Russo (1971) studied ninety-six live television broadcasts selected from over “1400 newscasts televised by CBS and NBC during [the] two-year period” (p. 541) 1969 to 1970. He attempted to determine quantitatively that bias against Nixon’s Vietnam policies were non-existent. Russo concluded “these results, I believe, provide factual evidence that there was no ‘bias’ against the Nixon Administration’s policies in Vietnam in the 1969 and 1970 broadcasts of either NBC or CBS” (Russo, 1971, p. 542).

George Bailey also did a quantitative study of bias in reporting by anchormen concerning Vietnam. In a three-month period, he coded 465 samples “on 31 descriptive, nominal variables” (Bailey, 1976, p. 321). He found that “with no substantial differences among the networks, roughly 35% of anchorman stories were interpretive” (p. 321) in nature. He noticed “a general trend to more interpretation over the

years on all networks” (p. 321). Bailey also concludes “generally dismal results describe much of the journalistic performance of Cronkite, Huntley and other anchormen whom so many people trusted and followed” (p. 323). This may alert the researcher to seek more information about the journalists named in the article.

Harriman and Lucaites (2003) discuss the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph known as Accidental Napalm in an analysis of viewer response. They “argue that the photograph functions as a powerful emotional and inventional resource for animating moral deliberation and democratic dissent” (Harriman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 35). This gets the public past the disconnectedness from strangers, Vis-à-vis the Vietnamese people, which was “central for public engagement” (Harriman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 35). The photo is described as “‘a defining photographic icon’.... confronting US citizens ... with the immorality of their actions” (Harriman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 39), indicating there exists a belief in a journalistic responsibility to moralize to the public.

All these articles except Russo’s admit or describe media bias in some way. Tallman and Kearns talked of censorship and the shift of pro-war media bias to anti-war media bias, thereby implying that bias did exist. They also spoke to the importance of the media on public opinion. Oddly enough, I found no articles that sought to discover whether the media interpretations of the Vietnam War were accurate. Peter Arnett came close to raising this question by admitting he feared the media worked for the benefit of the enemy.

Russo’s (1971) conclusion, that there was a lack of bias against the Nixon Administration’s policies (p. 542), contrasts with the remainder of the articles reviewed. Considering that ABC, NBC and CBS were the only U.S. television networks in 1971, “the question whether TV news coverage is ‘biased’ assumes tremendous significance” (Russo, 1971, p. 539). Additionally, content within Russo’s article is useful to demonstrate that bias among the networks during the Vietnam War had an impact on the viewing public.

Bailey (1976) notes that anchormen were “widely accused of reading short, headline-like stories lacking interpretation” (p. 321). He also discusses how the news was interpreted as well as the method

and how often body counts were reported. Additionally, Bailey discusses the lack of attribution of sources. Of “465 stories in the sample only 13 carried any attribution. ... For the vast majority of stories about Vietnam, Cronkite or Huntley or whoever, read the news omnisciently, as if he or his network had gathered it” (p. 323). This study not only indicates that bias occurred, but it questions the integrity of prominent anchors.

With the exception of Russo, these writers mention or include media bias as a given. For example, the statement, paraphrased by Harriman and Lucaites (2003), that the Accidental Napalm photo “reflect[s] its influence on public attitudes toward the war, an influence achieved by confronting U.S. citizens with *the immorality of their actions*” [emphasis added] (p. 39,) seems to imply that bias is a virtue, if not a duty, of journalism. This type of comment leads one to realize bias exists in the media concerning the Vietnam War. Harriman and Lucaites (2003) also revealed in this statement the general media sentiment that the War was immoral. Yet, they question a connection between immorality on the part of some players and the media contention that the War itself was immoral. Used “as an indictment, there isn’t much [about the Accidental Napalm photo] that would stand out after cross-examination” (Harriman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 40). This indicates that the evidence provided to propagate some biased opinions may be flawed.

Other than the Harriman and Lucaites (2003) article, which describes the emotional impact that photos have on the news audiences, and the Bailey (1976) article just discussed, little discussion of the techniques the media uses for employing bias in reporting was found. Harriman and Lucaites (2003) talk about the trick of cropping out portions of photographs, which removes context that may refute the frame the editor wants to develop when using the photograph.

The subtle indications from these authors lead one to suspect that there are many more instances of misrepresentation to be found. This suggests that a deeper study into the approach used by journalists to sway public opinion is warranted. Further study into how bias was used and the effects of that use, will contribute significantly to the overall knowledge base concerning, not only tactics of media bias, but

tactics of modern political rhetoric as well. Knowledge of media methodology will assist the educated man and woman in discerning objectivity from subjectivity and fact from fiction in news reporting.

The Artifact

Couturié and Bird's (2005) film *Dear America: Letters home from Vietnam* is a very poignant and heart wrenching film that evokes the emotions of the viewer and claims to be "a tribute" (back cover) to the men who fought the War. Famous voice actors read actual letters from Vietnam Veterans over clips they imply are actual footage and still pictures of the veterans who wrote the letters. This is intermixed with archived news reports, interviews and other footage from the Vietnam era.

The film *Dear America* was selected as the artifact for examination because upon initial viewing, it appears to contain examples of the tactics and methods used to introduce, fortify and perpetuate the ideology that the Vietnam War was a useless waste of money and manpower. Additionally it seems to support the ideology that the U.S. had no possibility of winning the War. These examples provide the researcher with insight into the research questions: Did mass media in the United States misread or misinterpret the meaning of the strategic and tactical outcomes, and the effects of those outcomes, of the military engagements of the Vietnam War and of the outcome of the War itself? If so, what were the methods used to project the bias created by that misinterpretation?

Method

I chose to use ideological criticism for this examination because the method allows an artifact to be analyzed in an attempt to discover the ideology or ideologies imbedded within that artifact. One identifies the elements that are presented by the creator of the artifact and uses them to determine the "ideas, references, themes, allusions, or concepts that are suggested by the presented elements" (Foss, 2009, p. 216). Foss (2009) continues, "Ideological criticism is a kind of criticism in which [the] research question can be specifically about [the] artifact" (p. 220). Thus, the Ideological Criticism allows the researcher to ask, what underlying messages does this film infer? Additionally Foss (2009) proposes that ideological

criticism allows the researcher “to analyze only the ideology concerning [a particular] subject in [the] artifact” (p. 215). This form of criticism therefore allows the researcher to question the validity of the ideological assumption perpetuated in the film, e.g. that the Vietnam War was fought for no reason.

There are times, such as is found in this case, when the structure of ideological criticism is insufficient in itself, to adequately discover the components of the content messages that are used to set up and reinforce the ideology. In my discussions with my Committee Chair, Dr. Kevin Stein, concerning the methodology for this project, he expressed the concern that “ideological criticism in general is too unstructured and it doesn’t always focus on the elements of the content of messages that contribute to the ideology” (personal interview, September 6, 2012, electronic interview, July 7, 2013). To alleviate this concern, coding strategies based on J. A. Kuyper’s Agenda Extension Theory are useful. His coding system was developed specifically to reveal rhetorical strategies exploited by the media to create an agenda that promotes a particular point of view.

Kuyper’s (2006) theory builds on the Agenda Setting Theory, which deals with the way members of the media frame their press reports to establish their point of view as the predominant one. Kuypers (2006) states, “Framing is the process whereby news stories and editorials act to shape our understanding, awareness, and evaluations of issues and events in a particular direction” (p. 140). Take for example, this excerpt from the October 16, 1972 *Newsweek* about the communist general offensive which with great difficulty was successfully repelled by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN):

“Although the South Vietnamese have recaptured Quang Tri City and prevented the fall of An Loc, Kontum and Hue, they have been unable to clear the enemy forces out of the hinterland” (The War, 1972, p. 57). Notice that the words “although” and “unable” set up the defeatist frame that focuses on what the ARVN were not able to do. The author could have framed the same information as accomplishments, for instance the story could have been written like this:

“The South Vietnamese recaptured Quang Tri City and prevented the fall of An Loc, Kontum and Hue. They are attempting to clear the enemy forces out of the hinterland” (or, ‘their next job is to clear

...’ depending on which was occurring at the time the story was written). Notice how the subtle differences in the wording changed the framing of the story from a negative story to a positive one.

