INTERVIEW IV

DATE: May 27, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: BARRY ZORTHIAN

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: The Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: All right, sir. When we left off, I believe we were talking about the Tet offensive, the impact of the Tet offensive on public opinion and so on and so on.

Z: Right.

G: Khe Sanh was coming in for an awful lot of attention about this time, too, and there have been criticisms of that coverage. What was good or bad about the press coverage at Khe Sanh?

Z: One, on the impact of Tet on public opinion, remember, we were in Vietnam. The impact was back here, so people in the States are probably better judges of that. Khe Sanh, of course, was very easily--too easily--a very facile comparison was with Dien Bien Phu, and the press tended to build it up in that framework. It became a sort of ultimate testing of our military concepts, and the sort of threat of VC take-over in due time a la Dien Bien Phu was always in the coverage. It was never that kind of a situation. It was never in that kind of threat. But from the coverage you would have never known. It was the marines at battle, holding out in a circular perimeter against these overwhelming forces.

Well, as you know, that force was finally relieved and there certainly was never any surrender. While there was not a victory in a conventional sense, it certainly did not end up being the debacle that a lot of people had implied it might become. Again, that image of us being backed in a corner, with all the memories that evoked, was negative; it had a negative effect. Again, we were not effective, we were following the tracks, the path the French had gone through. Defeat ultimately was staring us in the face. If Khe Sanh had been all by itself, it would have been one thing. All of that, strengthened by the Tet offensive and the impact of that [was another].

Incidentally, that was one of the few places during the war where the press's presence was limited. Physically they could only take on so many. Therefore when the press went in, they had to rotate or they had to wait for someone to come out.

G: Because the access was limited?

Z: Yes.

G: Did you have to explain the ways of the American press to the Vietnamese as well as the other way around?

Z: All the time.

G: Did you have any luck?

Z: To some degree. As I say, my count may be off, but I think I worked with seven different directors of information or ministers of information, depending on the title of the department in that particular government. A couple of those had been educated in the United States. Nguyen Ngoc Linh had been educated, if I remember, at Bates [College],

or maybe it was Bowdoin [College] up in New England, and had had one summer as a copy boy at the New York Times and so on. He was a very active, very energetic Vietnamese whose family or wife ran a big English school. He understood the press, his English was bilingual, very colloquial, and I did not have to tell him very much. Another fellow named Dinh Trinh Chinh was minister for a while. He had been educated at the University of Missouri journalism school, so he knew some.

But most of the others, and particularly when they would put generals in the job, as they did two or three times, the press, and particularly the American press, was very alien to them. There were many of them who regarded newspapers, particularly the Vietnamese language newspapers, as a conduit for the government, as something the government would use. And the thought of an independent press that couldn't be controlled, that didn't do what it was told, was just an alien concept. It took an awful lot of pressure to familiarize them with the concepts of an American press. Now they had all been in country long enough to know the impact it had on the U.S., the effect of press coverage and public opinion back through the administration on the U.S. Mission, then pressure to them. And they also experienced or went through the period when [Ngo Dinh] Diem was tightening up on the press, including the foreign press. But nevertheless, essentially the concept of a press as we know it, as I say, was alien.

G: You've mentioned some of the dangers and pitfalls that happened when Vietnamese leaders spoke directly to the American press already. I

think you gave me some examples of [Nguyen] Khanh and [Nguyen Cao] Ky and so forth, so we can skip that.

What kind of guidance existed for the individual not high-ranking American when some reporter came up and asked him a question?

Z: Well, what we tried to get through, but I'm not even sure it was communicated fully, let alone understood and accepted fully, we said anyone in the mission, any of the military, any of the civilians, should be free to talk to the press. But they should talk only on those subjects on which they're qualified to comment, the areas within their personal experience. Engagement in a battle, dealing with a local village, conducting a particular program, that they are qualified to speak about, the good, bad and indifferent. They are not qualified, because they don't have the exposure or the vantage point, if you will, for making ex cathedra judgments on strategic questions, military questions, political questions that they have not been exposed to, that they don't have an overall viewpoint on. Now as I say, I'm not even sure that message was sent around, let alone understood and implemented.

G: I can tell you some places it didn't--

Z: Well, sure. And that's legitimate and that ought to be a principle to be followed, and I think our military as well as our foreign service should be trained in that manner. I think our structure of society being what it is, it's going to be the exception rather than the rule that people don't have access to all our government personnel, and therefore they should be able to speak and will speak. But it needs self-

discipline, it needs training and saying, "Yes, let me talk about it as honestly and frankly as I want to on what I know, on what my experience is, on what my focus is and actual knowledge is. But beyond that I should not be able to, and if I do, the media should put it in context and not accept it."