An example of television agenda setting appears as *Washington Post* Saigon Bureau Chief, Peter Braestrup, while in Khe Sanh observes,

Press reports frequently emphasized the negative aspects of the conditions at the base because often there was little else to report. Stand-uppers were often narrated next to the ramp of aircraft loading casualties or body bags, or were filmed in the shadow of a KC-130 refueling aircraft that had crashed early in the battle, but whose constant reappearance on the nation’s television screen seemed to send a persistent message of failure. ... It was hard to generate an impression that the Americans had the upper hand when television viewers continually saw Marines running for bunkers and enemy shells exploding. There was no corresponding film of the devastation being wrought on the enemy. (Robbins, 2010, p. 232)

The first example demonstrates how simple wording selection can alter the tone of a news report. The second example reveals that some television field reporters staged events to dramatize news when they had nothing exciting to report. It also explains impacts that this type of dramatization can have on persons affected by the reports. These are among the types of things the Agenda Setting Theory was formulated to uncover.

The Agenda Extension Theory goes beyond agenda setting to agenda extension, where “the news media tells us, not only what to think about, but also *how to think about the information we receive*” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 136, emphasis in original). The media gatekeepers pick a story. Next, they decide “how much attention to give to the story and for how long” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 9). Then, they set up a frame, or point of view, by the method they decide to use “to tell that particular story, and it is here that the notion of agenda extension gains pertinence” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 10). Television “images conveyed drama without context, and could be misleading” (Robbins, 2010, p 246). General Maxwell Taylor explains, in the confines of the TV screen “a few flaming Saigon houses ... created the inevitable impression that this was the way it was in all or most of Saigon” (Robbins, 2010, pp. 246-247). By

February 4th most of the fighting was confined to the Cholon district. Robbins (2010) stated, “the last organized VC fighters were rooted out of the area by February 10” (p. 141). Peter Braestrup reported, “TV was always worse. ... The emotive demands of the medium and commercial demands of holding an audience just worked against calm, dispassionate reporting. ... It was show business” (Robbins, 2010, p. 247). Used in combination, the agenda setting and the agenda extension theories provide the researcher with a set of tools to critically analyze the framework, semantics and visual effects used by a journalist to discover if he or she is attempting to direct the viewer or reader to accept his or her point of view.

A disadvantage to the use of these theories is that there are too many complex framing elements described by Kuypers to list them all here. Framing elements found in this artifact include exclusion of oppositional information, oppositional framing, intentionally ignoring reports of progress, sandwiching, using only quotes from like-minded sources, and credibility enhancement. These are defined as follows.

Exclusion of oppositional information and intentionally ignoring reports of progress are part of a larger category of reliance on a narrow range of informational sources. Kuypers (2006) states, “intentionally framing an issue or event so that important information is omitted or improperly contextualized is an instance of oppositional framing” (p. 140). This includes any “failure to report information that would contradict the press’s own point of view” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 159). Kuypers continues, “so one way the media wield influence is by omitting or de-emphasizing information, by excluding data about an altered reality that might otherwise disrupt existing support” (p. 160) for the media’s point of view. Walter Cronkite provided a good example of this during a March 1968 report on Khe Sanh. He claimed, “I found very few people out there who really believe Khe Sanh could be held if the North Vietnamese are determined to take it” (Robbins, 2010, p. 233). Robbins (2010) analyzes Cronkite’s statement.

The North Vietnamese certainly seemed determined to take Khe Sanh, based on the commitment they had made to the siege. But Cronkite’s comment is a good example of defining a battle in a way that favors the enemy, regardless of the facts. Saying “they could win if they wanted to” requires no evidence. ... Characterizing the battle that way made any meaningful victory impossible, because if

the base fell it was a defeat; and if it held it was not because of a dogged and well-executed defense but because the North Vietnamese simply chose not to take it. (p. 233)

Thus it is possible to recognize media bias using Kuypers' definitions of oppositional framing and the exclusion of oppositional information as tools of detection. The importance of recognizing the tactic of oppositional framing becomes obvious from the forgoing examples.

Additionally as Covert and Washburn (2009) explain, a "lack of coverage of the issues ... removes these topics from public debate" (p. 14). This was especially true during the Vietnam War era since the Internet was not yet available as a forum. Kuypers (2006) warns,

This is why any biased news coverage is so deceitful coming from these news sources; they appear perched on a dais of objectivity, all the while injecting their own partisan beliefs into the very information they give to the public as objective news. (p. 140)

Exposure of this type of practice in the media can serve to curb its use and diminish its affect on members of the general public.

Credibility enhancement happens when "the press specifically advance[s a player] in a manner calculated to enhance his [or her] credibility and thus the weight of his assertions" (Kuypers, 2006, p. 151). Sometimes the press is simply informing us concerning the credentials of the person, which is a valid practice. The public should know about the source. What is of concern though is the bolstering of a less competent person's qualifications through means that appear to prove expertise. Yet, upon closer examination the verification lacks any real authenticity. For instance, it is popularly said, "He was there so he must know." Yet, this is a serious misnomer. This author was in Taiwan for two years, yet he is not an expert on Taiwan or on Taiwanese politics. He is only acquainted with those few things about Taiwan that he can remember from his personal associations, experience and what he has learned through reading (which has nothing to do with actually being there).

The use of hearsay and unsubstantiated information is a particularly deceitful technique as the general public has a right to expect that the media validate its sources. The Society of Professional Journalists (1996) *Code of Ethics* reads, "Journalists should ... test the accuracy of information from all

sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible” (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>). Kuypers (2006) states, “without the proper citations of sources, the press is passing along little more than gossip at best, and fictitious creations at worst” (p. 162). Similar to this is the use of unnamed sources as is found in a *Newsweek* article. “‘It is clear’ *says one analyst*, ‘that there is no common view of the fundamental elements of victory and defeat’” (The War in Indochina, 1972, October 16, p. 57, italics added). Any story that fails to confirm the accuracy of its sources falls short of journalistic standards.

Sandwiching is the layering of aspects of a story so as to project the impression of balanced reporting, yet upon closer inspection the report is highly biased. The opposing point of view concerning a story is sandwiched between two items that reflect the press’ point of view. Kuypers (2006) states,

The press maintains that it is fair because it reports both sides of an issue. However, ... the manner in which [the opposing information] is presented can detract from its potential impact, making it appear wrong or the minority point of view. (p. 155)

When sandwiched stories lose their impact, the public can be distracted from viewing the whole picture.

Directed language is described as “the lexical choices made within the various frames [that] act to frame the news story in such a manner that a dominant reading is suggested” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 14). Sentence structure such as the mixture of active and passive voice aids in this subtle adjustment of context. An illustration of this can be found in the writings of *New York Times* reporter Tom Buckley. When reporting on casualties, the reader is directed, by the language used, to doubt claims of enemy casualties while allied casualties are reported as statements of fact. “The guerrillas left 19 South Vietnamese marines dead and 47 wounded. Thirty of the enemy were reported to have been killed” (Buckley, January 1st 1968, p. 1). Active voice is used to contextualize the allied losses as fact, while the report of enemy casualties is softened with the use of passive voice. “Nineteen of the paratroopers were wounded. Ten enemy soldiers were reported killed” (Buckley, January 4th 1968, p. 3). Observe how in both articles, a slight hint of doubt is cast on whether the enemy soldiers were actually killed by the use of the phrase “were reported.” The reader is subtly directed to doubt the reports of enemy casualties, hence

directive language. Buckley does not do this in every report, but he does it often enough that over time his regular readers absorb his opinion as their own. Knapp (2008) reflects,

Repeated information finds a place in their memory even though it may not be at a high level of consciousness. Then, when they are asked to evaluate new information that is similar ... feelings of familiarity ... lead to the illusion that this information is true. (p. 21)

Repetition combined with directive language creates a powerful influence that often goes undetected by the moderately attentive reader or listener.

Besides the framing elements from Kuypers, the author observed some other indicators of bias. Building on Aristotle's pathos, a tendency was noticed in Courtier's film to use emotional appeal rather than provide empirical evidence. Further examination is needed. Additionally the film was inundated with sources that suffered from tunnel vision. Also observed, is the strategic use of hesitation following audio statements that embrace thoughts the producers appeared to want to emphasize.

Emotional appeal is an effective tool to cover up the lack of empirical evidence. Emotional appeal can be used to cloud the judgment of the viewer. Emotionally charged, the viewer accepts the statements at face value without questioning the validity of the account. Hitler was excellent at combining emotion with logic. The idea is to twist the facts into something the audience wants to hear then add emotion. The twisted facts become truth when emotion replaces reason and implants that twisted truth into the subconscious mind.

From research in the field of educational psychology, we discover that using entertainment to teach is very effective. Entertainment creates an emotional reaction, which in turn lowers students' cognitive barriers. Similarly, since one views entertainment as entertainment, the natural tendency to question what is observed is put on hold. Thus a producer or writer can inject a political message into the dialogue of an entertainment piece and subconsciously it can become part of the viewer's knowledge base. Even while viewing a sad film, the viewer is still being entertained. Yet, with a depressing film, he or she may understandably feel the negative emotions associated with the film. These negative emotions may

reinforce any negative message that is being projected at the time. Hence, the neutral minded viewer tends to accept the speaker's statements without corroborating evidence.

The use of sources with tunnel vision became evident when the media was found to be using sources that were not really in a position to know the reality about the information they were reporting. These sources did not have the big picture. For example, the grunts in the field are not in attendance during an operation's planning sessions. Rather the tendency is that lower echelon soldiers are deliberately informed on a need-to-know basis due to the idea that captured soldiers cannot be forced to give up information they do not have. Hence, the grunts' view of any scenario is limited by what he observes within his squad or platoon's Area of Operations (AO). Metaphorically, they have tunnel vision. To determine if the media are using a source that has tunnel vision, one might consider the individual's rank and position on the battlefield. One can establish if the source can be knowledgeable and qualified to comment on the big picture. One can then reflect on whether the comment is framed as if this source is an expert.

This may be a good time to talk about the author's own interests in this analysis. I am a Vietnam Combat Veteran. I was once asked if I was a grunt. The difference between what I did and a grunt's job (at least in a mechanized infantry battalion) is that when we got where the action was, the grunts got off the armored personnel carriers (APC) and walked in between the APCs while the mechanized personnel stayed on board, manning a 50 caliber machine gun, an M-60 or driving the vehicle. A grunt's MOS designation (military job code) is 11B, which is infantry while I was 11D, which is armored reconnaissance. Since I was in a scout platoon my unit very rarely worked with grunts. This meant that out in the field there were only about 30 of us by ourselves instead of about 100 that operated in a mechanized infantry line company. I can testify that I rarely knew what was going on. I drove where I was supposed to drive, or shot at whom I was supposed to shoot, or waited until I was told to move out again. Any expertise I have about Vietnam that I gained from my experience in Vietnam is tactical, not strategic. Most of my buddies suffered from the same metaphorical tunnel vision that I did. We did not know what was going on and frankly speaking, most of the time we did not care either.

I do have personal experience with severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I also claim a certain amount of academic expertise associated with the disorder through years of therapy and occasional academic research. PTSD is discussed later in this project.

My limited claim to strategic expertise about Vietnam comes from over two years of full time graduate research. Also I was a history teacher at both the high school and community college levels, as well as about twenty years of recreational reading of biographies, memoirs and historical accounts specific to Vietnam. In my graduate research, I was objectively seeking to learn the facts about what really happened in Vietnam. My combat experience did not match the defeatist rhetoric that was presented by Hollywood and the news media. In fact, there was nothing defeatist about my Vietnam experience whatsoever. It is easy to see that I have a personal stake in this topic and do have a biased opinion about the media representations associated with the Vietnam War. As a scholar, an educator and a serious researcher, I have endeavored to maintain an objective tone to this analysis, although I fear that some of my bias may occasionally reveal itself in this work. For that I seek the reader's indulgence and understanding.

This analysis contributes to rhetorical theory in that it demonstrates a method in which ideological criticism can be combined with more functional rhetorical approaches. Agenda setting theory and agenda extension theory, when merged in the ideological criticism format, can expose the lack of validity for concepts that are so well ingrained into public knowledge that they are incorrectly assumed to be true.

Strategies used in the *Dear America* Film to Perpetuate Media Bias

In the artifact, *Dear America*, instances of exclusion of oppositional information, oppositional framing, and intentionally ignoring reports of progress are found. There are occurrences of sandwiching and using quotes of likeminded sources. Also discovered are cases of using sources with tunnel vision and credibility enhancement. Most notable in its prevalence are numerous examples of the use of emotional appeals surrounding a particular point, most of which contained no empirical evidence.

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An undisputed ideology that stands out most clearly in the film is that war is terrible. However, two underlying ideologies emerge as well. The first is the myth that the Vietnam War was useless, without purpose or gain. The second ideology is printed on the cover, yet is contradicted throughout the picture. That is the claim that the film “is a tribute to” (back cover) the Veterans who served in Vietnam. The focus of this analysis is on these latter two ideologies.

One is able to deduce how the ideology of the War being useless is established, by examining the methods that the filmmakers used. This examination involves a review of indicators found within the artifact, with a view toward discovering how the distinctive, sometimes subtle messages combine to form the ideology that the Vietnam War was useless. As the circumstances dictate, the claim that the film honors Vietnam Veterans is examined.

An instance of the exclusion of oppositional information is shown in the occasional timeline pieces that report only U.S. casualties. In these, the viewer is shown the harm inflicted on U.S. forces. However, the film does not counterbalance those reports with reports of the price the enemy paid for inflicting that harm. It leaves the viewer with the impression that only Americans suffered casualties and the sense that there was no purpose and no gain for U.S. involvement. One graphic states, “Timeline: December 31, 1967, U.S Troops in Vietnam = 485,600, Killed in action to date = 16,021, Wounded in action to date = 99,762” (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 36:32, equal signs added). A similar timeline piece is done for each year from 1965 to 1969. No mention is made anywhere in the film of the number of enemy casualties. One can question whether the producers believe reporting the number of enemy casualties would compromise their agenda. Additionally, the film jumps from 1969 to 1973 with no timelines and little coverage of the time period where the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were showing the most improvement and causing the most devastation to the enemy. For instance Downey (1995) reports on the general attitude of troops at Fire Support Base Mary Ann just prior to a communist surprise attack,

The general attitude was of safety and relaxation. Few paid attention to the terrain in front of the bunkers. In the American Army of 1971, any attempt to get the men to shore up the defenses or

become more knowledgeable about their responsibilities would have been met with indifference or sarcasm. (p. 47)

Downey (1995) related that the attack left 31 US KIA & 82 WIA vs. 15 enemy bodies & an unknown actual body count.

For one of the *few times* in the history of the war, the ultimate casualty tally clearly favored the NVA. Mary Ann was the greatest American combat loss from a single attack in *four years* and served as a deadly reminder to US soldiers that the war in Vietnam was not yet over. (p. 52, emphasis added)

While this attack obviously hurt American pride, not to mention the casualties, it was an isolated incident. However, it is important because it demonstrates complacency. Complacency is an after effect of success. Complacency leads to, but is not bred from failure. The fact that complacency occurred, demonstrates that military successes previously occurred.

Additionally, the statistics also indicate American successes. According to a 4/9 Infantry Manchu (Vietnam) Association (2006) chart, annual U.S. deaths in Vietnam fell from 16,589 in 1968 to 6,083 in 1970. The even more significant reductions in 1971 (2,357) and 1972 (640) were largely affected by U.S. troop withdrawals. However, the Administration's willingness to conduct troop withdrawals demonstrates a positive degree of success as well. If the producers of the artifact truly wished to "honor" Vietnam Veterans, it would be better to show the progress our soldiers made, rather than the price they paid.