G: There was a famous example, and I'm sure you've had to speak to this one more than once. After the Tet offensive an American adviser in the Delta--

Z: "We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it." Now, Peter Arnett and I have argued about this many times, and I know how I think it happened. Peter has a different version. But I talked to the Major, who was a fellow named [Chester L.] Brown, who was involved, and there was no doubt some destruction of Ben Tre, artillery fire, air strikes or whatever, and I can just see Peter talking to the fellow, and the military man saying, "Well, some of this sort of stuff is necessary. It's a result of attack," and Peter saying, "You mean you had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it, is that what you're saying?" and the poor Major saying yes without any appreciation.

G: Do you have this from Major Brown?

Z: That, at least ten years ago or twelve years ago, was his version of events, that those words were put in his mouth.

G: I see. Well, I had understood that there was quite a flap generated.

Z: Oh, there was, because it was a great quote and it hit a headline. If you came up with a great quote there were always ways of putting it

in someone's mouth so it was fed back to you and used, and it made a first-rate story. But I don't vouch for its validity.

G: Arnett would--

Z: Or accuracy, if Peter would deny it then. Peter is too smart a journalist not to--and Peter's a very good journalist, but nevertheless, he's too skilled a journalist not to lead a person he's interviewing on to the things he wants to have said.

G: What was the impact from your vantage point of Lyndon Johnson's famous speech of March 31, [1968]?

Z: I'll tell you both a very funny incident and the impact. The timing of that happened to be exactly at the time, twelve hours around the clock, that we were holding a mission council meeting in Saigon. That speech was piped in to the mission council chamber chaired by Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker. At that time, based on seniority and so on, I sat next to [William] Westmoreland. The President went through the speech and then came out with that last paragraph about "I'm not going to run again," and I think genuinely most people in the room were surprised if not stunned. Westy leaned over to me and said, "You know, the President asked me about that last November, what would happen if he didn't run, and I told him he should run, et cetera."

The speech ended. Obviously it was on people's minds, but we went on to our mission council meeting work. The agenda must have taken about an hour or so. We broke up and went downstairs in the elevator. Westy started going out and the whole press was there, a pretty good-sized contingent of the press. They started asking him

questions about the President raising this issue with him last November and what had he advised. And Westy later told me, he said, "That son of a bitch Zorthian, how did he get down here so quick to tip off and leak it to the press?" What we didn't know was that in that hour we were meeting, in Washington, after the President's speech, George Christian had briefed the press and had said to them, "The President discussed this with General Westmoreland last November." That came in on the wire services received in Saigon. The AP and UPI bureau chiefs said, "Get over and ask Westmoreland about this," and that's why they were there. Not knowing about that Christian tag end, tail end of the thing, Westmoreland was convinced that little comment he had made to me in the mission council meeting, and during which I hadn't left the room thereafter, I had somehow or other leaked to the press and alerted them to come and bug him about it.

G: Have you ever convinced him that that wasn't the case?

Z: I don't think he's still absolutely sure. (Laughter)

G: That's great. That's great.

How did that affect things, now Johnson's not going to run? Did that--?

Z: Well, it had a great political effect, but you know, it confirmed the growing belief that Tet was such a defeat it had affected all support for the war, and even the President's judgment was that he didn't have enough support to continue, that he had been judged a failure by the American public and was not going to face the electorate again. As

you know, there were some votes for Eugene McCarthy in Chicago or Illinois or wherever it was.

G: New Hampshire, I think it was.

Z: Again, sure, there was some discussion of that in Saigon, but nevertheless, as a practical matter it wasn't a matter of affecting our operations out there beyond that confirmation that U.S. public support was collapsing.

G: Did the Vietnamese read it that way?

Z: Oh, I think they were very concerned that this sort of forecast or foreshadowed an American pull-out, at least weakening of our resolve.

G: You've recommended elsewhere how to conduct a successful government press relationship, so I'm not going to ask you to reiterate that, but I would ask--

Z: Now, I just gave you a paper, didn't I?

G: Yes.

Z: Okay, just put that in, because that summarizes some thoughts I have, and I've given you that speech I did at the Press Club back in 1969, so, yes, that covers it pretty much.***

G: Do you feel there's been any progress?