Another example of the exclusion of oppositional information is found early in the film during the discussion of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The only senator whose voice is heard concerning the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (which passed congress by 504-2) is the antiwar rhetoric of voting dissenter Senator Wayne Morse. The producers begin with Morse' unverified statement: "You can't win in Asia" (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 5:48 to 5:52). History does not support this statement. Prior to Vietnam, the U.S. fought three wars in Asia. A win was scored during the Spanish-American War in the Philippines. A win was scored against the Japanese in World War II. The Korean War was a tie. Consequently, in 1965 when Senator Morse made the statement, the expectation of a U.S. victory in Southeast Asia was a legitimate

expectation. No validation was offered for Senator Morse's statement. But the historical point of view did not fit the "useless war" agenda of the producers, so Senator Morse's declaration is the only congressional voice that is heard.

Morse continues, "You can't win in Asia. So I am not going to go along with this kind of a program in South Vietnam, at least with my vote, that in my judgment is going to kill *needlessly* untold numbers of American boys, and *for nothing*" (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 5:47 to 6:04, emphasis added). The "needlessly" and "for nothing" statements are representative of the directive language used to express the ideology that the Vietnam War was useless. Typical of this tactic is the following interview conducted under fire.

Interviewer: "Is it worth it"?

GI: "Yeah ... I don't know. They say we're fighting for something. I don't know."

(Couturié and Bird, 2006, 41:22)

This statement concerning the interviewee's lack of knowledge or lack of understanding is one of many sound bites that are offered, without evidence, that subtly reinforce the agenda that there is no purpose to the War. This soldier's lack of knowledge is not evidence that there was no purpose in fighting the War, yet it is presented as such (note also: sources with tunnel vision).

Dear America begins with a statement that attempts to validate the material found in the film: "This film is about young men in war. It is their own story; in their own words ... Words they wrote home in letters from Vietnam. Every scene, every shot in the film is real –nothing has been re-enacted" (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 0:10 to 0:26). This opening statement is an example of credibility enhancement and of the use of sources with tunnel vision. Yet all the voices were reenactments using voice actors.

The initial problem is that the filmmakers use the opening statement for validity as if the "grunts" in the field were knowledgeable of the strategic plan. One of the proverbial Vietnam War sayings, often found inscribed on Zippo lighters, was "GI's are like mushrooms, they keep us in the dark and feed us bull[dung]" (author's recollection). General Tommy Franks (2004) recalls his days in Vietnam as a Forward Observer with a mechanized infantry line company, "Lieutenant Tommy Franks didn't know

diddly about strategy, but I was learning about war at the soldier's level" (p. 85). When the author was an APC driver every time he would ask his track commander, "Where are we going," he was told to "Shut up and drive" (author's recollection).

Certainly there were things the GIs knew about. For instance, an unnamed GI is being interviewed during a firefight in Saigon:

Interviewer: What's the hardest part of it?

GI: Not knowing where they are, that's the worst of it. Riding around, they run in the sewers, in the gutters, anywhere. They can be anywhere. Just hope you can stay alive from day to day. Everybody just wants to go back home and go to school. (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 40:38 to 40:54)

The GI knows Charlie is hard to find. It is a tactical experience that he grasps consistently. The GI also probably knows his friends want to go home and go to school. As expected, he has a good perspective of the things around him. His words reflect reality within his microcosm. Still, he does not have the big picture. A GI's words should not be portrayed as if he does have the big picture, such as is found in the following example.

During parts of a filmed conversation of General Westmoreland, the theater commander, interviewing troops, Westmoreland's voice fades out and the narration of a letter fades in, "David, morale's very high in spite of the fact that most men think the war's being run incorrectly. One of the staggering facts is that most men here believe we will not win the war" (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 35:39 to 36:26). The words "fact" and "staggering facts" offer a façade of validity, yet the "staggering fact" is that the statement is one man's opinion, based on his very limited observations. Did this one man have access to "most men here" in order to form this opinion from evidence?

The man shown was a grunt. How much regular access do most grunts have to the men outside their squad or platoon? Intermittent access may be found with members of the company and sporadic access to members of one's battalion. Access beyond battalion level happens, but is probably beyond the norm for a grunt. Albeit, the speaker's meaning for most men here may be "most men" in my squad or even in my

platoon. Yet the context of the statement implies that the statement is representative of “most men” in Vietnam.

Another example of using sources with tunnel vision occurs during the siege of Khe Sanh as the filmmakers use uninformed Marines as experts in the following sequence. The graphic “February 23, 1968: The 33rd day of the siege” (42:49) is placed over a nocturnal establishing shot of Khe Sanh that fades to marines talking around a camping light inside a bunker.

“Marines just sitting here taking it like dopes.”

“Yeah, that’s what gets me.”

“That’s not the way we’re supposed to —”

“We’re supposed to be hard chargers, man, we’re supposed to go out and get ‘em.”

“If they pulled a good Search and Destroy, we could clear them away.” (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 42:49 - 43:00)

This last statement about a Search and Destroy (S & D) around Khe Sanh demonstrates that the speaker does not see the whole picture. The Khe Sanh force was below of the military strength needed to be able to use S & D tactics to eradicate the NVA force surrounding Khe Sanh. The Khe Sanh introduction graphic displayed, “January 21, 1968, Almost 40,000 NVA regulars have surrounded 5,600 Marines” (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 38:10 -38:16). Seven to one odds in an S & D mission would be a commander’s nightmare. Consider that the enemy surrounding Khe Sanh had the strategic advantages of cover, concealment, and being *dug in*. However, the idea that the Marine had the confidence to want to conduct an S & D operation in that environment indicates that U.S. troops were not failing as much as the media wants the public to believe. Defeated troops do not have that kind of confidence.

There are several instances of reliance on the use of hearsay and unsubstantiated information. In these cases, however the source is known, because it is shown. The source in all but two occurrences is the grunt in the field and the author of the letter. Grunts’ limitations as sources about a battle’s strategic plan were previously demonstrated. Sp4 Phillip Arterbury states,

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Dear Mom, it's official. Would you believe a silver star? But I'm no hero. Heroes are for the late show. I was just trying to help a couple of guys who needed help. That's all. The real heroes over here are the guys trying to do their job and get home from *this useless war*. Love, Phil. (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 50:46 – 51:11, emphasis added)

Specialist Arterbury's letter is a valid reflection of what a grunt might feel. Yet, Phil is not qualified to determine if the War is useless. His unsubstantiated phrase "this useless war" is also left hanging for 3 seconds before the narrator adds, "Love Phil". This hesitation is long enough for the words to sink in as the point of the statement.

In the next example, narrated over a clip of four grunts carrying a body in a poncho, the letter writer is unidentified except for his first name, Phil. Perhaps it is the same Phil as the previous letter.

My Platoon leader Gary Scott and one other man were killed. I was very close to Lieutenant Scott. I was his radio operator. [B-roll changes to an identified still photo of Lt. Scott.] He was a fine man, a good leader. Yet, he could not understand the whys of this conflict, which killed him. [B-roll fades to a clip of a twenty-one-gun salute at a nine-man memorial service.] They will say he died for his country, keeping it free. Negative. [*Taps* is playing at the memorial service.] This country has no gain that I can see, Dad. We're fighting, dying for a people who resent our being over here. ... This war is all wrong. Your loving son, Phil. (Couturié and Bird, 2006, 51:56 – 53:14)

Several examples of the use of hesitation to emphasize points are contained in this clip. Eleven seconds follow "Yet, he could not understand the whys of this conflict, which killed him." Two to three seconds follow "people who resent our being over here" and five seconds following "This war is all wrong."

Another subtle trick is uncovered when one notes that Phil stated Lt. "Scott and one other man were killed." Yet, the B-roll showed a memorial service with *nine* sets of rifles, boots and helmets, indicating nine deaths instead of two. This could be because the producers could not locate a clip of a two-man memorial service or it may be a conscious effort to make the event more emotionally charged.

It is reasonable to believe that as Lt. Scott's radio operator, Phil had conversations with Lt. Scott during lulls in the fighting. The problem with Phil's statement is that we have no way to discover which "whys" Lt. Scott discussed. Was it, why are we fighting the Vietnam War or why do we have to go down the right trail instead of the left trail? Why do we have to stay out in the field another night or why did the mess hall fail to send chocolate milk on the chopper with the hot chow? The producers made choices, first to use the statement and then to frame it as if Lt. Scott was an antiwar advocate. Scott was an officer and officers are not drafted, they volunteer. He chose to serve in a combat occupation (MOS). Framing this officer as being opposed to the War disrespects his memory. The letter was written about him, not by him.