Z: Some. This thing is awfully hard to get a handle on because the press is so diverse and diffuse, as is the government's role, and most of this is subjective and instinctive, and it's hard to prove. But I do think, for instance, when El Salvador came--remember, Vietnam was then followed in due course by Watergate, which strengthened some of the, if you will, confrontation syndrome, confrontation with the government,

*** See article and speech attached to transcript.

questioning of the government, underlined it and carried it even further, where the government's word wasn't good at all. In El Salvador, it seems to me, as coverage got more intense and attention got more intense, there was an initial period of going off in similar tangents, if you will, and criticism of the press for the nature and content and direction and tone of its coverage. I get a feeling the networks and the major newspapers, that are to me the bell cows, if you will, of national coverage, did sit down and re-examine themselves to make sure that the various charges about media coverage which had grown over the years, Vietnam being a large part of it, Watergate part of it, other stories, were taken into account. And adjustments [were] made and an effort made for a more balanced, objective reporting, less advocacy reporting and less readiness to challenge every word the government has said.

Now, as I say, that's sitting on the sidelines watching some of the give and take and some of the results, so I could be wrong. But I do think it's had an effect on coverage in El Salvador, those lessons and those criticisms. I think generally the press, at least again the major national press, is conscious of many of the charges about the nature of their coverage and the institutional flaws and so on, and I think aren't making enough adjustments, but I think are making some.

G: Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't touched on, that I haven't brought out?

Z: Oh, not really, on things that aren't my special province. One of the things I think no one's really been able to capture, at least not in

terms of the mission council, is the intensity of the experience, the pressures that were on, the constant spinning, spinning of wheels, sometimes with movement. But LBJ, as I say, his overwhelming personality, his style of doing things, I don't think has ever been really evaluated, his impact on Vietnam has never been properly evaluated. The intensity and the pressures, and the nature of those pressures on the mission council, and through the members of it on the agencies working out there I think has not been really probed enough, has certainly not [been] appreciated enough.

G: That's a very good point.

Z: That and this whole thing of the constant choice of the lesser of two evils is something I think that tends to be forgotten.

G: Has anybody ever captured LBJ?

Z: I don't know. I did not read Doris Kearns' book [Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream]. I guess that's one that tried most of all. So I really don't know. No one has captured him in anything I've read.

G: How about Merle Miller? Have you read Merle Miller's book [Lyndon]?

Z: No, that's a more recent one. Both books I've gotten and I've put aside like so many other things. But the man, for better and worse, in many ways was a giant, both physically and sort of in personality terms. In other ways he was his own worst enemy. But the man was a presence you never got away from, even if you were ten thousand miles away.

G: I think that's a good place to end it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

MARINE CORPS
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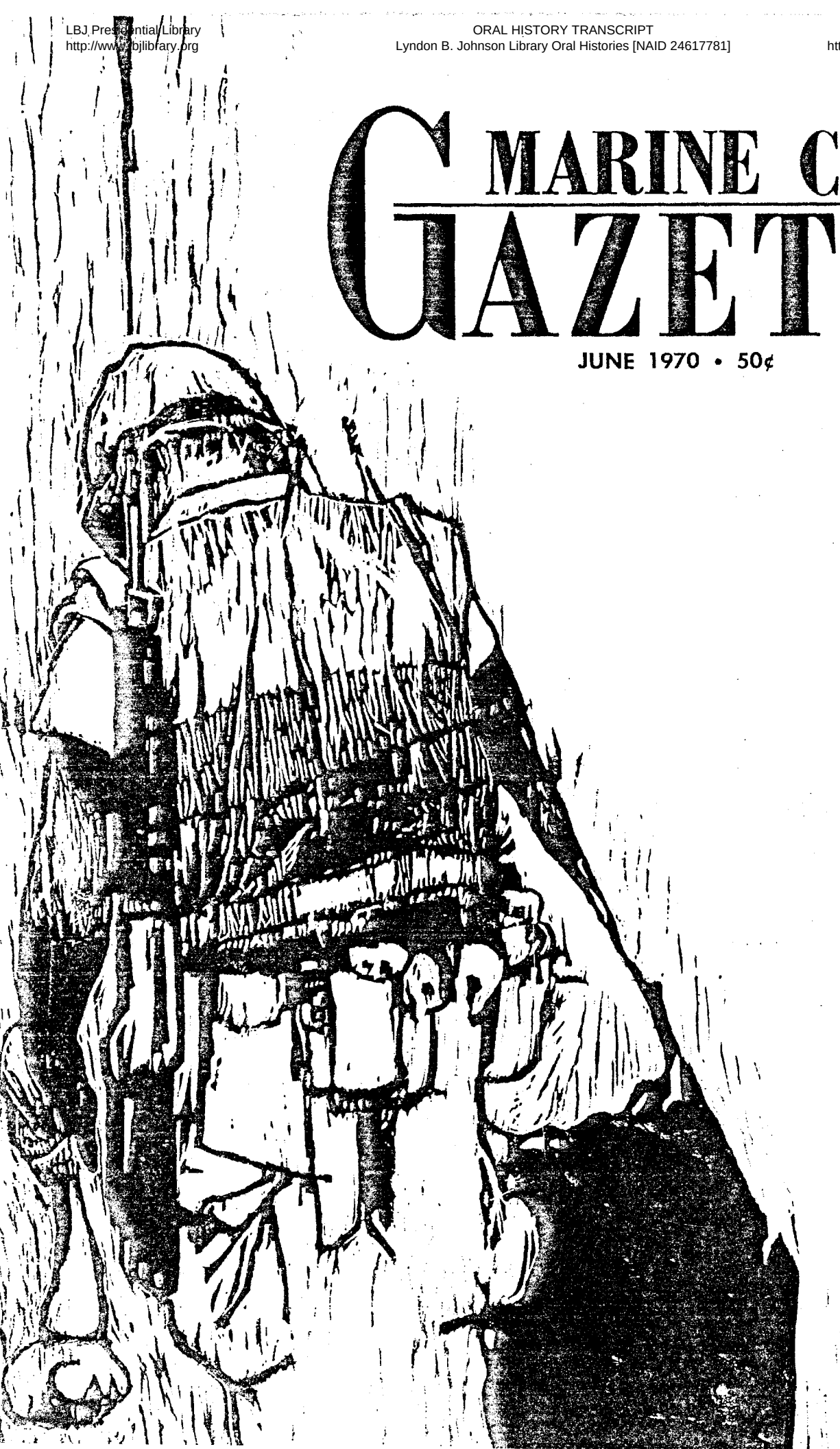

Press relations is an art that rejects a precise formula, but consideration of certain ground rules can make the often difficult task more effective.

EFFECTIVE PRESS RELATIONS

Col Zorthian's article is a moderately revised transcript of a speech he made to students at the Command and Staff College on 21Jan1970. Col Eugene H. Haffey, Director, C&SC, suggested that the lecture would be meaningful for all Marine Corps officers.

By Col Barry Zorthian, USMCR

AS a former Marine it's good to get back to Quantico. I am especially pleased to share the next hour with you talking about a subject of vital importance to Marines: the broad field of public communication—or, more precisely, press relations.

If there is a new dimension that you as commanders and staff officers must face up to in 1970, it is the dimension of communication—not as an additional duty or something to be done in spare moments, but as an integral part of your military duties. Whether you find it agreeable or not, the fact is with you and must

Col Zorthian, a Vice President of Time Incorporated and President of Time-Life Broadcast, Inc., served in the Government for 20 years. During his Government service, he served for 13 years with the Voice of America and 7 years overseas with the USIS in India and Vietnam. In the latter capacity, he was responsible for the coordination and direction of the Mission's press relations in behalf of the Ambassador. He served with the 1st Marine Division during WWII and is still active in the Reserves.

be accepted as an area that must receive your attention.

The temptation is for us to have a nice bull session criticizing the character and nature of the press and then leave early for the club feeling that we've put in a good day's work. Let me resist that, not because I'm here as a defender of the press but simply because I think that there's not much mileage to be gained in this setting by dwelling on the shortcomings of the press. If you ask whether the press has many faults, the answer is yes, it does. But let's put the performance of the press aside for the moment and look instead at the government's performance. Under that broad heading, I want to focus in particular on the performance of the military services and the Foreign Service in the context of Vietnam.

Vietnam represents what may be the most intense point of confrontation in recent years, perhaps in all times, between the government and the press. Consider the role of each in filing reports to the home front, the impact of one on the other, the effects of this interaction on the American public and, consequently, on national policy. These phenomena are going to occupy the attention of sociologists, historians, politicians and, I hope, military career officers for a long, long time—as indeed they should, for the lessons and guidelines they can give us for the future. I want to contribute to that exercise, to distill a few of what I think are the lessons of Vietnam in dealing with the press and suggest them to you perhaps as a starting point for future dialogue and analysis on your own part.