With reference to Phil's claim about attitudes of the population, there are no means at this time, to assess whether the people in his AO resented U.S. forces being there. Similarly, functioning as a platoon radio operator, he could not accurately assess whether a majority of the South Vietnamese population resented U.S. forces being there. Although we can, in a general way, measure public sentiment through the writings of some significant South Vietnamese players. For example, Nguyen Cao Ky demonstrates the sentiment of his people, when he relates how thousands of Vietnamese draft dodgers and young men with phony draft exemptions responded positively to his radio appeal to join the ranks of those fighting the communists, during the Tet offensive of 1968 (Ky & Wolf, 2002, p. 206). Ky also states,

After Tet, it was plain that the Vietcong were mistaken, that as much as people found fault with their government, they did not want to live under communism. The foreign [to him this includes the U.S.] press should have been able to see what I had said from the beginning: The Vietcong were not holy redeemers; they were not popular among South Vietnamese people. They were not the wholesome nationalists they pretended to be. (Ky & Wolf, 2002, p. 284)

Ky was so sure of the popular support of the people that while he was Prime Minister, he told President Nixon in all seriousness, "Let's challenge the communists in a general election for the presidency. North and South, the whole country" (Ky & Wolf, 2002, p. 285). Ky was not simply trying to impress President Nixon. He reasoned, "the people of South Vietnam know that they still have the cherished right to criticize us, even to insult us, but Communism would never tolerate that, and that is

why we would win in a free election tomorrow” (Ky, 2002, p. 178). Whose opinion about the hearts and minds of the people is more knowledgeable; a radio operator for a platoon in the field, or a man who, at different times, held the offices of Prime Minister, Premier and Vice President of South Vietnam?

Another issue with Phil’s opinions is that they are presented in such a way as to leave the impression that his were the opinions of all combat soldiers in Vietnam. Notice also that the negative emotional appeal that surrounds the memorial service and the playing of *Taps* leaves the unsuspecting viewer’s guard down to accept Phil’s negative statements.

Two excellent examples of sandwiching are couched within a 1966 segment of NBC News. Correspondent Edwin Newman transitions from a report on Vietnam into a report on Vietnam War protestors. The segment begins,

What we’ve just seen, men fighting for their lives in the jungles of South Vietnam is what has aroused such apprehension and debate throughout the world. War is brutal, and the reaction to it is strong. This week hundreds of people demonstrated against it. [The B-roll shows peace protestors with signs walking outside the iron fence surrounding the White House.] Others have voiced their concern by question and dissent. Public opinion polls indicate that the dissenters are in the minority, but their number is growing, [Newman’s voice is positively inflected] and they are starting to take more positive actions. [The B-roll switches to a parade with uniformed majorettes] On Saturday, a march to show solidarity with American servicemen in Vietnam was held in New York City. The marchers carried American flags. Flags were hung from apartment house windows. [The camera returns to Newman] Against this background, the battle continues, and in it this week, 274 Americans were killed, 1,748 wounded, 18 are listed as missing. There is no end to the war in sight. (22:07 to 23:04)

Observe the antiwar framing in the opening statement of the report, with the use of the affecting phrases “aroused such apprehension and debate” and “war is brutal, and the reaction to it is strong.” This lead-in enhances the credibility of the antiwar protestors that are the subject of the news segment. The neutrally framed statement that these protestors are not the majority is quickly followed by the

optimistically framed message that “their number is growing and they are starting to take more positive actions.” The short reference to the opposing point of view is sandwiched between the two lengthy antiwar messages.

Next, a neutrally framed report on a pro-war demonstration is placed in between the antiwar demonstrators and that week’s U.S. casualty reports. Compare the emotional tone of the antiwar reports, and the neutral *straight facts* reporting about the pro-war demonstrators. “The marchers carried American flags” and “flags were hung from apartment house windows.” These are subtle differences. Yet, subtle differences can affectively impact the subconscious of an unsuspecting viewer relaxing in his easy chair following a hard day’s work.

Also note the phrasing of the purpose of the parade was not expressed as support for the War, but of solidarity with the troops. Again, information that provides an opposing viewpoint was modified in a manner that reduces the support for that point of view. Finally, in the closing statement, “there is no end to the war in sight” (22:59 to 23:04) is placed in the trailing position as if it were the conclusion to the article, yet nothing *in the story* supports that conclusion. This statement is also an example of directive language. The audience is linguistically directed to believe this assumption.

One might argue that the film producers did not produce this particular news piece. The framing of the report and wording of the closing statement were the work, decision and responsibility of Edwin Newman and/or NBC News. Yet, of thousands of news reports on the Vietnam War, the producers chose *this* report to include in their film. The decision to include the report, in its aired form, was theirs and thus they tacitly accept the responsibility for the framing and the wording. Similarly, they chose which letters to include and how to frame them. Even though they indicate a denial of responsibility in their opening disclaimer, the responsibility for the framing and choice of content within the film is undeniably theirs.

The most prevalent tactic used within the film is the use of emotional appeal. This becomes particularly significant when emotional appeal is used to replace empirical evidence. There are myriad of instances of the use of emotional appeal within the film, yet they offered no actual facts to support their agenda of the uselessness of the War.

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An outstanding example of the way the filmmakers use emotion is the story of Don Jacques.

Following Jacques' description of a lost comrade in a letter, the narrator adds,

But there are 75 others to worry about and I snapped myself out of my cheap civilian bull... and got back to work. You learn every day the mistakes you're making and the biggest one is to get too attached to any one person, over here at least. [The B-roll shows troops carrying litters to a helicopter for evacuation] Things happen too quickly. One minute he's fine and the next he's not. (43:49 to 44:55)

This leads into a clip that is held for three seconds of about 30 bodies in body bags waiting for evacuation. Then over a slowly tightening still photo labeled "2 Lt. Donald Jacques" (44:58).

But old Don is pretty lucky. Knock on wood. And home I'll come I'm sure. Maybe after we wipe them up here we can go to the bargaining tables and we can come home—all of us. Love, Don. (44:58 to 45:11)

At that point, the camera is tight on the still of Don captioned with his name. This fades to a graphic,

Days later, Jacques led the first patrol outside Khe Sanh. [The graphic fades to] He and 22 of his men were killed in an ambush. [Sad music fades in while the background transitions to a headshot of what appears to be an actual picture of the dead Lt. Jacques. The camera then pulls back to a full view of the same still photo of Lt. Jacques being dragged, ostensibly back to the base camp, or to a medevac helicopter by struggling marines] Don Jacques was 20 years old. (45:11 to 45:33)

Note how emotion is evoked by the images, music and linguistics contained in the graphics. Also observe how the mother in the next example accesses the viewer's emotion.

The final letter of the film is a heart wrenching cry from a mother to her deceased son, "They tell me the letters I write to you and leave here at this memorial are waking others up to the fact that there is still much pain left from the Vietnam War" (1:18:50 to 1:19:02). This idea of pain and suffering caused by the War seems to convey the useless war ideology expressed by this film.

It is argued that all these letters simply contain opinions of the soldiers writing them. Certainly, that is true. However, it is not so much the opinions expressed that is the problem. Rather it is the

selection of opinions that were chosen and the way they were presented. Antiwar opinions predominate and the statements about the war are presented as if they are generalizable. None of the statements are contested. Yet, there are instances where their accuracy is questionable at best.

Examining the Ideology

Sonya Foss (2009) explains, “in the final step of ideological criticism, your [mission] is to discover how the ideology ... functions for the audience who encounters it and the consequences it has for the world” (p. 220). As part of the process, she believes it is necessary to determine if the artifact “present[s] a view of a condition that is naïve, misguided, or inappropriate for some reason” (p. 220). Refer to the piece on Don Jacques. Observe how the viewer is grabbed by hearing the words of a dead man while looking at the man’s morbid picture. The emotion becomes a call to action to feel this underlying message concerning the uselessness of the War. The subtlety with which that message is delivered allows the viewer to feel he or she thought of the idea. It creates ownership of the message within the viewer. The unsubstantiated implication becomes a twisted truth, a public knowledge.