I think it may be well when considering the role of the government in this field of communication to step back a bit in order to attain some perspective in constitutional terms. My purpose is not to give you a course in civics. But I do think that in all the heat and fury of today about the press, its role and its performance, the constitutional aspect (the constitutional concept, if you will) is often forgotten. Our concept of government is based in part on a free press. It is an essential, integral part of the system of government that we have chosen. The press has a role to play in that system in behalf of the public as a monitor, as a guardian, as an independent judge of the performance of the government. This is a constitutional rule, but too often, I'm afraid, it is not really understood or accepted.

The press' role in our society is one of independence. It is not a handmaiden of government, so to speak. The press does not have the duty to create or contribute support to an administration or to any of the administration's policies. Its role is one of the critic, one of passing judgment. It is perfectly within the responsibilities of the press to pass judgment on the facts—on whether the facts are accurate, on whether they're complete, on whether we in the government—military and civilian—have enough facts at hand.

Secondly, it is the press' responsibility—its constitutional responsibility—to judge also the evaluation of those facts and the decisions and policies reached by those in government.

At its best, the press performs its constitutional role in a responsible, intelligent, positive sense. At its worst, it does it irresponsibly, with all the possible drawbacks and flaws that we're all too aware of. But I suggest that essential to any discussion of the problem is an acceptance of this concept of the role of the press in our society. It becomes particularly important in your case as career military officers and in my former role as a Foreign Service officer to be aware of this, because we do live a somewhat insulated life, a life detached from the normal mainstream of American society, especially when we serve overseas. And the press ends up becoming an inconvenience, an intrusion, a critic who isn't welcome.

An acceptance of the constitutional concept becomes doubly important when you consider that it's still possible today for an individual to become an ambassador or a general without ever having developed a sense for press relations, public affairs or communicating, and without ever really having had any training in it. This type of public relations course in a command and staff school is excellent, but it is also fairly new. One of the tasks facing Uncle Sam is the development of a press doctrine. It should be as much a part of the training of career officers as tactics in the military case and as political reporting in the case of foreign service.

The press media are going to be with us more, not less. We live in a world of instant communication. The flow of information to the public is just enormous. It's gone up several fold. I don't know how you'd measure it mathematical-

ly, but certainly what we and our children are getting is much, much more than even 10 years ago.

The average American today watches television for five hours a day, and of that a certain amount is news, public affairs, and so on. How long ago would you have accepted the thought that a man would walk on the moon and be watched simultaneously by 600 million people while he's doing it? Five short years ago, 10 years ago, if you'd made a statement like that, you would have been taken for a visionary. Such things could never happen!

Our capability in communicating is pervasive. It's become a much greater element in our lives. Our substantive ability has not improved equivalently; and yet, if we are to meet our present responsibilities, that ability must improve. Here, too, I suggest that we look beyond the immediate problems, frustrations and annoyances of the press and look at what is the ultimate target: the public—hopefully, an enlightened, informed public. Again, if we believe in our basic concepts of society, our government rests ultimately on public opinion. Our need, then, is for a more enlightened, better informed, more intelligent general public that will reach better judgments or at least as good judgments as possible. The channel to the public is the press. And in dealing with the questions that I'm raising, it would be well to remember that the press is only a channel, not an end in itself.

If we can start off on the basis of these few points, there are a few principles (or commandments, as I like to call them) that should be observed in dealing with the press and in becoming more effective in communicating. Number one is this basic point that I have tried to put across: respect for the role of the press; acceptance and understanding of the role of the press.

Secondly, in today's world a degree of sophistication, or candor, is necessary. The rhetoric of my generation, of World War II, is no longer good enough. In the mood of our society today, the "establishment," the institution, is under question and is being analyzed, and in the proper spirit this is a healthy process. A gap between words and fact—a reliance on rhetoric—is simply not adequate for this kind of a situation. I think that too often on the government side our approach to the press has been disingenuous; if not deceptive, at least misleading. This is not right in principle. You simply cannot get away with a gap between reality and your articulation of it. So the sophistication of the day—this irreverent, questioning, skeptical mood of the day—has to be taken into account and accepted as a fact of life. The issue is not really whether it's good or not; the issue is that it's there.

Let's try to put into perspective, also, the role of the public affairs officer. He is a staff officer; and, while I don't claim to present Marine Corps doctrine in this area, as a staff officer he should be used. I argue that the public affairs officer should participate in the policy-making process just as much as the G-3 or any other member of the staff.

The element of "public impact" is a factor to be taken into account in making a decision. It need not be a dominant factor, and there are many times when it will not be. But it is certainly not one that should be ignored. Very often, as many of you are aware, the ground rules under which we fought the war in Vietnam were affected by public opinion or the anticipation of public opinion.

The public affairs officer, then, should be taking part in the decision-making process and contributing his element, his dimension of the command function, to your over-all judgment. Furthermore, I suggest that he not be held to account, as is so often the case, for the failures—that is, for the negative stories. I've had a very, very knowledgeable ambassador tell me that the trouble with the Foreign Service is that it thinks it has to win all the press issues. It has to hit 100 per cent, and if it doesn't it's very disappointed. Again, it is the type of thing that's hard to measure. But if you do better than 50 per cent, you're doing well; and if you're getting 60 to 70 per cent on your side, just count your blessings and let it go at that.

The mood, the tone, the skepticism of the day almost ensures that you're going to lose a few. What a public affairs officer can do and what you do with his help and staff counsel is perhaps blunt the harm in a damaging story, making it less bad than it might be otherwise. I think that if you achieve that, you ought to be satisfied. A bad story is a bad story, and it's going to end up as such. The facts of life are not going to be changed. You can, perhaps, put it into perspective. You can, perhaps, blunt the negative impact by the way you handle it, the approach you take, and the attitude you show.

I said you can blunt and provide perspective; and I get to a next major point, which is education of the press. That sounds a bit patronizing, but it isn't meant to be.

When the press is filling its role properly, it is anxious to have information and facts as the basis for a judgment. You can help considerably in that regard by ensuring that the judgment exercised by the representative of the press is as knowledgeable as possible, by giving him the information you can subject to considerations of national and military security. To

There is a sharp distinction between information and publicity.

provide the press with the information at hand together with your evaluation of the information is part of a necessary exercise on your part to educate and inform the press. This important principle is shown, obviously, in the various techniques used in dealing with the press—in backgrounding, in giving the press access to military expertise, and in providing all of the facts and information collected. The press is going to file its dispatches. Far better it does so, even if it ends up critically, based on accurate information than done in a vacuum or on only partial information.

Let me suggest, also, that a very sharp distinction be drawn between information and publicity. A post newspaper, an instrument of command, is essentially publicity. Information from the viewpoint of the press is quite different. The press is not there not only just not to be a handmaiden, but it is not there simply to accept releases and file them without question or without further examination. One of the headaches we used to face in Vietnam was that too many of our press officers, both military and civilian, had been plucked out of post PAO jobs where they had been involved really only in publicity (they knew the story they were writing was going to get into that post newspaper) and plunked down in the middle of the hottest, most controversial, most complex story in the world today and asked to do a real information job, a press job. The distinction is a real one. It is one I think you have to bear in mind; and it is one, certainly, that the press is aware of. When you hear the press criticizing the pap, the propaganda, the government releases, what they're really criticizing most often is the government's efforts at publicity. There are some incorrigibles who criticize even the information side. But I haven't heard any really responsible correspondents complain about the provision of information to them. Obviously, most of them would welcome it.

Finally, I'd suggest as part of press doctrine that we look at the press as an opportunity. I think there is a difference in approaching the press within a framework of positive, constructive thinking rather than as a chore, a frustration, or perhaps the last choice beyond jumping into a pit of vipers. Too often our senior commanders in Vietnam, both military and civilian, failed with the press. As a result they failed with the American public and failed to support U.S. policy by actively disliking the press and by approaching the press in terms of hostility, whatever the justification. (There *was* a good deal of justification. I assure you that some of these gray hairs I attribute to my friends of the press.) Nevertheless, if you put aside the individual behavior of certain correspondents and look at them as a channel, as the means to an end—and the end is an enlightened public affecting decisions on great issues in our society—if you look at the press along these lines despite the temporary annoyances and frustrations, their reaction to you might be a little more positive. Because while all of the things I say sound fine in theory, they do develop and take effect and are applied by human beings; and the element of human relations in press relations is very important. To be respected as a human being by the press is an important part of it. While you can't change your personality to fit a certain mold, you can help influence these human relations by your own attitude.