Now notice the mother’s letter about the pain and suffering caused by the War. Notice also that they failed to reflect on the amount of pain that was and is still being inflicted upon the Vietnam Veterans and their families by the unfeeling, derogatory and often rude coverage of Vietnam Veterans, both during and after the War, by the U.S. media. If any minority group were disparaged in the manner Vietnam Veterans have been disparaged by the media, especially by television and the film industries, the perpetrators would have been shamed out of their trade.

In all fairness, the director placed a couple of letters in the beginning of the film that have comments that may be seen as positive comments about reasons for U.S involvement in the War. Drawing in close on a still of 3 GI’s each holding a case of Budweiser beer a letter narrator reads, “I’ve read where officers were quoted as saying, ‘this is the only war we’ve got. Don’t knock it’” (17:01 to 17:09). Or is this a subtly negative comment about the veterans they claim to be honoring.

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Another comment was closer to an actual positive remark. Yet, just as the comments about the uselessness of the war, this comment is framed to lack substance.

Dear Uncle and Aunt, some people wonder why Americans are in Vietnam. The way I see the situation, I would rather fight and stop Communists in South Vietnam than Kincaid, Humboldt, Blue Mound or Kansas City. And that's just about what it would end up being. The price for victory is high when life cannot be replaced. But I think it is far better to fight and die for freedom, than to live under oppression and fear. Your nephew, Jack. (7:49 to 8:16)

Note that this letter is placed early in the film so contradictory statements throughout the rest of the film drown it out. There is a semblance of fairness in that the producers did not support this pro-war statement any more than they supported any of the antiwar statements.

Yet, there is documental support for the philosophy encompassed in Jack's statement. To examine that support we must understand why we fought the Vietnam War. This necessitates viewing the world from a 1950/1960's perspective. Following World War II, there was a political vacuum created by the demise of colonialism. New countries were formed and former countries were revived from former European colonies. However, these former colonies lacked the resources to defend themselves against communism. "The Soviets were skillful with their propaganda and lavish with their money" (Nixon, 1978, p. 136). The Falling Domino Theory was the western catch phrase for the premise behind the Cold War. President Dwight D. (Ike) Eisenhower at a 1954 news conference explained this principle. "You have a row of dominos set up; you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly" (Lyon, 1974, p. 638). John Foster Dulles (1954) warned, "Communist control of Southeast Asia would carry a grave threat to the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand, with whom we have treaties of mutual assistance, the so-called 'offshore island chain'" (pp. 38-39) would be strategically endangered. Concerning this potential loss of Indochina, Ike cautioned,

It takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area or Japan, in turn, will have only one place in the world to go—that is, toward the Communist areas in order to live. So, the possible consequences ... are just incalculable to the free world. (Lyon, 1974, p. 639)

All the presidential administrations from Truman to Nixon were highly concerned about suppressing communist expansion.

President Nixon (1980) referred to both Vietnam and Korea as being battles within what he called World War III, which was the fight against communist expansion. In his support for his point of view he warned,

The Soviet armies that followed the retreating Germans into Eastern Europe stayed and the Iron Curtain clanged down across the continent. Locked under communist rule were the people of [eleven nations]. It was a coldly calculated grab on Stalin's part; as he later commented, "the reason why there is now no Communist government in Paris is because in the circumstances of 1945 the Soviet Army was not able to reach French soil." (p. 19)

This is a clear Soviet statement citing evidence that supports the administrations' concerns about communist aggression.

By the early 1950's, at least 20 European nations were amalgamated into the Soviet sphere. In 1949, China fell to the Communist Mao Zedong, encompassing another "450 million of its people into Communist dictatorship" (Lyon, 1974, pp. 638-639). Stalin and the Soviets, along with Mao and the Chinese, openly endorsed national liberation movements. Robert S. McNamara (1995) states,

Mao Zedong ... controlled China since 1949 and had fought with North Korea against the West; Nikita Khrushchev had predicted Communist victory through 'wars of national liberation' in the Third World. ... [and] turned up the heat in West Berlin. And [in 1959] Castro had transformed Cuba into a Communist beachhead in our hemisphere. We felt beset and at risk. This fear underlay our involvement in Vietnam. (p. 30)

The Soviets and the Chinese, seeking to increase their independent influence, competed to assist national liberation movements with weapons, food and training. "To Mao, national liberation movements in the Third World were the most important potential allies in the coalition that he wanted to establish" (Zhai, 2000, p. 146). "*Chinese Defense Minister Marshal Lin Biao*, on September 2, 1965 ... called on the 'rural areas of the world' (developing countries) to take over 'the cities' (industrialized nations) through militant

local revolutions” (McNamara, 1995, p. 215, parentheses in original). “Lin’s remarks seemed to us a clear expression of the basis for the domino theory” (McNamara, 1995, p. 215). Dulles (1954) explains, “Southeast Asia is the so-called ‘rice bowl’ which helps to feed the densely populated region that extends from India to Japan. It is rich in many raw materials, such as tin, oil, rubber, and iron ore” (p. 38). Southeast Asia is vital to the sea and air routes between the Pacific and South Asia. The area’s key U. S. naval and air bases were also a major concern.

Containing world communism was a logical American foreign policy decision. Foreign policy became complicated by the communist development of nuclear weapons. The Soviets developed the atomic bomb in 1949 and the hydrogen bomb in 1955. In 1957, the orbiting of the Sputnik satellite demonstrated the Soviets had the technology to create a delivery system to reach the United States with their nuclear weapons. The Chinese coerced the Soviets into providing them with the technology to develop their own nukes, (Jung & Halliday, 1995, p. 413-414), and they became a nuclear power on October 16, 1964, (Robbins, 2010, p. 25). With the proliferation of nuclear weapons, any direct confrontation between the superpowers threatened the survival of the human race. Since direct confrontation was so dangerous, the communists began to seek expansion through the use of, and/or control of, nationalist movements within the colonial breakaway nations.

There were many dominos the communists were trying to topple. Jung and Halliday (1995) explain, “the Japanese Communists had gone to Peking in spring 1950 to prepare for armed action in coordination with the Korean War” (p. 370). Mao was also training insurgents from the Philippines, Malaya, and from South East Asia, Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam, (Jung and Halliday, 1995, pp. 370-371). John Foster Dulles (1954) explained the communist system of expansion in his March 29, 1954 speech to the Overseas Press Club in New York.

The Communists have a regular line. ... The scheme is to whip up the spirit of nationalism so that it becomes violent. That is done by professional agitators. Then the violence is enlarged by Communist military and technical leadership and the provision of military supplies. In these ways,

international communism gets a stranglehold on the people and it uses that power to “amalgamate” the peoples in the Soviet orbit. (pp. 37-39)

The evidence mounts against any benign designs on the part of the communists in the middle of the twentieth century.

The U.S. Commanders in Chief believed in the domino theory. President Nixon (1978) acknowledged,

Despite the most nobly ringing [Communist] rhetoric, the pattern was tragically the same: as soon as the Communists came to power, they destroyed all opposition. ... Never once in my career have I doubted that the Communists meant it when they say that their goal is to bring the world under Communist control. (pp. 343-344)

President Johnson (1971) demonstrated his belief in the domino theory when he stated, “The evidence before me as President confirmed the previous assessments of President Eisenhower and of President Kennedy” (p. 151). Notice specifically that the statement indicates that as President he received information that was not previously available to him. In other words, the government had information unavailable to the press or the general public. NBC News anchor, David Brinkley asked JFK if he had *doubts* about the domino theory, Kennedy replied candidly, “No, I believe it” (McNamara, 1995, p. 64). Kennedy (1967) speaking about the communists declared, “We cannot negotiate with those who say, ‘What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is negotiable’” (p. 31). Just like dealing with any bully, “the only way to deal with Communists is to stand up against them. ... Fear is the primary weapon of Communists” (Nixon, 1978, p. 131). Many today scoff at the Domino Theory. But, the reality of the Domino Theory is that in the 50’s and 60’s the *decision-makers* believed it and foreign policy was based on its premise.

We were in Vietnam because the leaders of both the Soviet and Chinese Communist parties were trying to take over the world. Many of their leaders proclaimed it. The political, military and industrial machines of both countries were geared to that goal. Their leaders believed they would succeed. U.S.

policy makers in both the Democratic and Republican parties, from President Truman to President Reagan believed the communists could succeed if the U.S. failed to take action.