And let me suggest that in this spirit of going half way and achieving a better rapport, you learn something about the tribal customs and mores of the press; that you understand something about how and why a correspondent functions. Just as you want him to know something about your business, so he will respond better if you understand something about his.

Here is a list of a few ground rules that I referred to earlier as "commandments":

No lying to the press. While that isn't very often done, I do say deception, deliberate or otherwise, has happened often enough. Being disingenuous, not providing all the facts—there should be no deception today. One of the aspects of Vietnam that will someday get a great deal of examination is the "goldfish bowl" aspect, the fact that everything was public. We not only had no censorship, I'm not sure we had much security. There were an awful lot of papers labeled "top secret" and so on, but there was very little going on in the country that the press or even the Vietnamese public didn't catch up with eventually. It's much better to get out the full picture accurately as you know it rather than be cute and coy and hold back part of it because you think it's negative and will affect the impression you want to leave.

Restrict security to an absolute minimum. Military security and national security have been used as a crutch too often for papering over just distasteful, negative situations. Hold security to an absolute minimum. If it's not justified, it won't last very long; it won't be respected very long. In terms of military security in Vietnam in the four years I was there, we only had four correspondents who violated the self-imposed ground rules on military censorship badly enough to have their credentials lifted. Out of 2,000 correspondents with as wide a range as you can get in terms of

quality and attitude, that's a pretty good record. Legitimate military security is not going to be violated by any journalist worth his salt. But if he thinks you are using that as an excuse for other purposes, your so-called security just won't last five minutes.

Establish ground rules in dealing with the press clearly and without any misunderstandings. Be clear and then be firm on whatever the ground rules are. Too often someone has talked indiscreetly, thinking he was "background," the correspondent thinking he was "on the record." Again, legitimate, responsible correspondents will accept ground rules. These are tools of the trade. They should be learned and they should be stated clearly without any embarrassment or hesitation. We just had occasion to talk to the Commandant about something this morning. He said, "This is a subject I cannot speak about." Fine. Period. This is all you need. What is not right is, "You cannot use this" or "You can use it but you can't attribute it to me," and then provide material and be surprised when it appears in print. Just know where you stand and how you're dealing with the press.

Parts of the government are interrelated. Neither the armed forces as a whole nor a single military service nor the State Department itself nor any other element of government exists independently today. Our world, our society and our government are too sophisticated. There is an interrelationship between the press relations of one element of the government and the others. Whether you are in a command position or a PAO position, you cannot operate and execute your responsibilities without regard for the impact on other elements of the government.

Your audience is a wide one. To fall back on a cliche, it is a small world. There is no distinction between a domestic audience and a foreign audience that means much any more. Why, our press conferences are covered almost as heavily by representatives of the foreign press as they are by the domestic press. One of the major problems you face in a place like Vietnam—and it is a problem that you've got to be conscious of—is, "Who are you talking to?" You talk to the whole world at once. Consider Gen Westmoreland as COMUSMACV just about two years ago standing in front of the American Embassy after the TET attack. He's talking to the Marine guards who are surrounding him then after a vicious all-night battle. He's talking to his command. He's talking to the South Vietnamese people. He's talking to Hanoi, to Communist nations, to Allies, to neutrals. Finally, he's talking to the U.S. There are conflicting interests, certainly, and what is appropriate for one audience very often is not appropriate for another.

There aren't any easy answers to this. A four-star general, after a fight surrounded by a platoon of Marines who went through a hell of a night, saying, "You've won a great victory here," is understandable. Two years later you look at that statement in cold light with the perspective of two years and the effect of that TET offensive and U. S. public opinion and so on; and you say, "How can a man be so optimistic?" It leads to a Herblock cartoon which you may remember: "All is not lost; the mimeograph machines were saved!" As I say, I have no magic solution for this problem. But it is a problem that must be borne in mind. Sometimes there are ways out. Very often you've got a conflict and you've got to compromise. All I'm suggesting is that it not be forgotten that your audience is a wide one; and, depending on the issue, it can be a worldwide audience.

You must take the initiative. Finally, I'd list the need for initiative, for being concerned about getting out a story—even a negative one—in your terms, under conditions of your choosing, and in a setting that you've help to set up. Again, this can be extremely important in the light and mood and tone of a difficult story. That first headline very often sets the tone. Provide the form—if you will, the framework—for the development and evolution of that story.