If the Domino Theory was false, then why did President Ford suffer the displeasure of watching the dominos in Southeast Asia fall just as President Eisenhower predicted in 1954? Cambodia and Laos fell in 1975, the same year as the fall of Saigon, (Kissinger, 2003, p. 446). Technically Phnom Penh fell thirteen days before Saigon, (Kissinger, 2003, p. 530). The only Indochinese domino to survive communist aggression was Thailand. Fortunately for the free world, Vietnam lost much of its global significance with the normalizing of relations between the U.S. and China, and the U.S. and the Soviet Union, beginning with President Nixon's visits to both countries (Zhai, 2000, p. 201).

Another reason for U.S. involvement in Vietnam was the people of South Vietnam. The Vietnamese voted with their feet when they left North Vietnam in droves in 1954. And again multitudes left Vietnam altogether in 1975. As Ky stated, the majority did not want to live under communist rule. Everywhere around the world that the communists were in power, they had to close their borders to keep the people from escaping.

"The North Vietnamese were a particularly ruthless and cruel enemy, but the American media concentrated primarily on the failings and frailties of the South Vietnamese, or of our own forces" (Nixon, 1978, p. 350). Nixon's landslide election victory in 1972, despite all the Nixon bashing in the media, demonstrates how out of touch the media was with the opinions of mainstream Americans. For example,

A Harris poll found in early September [1972] that 55 percent supported continued heavy bombing of North Vietnam, 64 percent supported the mining of Haiphong Harbor, and 74 percent thought it was important that South Vietnam not fall into the hands of the Communists. (Nixon, 1978, p. 689) Comparing public opinion poles against media rhetoric to determine the media's connection to mainstream America may be a good topic for future research.

Vietnam was just one conflict in the overall goal of containing Communism. The U. S. goals for the Cold War were the containment of Communism and the prevention of nuclear war. These overriding

goals affected all foreign policy decisions in some degree or another. Even the much-touted promotion of democracy became subordinate, as demonstrated by the U. S. backing of the Diem regime. So, we can see that one element of the policy for Vietnam was not to defeat the communists, but rather to contain them.

Part of the objective in Vietnam was a negotiated settlement that gave the South Vietnamese a good chance of surviving against communist aggression from North Vietnam (DVR). The War dragged on several months after the U. S. and the DVR reached an agreement in order to negotiate South Vietnamese President Thieu's changes to the Paris Accords. Kissinger (2002) asked,

Were the changes significant enough to justify the anguish and bitterness of those last months of the war? Probably not for us; although most surely for Saigon, about whose survival the war had, after all, been fought. (p. 425)

In order to accomplish that objective, a strong and effective military establishment was necessary to maintain the South Vietnamese government.

That effective military establishment was indeed organized, but it took time and effort on several levels to accomplish this successfully. According to Ky (2002), the Vietnamization of the War began following the first inauguration of President Nixon. "By the end of 1970 we had added 400,000 to our services and had 1,100,000 men under arms" (p. 173) excluding U.S. and other Allied forces. The simple fact of multitudes of men under arms contains no guarantee of defensive success. Training, equipment, motivation and commitment are also required.

Vice President Ky (2002) relates that over "12,000 South Vietnamese officers went for advanced training to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth" (p. 173). Training at the local level was provided by the addition of three hundred fifty, five-man teams of U.S. advisors, (p. 173). Motivation and commitment was provided through two means. First was the realization that the Americans were going to leave at some point in the not too distant future. Ky (2002) told Vice President Agnew "You know ... that public opinion will force you to pull American troops out of Vietnam" (p. 172). The second was built upon that realization of American withdrawal, combined with the discovery of mass graves, containing more than 6000ⁱ civilian bodies. Civilians, mostly government officials were

rounded up and massacred by the Communists during the Tet Offensive of 1968. These were not soldiers killed in battle. They were government officials and civilians who supported the Government of South Vietnam that were murdered. Cosmos (2007) states Communist “Party cadres assembled lists of government officials and supporters to be killed and kidnapped” (p. 29). North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin (1995) admits, “how many thousands nobody knows because they were buried in various places” (p. 62). These massacres were not exclusive to Hue City. Foreign Service Officer Douglas Pike (1969) reported,

Religious figures, schoolteachers, or simply people of integrity and honor ... are more likely to have the courage to stand up to the NLF when they come to their village and thus are most likely to be the first victims of NLF terror. ... Steadily, quietly, and with a systematic ruthlessness, the NLF in eight years wiped out virtually a whole class of Vietnamese villagers. Many villages today are depopulated of natural leaders. (p. 63)

Reporting on a 1973 visit to South Vietnam by author James Jones, Robbins (2010) quotes, “whatever else they accomplished, the Hue massacres effectively turned the bulk of the South Vietnamese against the Northern Communists” (p. 206). The South Vietnamese knew they faced a similar fate if the North Vietnamese obtained victory. The mass exodus of South Vietnamese loyalists during and for years following the fall of Saigon provides solid evidence of this sentiment. This fear provided the motivation that enabled the gradual U.S. combat troop withdrawal between 1969 and the summer of 1972. Motivated and trained South Vietnamese forces replaced U.S. forces as they demonstrated their ability to adequately function in their own Area of Operations. One must wonder why the U.S. media did not discover or reveal this significant change in Vietnamese public opinion.

Another reason that many believe the Vietnam War was useless was the sense that the War did not accomplish anything. President Nixon stated,

The War was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed. Eventually this contributed to the impression that we were fighting in

military and moral quicksand, rather than toward an important and worthwhile objective. (Nixon, 1978, p. 350)

What then was accomplished? Vietnam was not an isolated war. It was an integral piece of a much bigger event. President Nixon (1980) stated, “World War III began before World War II ended” (p. 17). The western world historians call the event the Cold War. Nixon (1980) quoted Stalin as saying “whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise” (p. 17). Both foreign and domestic experts believe a great deal was accomplished by the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In October 1969, while the American media sang songs of American defeat, Robert Thompson, the British guerilla war expert credited the war in Vietnam with the defeat of the communists in Malaya. American action strengthened the will of the non-communist Malaysian fighters. Thompson advised,

When it is all over, the War in Vietnam will undoubtedly prove to be one of the most decisive wars of this century and, in its influence, more far reaching than any other war of its type (Nixon, 1980, p. 96) [Thompson also] reported that [in October 1969] he was able to walk safely through many villages that had been under Vietcong control for years. He was so impressed with the progress that had been made that he thought we were in “a winning position” to conclude a just peace if we were willing to follow through with the efforts we were making. (Nixon, 1980, p. 107)

Thompson’s report is another indication that significant progress was being made during the period following the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) leaders credit the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War with saving their own countries from falling to communism. According to McGovern, Westmoreland, Luttwak & McCormick (1990) U.S. involvement in Vietnam saved them because we held the line for 10 years. This allowed them to grow strong enough to remain non-communist (p. 50). Wars of national liberation began to wind down after Vietnam because the communists discovered that their aggression was too costly. The normalization of relations with the communist countries was facilitated

because Nixon demonstrated in Vietnam our determination to prevent communist world domination. Soviet Communism ultimately failed. Chinese Communism is fading away as capitalism booms in China.

It is easy to believe that the War is useless if one believes that the Allies were losing the War. Antiwar activists may argue that if you are losing there is no reason to continue to fight. This line of reasoning may be at the heart of the *unwinnable useless war* rhetoric. Colonel Ron Roy USMC recalled,

I was beginning to understand after I heard Walter Cronkite stand up about a half a mile from where I was fighting and to call the victories we were achieving on the ground defeats. I knew that was a lie, and my attention began to turn to politicians and people in the media who were lying about what we were doing and were making our job more difficult. (Evans, G. & Pinkerton, K. A., 2010, 10:07-10:32)

Clearly there was a discrepancy between the perceptions of the media and that of the men who actually did the fighting.

One major problem with the members of the media may have been that for the most part, they were not military men and therefore did not have an adequate perspective to decipher events. Therefore it was easy for them to misread victories and believe the spin masters within the DRV. Evidence that would be obvious to a military man they discounted and called spin doctoring.

Declassified documents from both the United States and the People's Republic of China, as well as writings of the North and South Vietnamese, plus writings and documents from other players, reveal that the allies were *not* losing the Vietnam War. When the communists signed the Paris Accords, they did so because they were defeated. They feared being at war for another four years with Nixon in the White House. Referring to the October 12, 1972 negotiation session, Kissinger advised Nixon, "Le Duc Tho had presented a new proposal that met almost all our major requirements" (Nixon, 1978, p. 692). In a cable on October 21st General Haig told Henry Kissinger "We are dealing with fanatics who have been fighting for twenty-five years and have recently lost the cream of their manhood in the war" (Nixon, 1978, p. 699). Communist losses influenced their willingness to negotiate.

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South Vietnam's military was finally organized into a cohesive and effective force. Hard earned ARVN victories during the 1972 Offensive demonstrated that with U. S. material and air support, the South Vietnamese could hold their own against the best armor supported armies the communists could place against them. Kissinger (2003) affirmed that the United States did not

... go through the agony of four years of war and searing negotiations simply to achieve a 'decent interval' for our withdrawal. ... We were convinced that Saigon was left strong enough to handle the enemy forces that remained in its country; that we would resist other violations of the agreement. ... We sought not an interval before collapse, but peace with honor. (p. 428)

The Nixon Administration felt they had achieved the Johnson Administration's objectives for escalating the War.

Much like the Viet Minh felt betrayed by the results of the Geneva Accords of 1954, which they felt gave away half of what they won by defeating the French, many Vietnam Veterans, both American and South Vietnamese, as well as the South Vietnamese people, feel betrayed by the results of the War Powers Act, which gave away everything the Allies had won by 1973. The War Powers Act was an effectual statement to the North Vietnamese that we would not enforce the Paris Accords.

The turning point of the war was the 1968 Tet Offensive. K.W. Nolan (1996) states, "Hanoi, unable to win on the battlefield, achieved a psychological victory on the American home front because of irresponsible negative reporting of the Tet Offensive" (p. 119). The U.S. media ignored the evidence that the United States accomplished its objectives for becoming involved in the Vietnam War. U.S. combat forces prevented the fall of South Vietnam until the South Vietnamese were able to build a strong military capable of defending their own country. South Vietnamese forces demonstrated on the battlefield in 1972, they were capable of defeating the North Vietnamese aggressors and maintaining political stability with elected government officials. General Westmoreland (1967) addressed the State Department concerning the progress made by the South Vietnamese people,

In the midst of war, the South Vietnamese have in the past year held free elections and have turned out a larger percentage of the vote than we normally do in this country. The Viet Cong have tried

desperately to stop these elections by terror and intimidation. But the Vietnamese voted despite the Viet Cong efforts. This mass disregard of the Viet Cong initiatives killed the myth that the Viet Cong or the National Liberation Front speak for the people. (Westmoreland, 1967, p. 126)

The people themselves legitimized the government of South Vietnam.

Although the mainstream media ignored the evidence that the U.S. military defeated the communists on the battlefield, there were some correspondents who recognized the progress that was being made. Jack (Sandbag) Smith was a veteran of the battle at Ia Drang and an Emmy Award winning ABC news correspondent.

Smith said, “The networks have never given a complete picture of the war”. With respect to Khe Sanh, Americans were never told about the bravery of South Vietnamese fighting by America’s side, or that the “Viet Cong casualties were 100 times ours. We just showed pictures day after day of Americans getting the hell kicked out of them. That was enough to tear America apart”.

(Robbins, 2010, p. 250)

Similarly, they ignored the obvious fact that the last United States combat troops left Vietnam with a bona fide peace treaty two years, almost to the day, before the fall of Saigon. Therefore, when Saigon fell, the North Vietnamese defeated the South Vietnamese. They did not defeat American troops. The Nixon Administration signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam. “For many if not most Americans the signing of the Paris Peace Accords had concluded the war” (Lee & Haynsworth, 2002, p. 79). The Communists, convinced by the War Powers Act and the fall of Nixon over the Watergate scandal, that the United States would no longer interfere, which we did not, launched a successful invasion of South Vietnam in 1975.

Conclusion

The U.S. press was in a position to discover the change of public and military sentiment in Vietnam. Yet, they were so caught up in their antiwar groupthink they either failed or refused to see it. Conrad and Poole (2005) wrote, “excessive cohesion may also lead groups to do everything they can to implement a foolish decision and to ignore or distort feedback indicating that their decision was unwise” (p. 298). And Knapp (2008) advises “Sometimes we believe something is true based on the sheer number

of other people who believe it” (p. 23). This is the effect of the type of reporting we observed in the Newman sandwiching example. The American press was so effective at convincing John Q. Public that we could not win the Vietnam War that everyone began to believe that everyone else believed it. The facts that disputed that sentiment were withheld, distorted or cleverly hidden from them through the use of the techniques discussed in this paper as well as other techniques that are good fodder for future research.

Rather than the current ideology, an alternative ideology about the Vietnam War could have been and should be developed, based on the myriad of evidence. This ideology is: As part of the Cold War and in order to contain the spread of communism, the United States became involved in the civil war between the democratic South and the Vietcong supported by the communist North Vietnamese. When the Johnson Administration discovered that the communists were defeating the South Vietnamese in 1964, they decided to use U.S. combat forces to prevent the fall of South Vietnam. The objective was to shore up the South’s military forces until they could be trained and supplied sufficiently to be able to defend their country on their own.

Between 1965 and 1971, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) steadily grew in both numbers and skills, while facing increasing infiltration from the Soviet and Chinese Communist backed North Vietnamese forces. Based on ARVN progress, President Nixon began the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces in 1969. In the spring of 1972, the ARVN successfully repelled a massive Communist invasion, where the communists used more heavy equipment such as tanks and artillery, than were used during the Tet Offensive of 1968. This action convinced the Nixon Administration and the Joint Chiefs that the ARVN was ready to stand on its own against the North. As the North became convinced that they could not win against the South while supported by the Americans, they capitulated to most of the U.S. demands. A peace treaty was signed and the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces was completed by April 30, 1973. On January 28, 1973, the *New York Times* declared the War to be over, (p. 1). The U.S. objective for entering the War was accomplished and U.S. military involvement by combat forces ended.

Many films about Vietnam have been produced since the War ended. The predominant stereotype of the Vietnam Veteran derived from these films as well as from media coverage is a negative one. There are the revengeful soldiers of fortune found in the *Rambo* movie series or the drug crazed rapists and cover-up artists of *Casualties of War*. Most of the films that enforce the negative stereotype are fiction or occasionally fictionalized versions of actual events. *Dear America*, however, is a documentary. Couturié and Bird (2005) claim it to be “an authentic account of the Vietnam War from the actual letters of the men and women who served there” (back cover). This film takes advantage of the natural penchant people have toward stories about the things most familiar to them. Vietnam Veterans are thus a large part of the target audience. It is important to recognize the producers are delivering a message that can have a negative psychological effect on their audience. This examination can help veterans reevaluate the messages delivered by the media and help filmmakers in the future to be more aware of the harmful ramifications of the way in which they portray their subjects.

Couturie and Bird (2005) also declare that, “*Dear America* is a living tribute to them all” (back cover). While claiming to honor the veterans the film portrays, it subtly disrespects these veterans by using their raw emotions, expressed during the worst time of their lives, to perpetuate the message that what they did in Vietnam was useless and without honor, reason or purpose. For those combat veterans struggling to deal with guilt for the lives they took, the buddies they lost and the destruction that occurred while performing their duty, this ideology generates a cognitive dissonance that turns guilt into mental anguish. The film projects a façade of evidence that there was no justification for their actions. For those who lost family members, friends and fellow soldiers, the ideology of Vietnam being a useless war intensifies the pain of that loss. It is not surprising that Vietnam Veterans suffered a high rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Robbins (2010) relates the words of Lt. Col. David Funk, “The media got Tet wrong and they’re getting Iraq wrong” (p. 11). One can only hope that the Iraq Veterans do not find a sense of the same lack of purpose to their efforts, based on the media’s attention to the government’s failure to discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

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