I have no firsthand knowledge of what went on behind the scenes in My Lai; but a "My Lai" would have been a negative story no matter what was done. I think it would have come out better—less negative, if you will—if the military had been in a position to take the initiative in surfacing it, to get it out under the best possible circumstances rather than having it leak out the way that it did. Bits and pieces came out, and the buildup was much longer than perhaps had to be the case. And the framework in which it came out was about as negative as it could be. So I don't say you could have gotten a good story out of My Lai no matter what happened. But it might not have been quite as bad if some initiative had been taken.

Too often in the past our philosophy has been reflected in the classic guidance to PAO's: "If asked, if you are questioned about this. . . ." I'd suggest that in many of these cases it's far preferable to take the initiative rather than wait for it to come to you, and that you'll end up with a better story.

Let me close with the point that I can't promise that application of all these principles I have listed will automatically bring you better press relations. For press relations is an art, not a science, and precise formulae cannot be applied. But I do promise that conscientious adherence to them will make your efforts with the press more effective; that it will make easier this critical task of communicating with the public which has become an integral part of your military responsibilities. USMC

FOR RELEASE ON DELIVERY

Address by
Barry Zorthian
at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C.
12:30 p.m., Friday, October 4, 1968

"A View of Vietnam and the Press"

When Peter Edson called to invite me to appear before you, I confess I accepted with some enthusiasm. I had been away from Saigon for more than two months and frankly, I was beginning to miss an audience and specifically was homesick for - I think the accepted description is - a stimulating session with the press.

Since then, the full significance of my commitment has begun to dawn on me. For a government press officer to enter this Basilica of the Profession and talk about the Press in Vietnam is somewhat akin to the quarry reversing direction and entering the lion's den to discuss the well-being of the occupants. There is no assurance he will emerge in one piece.

Just the other day, a leading television executive told an audience "It is the business of the press to tell the government how to run its business. It is not the business of the government to tell the press how to run itself." In view of past reaction on the part of the press to unsolicited advice from outsiders, this is probably sound counsel. So for the sake of prudence and the record, let me discard whatever government mantle I have, even though I may use the editorial

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"we" in referring to the government, and speak to you instead on a personal basis as a friend and associate who shared with your colleagues in Vietnam for over four years what has been perhaps the most difficult task of communication we have faced as a society in the post World War II era -- the task of communicating that complex, frustrating, perplexing part of our national experience known as the war in Vietnam.

I would like to examine with you today the question of how well we, the press and the government, performed that task. I speak of course only on the basis of my own service in Vietnam and my use of the past tense today reflects this context rather than any lack of awareness that the Vietnam story is still very current.

In many ways Vietnam was the supreme test of our abilities. That public opinion was a critical factor in the course of the war is stating the obvious. An analysis of the formation of that opinion would involve many ingredients and we may have to wait for historians to measure the interplay of various factors from the perspective of time. But, at the least, the information reaching the public from Vietnam was a significant factor. And it is not too early for us to look at the record, to note the problems and to seek solutions in order to apply any lessons that we may learn to the tasks of communication in the future.

Certainly in Vietnam, we had the opportunity and the means to demonstrate our competence. The communications revolution of the past two decades has given us the technical capability. In Vietnam, our government had unprecedented access to the media and the press had unprecedented freedom of movement and coverage. There remains the question of how well we met our responsibilities

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on the substance of the message.

I use the word "communication" -- a somewhat inadequate term -- to include the task of both the government and the press. For I am convinced that on issues of national affairs, we have a joint and parallel responsibility for communication with the public: the government out of its obligation to inform the electorate; the press in its capacity as the watchdog of the government in behalf of the people. Almost by definition, the government and the press are natural adversaries; but if our relations must have conflict, they need not be hostile and at best should be founded on mutual respect. Our relationship would also be healthy and beneficial if we could engage in constructive dialogue on our problems -- without self-righteousness, without recrimination, without undue sensitivity, all admirable qualities which too often have been absent in our exchanges in the past.

These are lofty sentiments -- perhaps they smack too much of theory and cannot exist in the world of reality. Nevertheless, I like to think that at least a start was made along this road in Vietnam. That the government and the press had differences there is hardly news. And that there were periods of hostility between the two is not a startling revelation. But I would submit that eventually, we eliminated most of the hostility - and while we still had very real differences in outlook, in evaluation and in judgment, we also had dialogue: hours and hours of dialogue at many levels and in many settings. The substance of that dialogue was most often the war itself -- its conduct and status. The intensity of those discussions and the preoccupation with our task at hand must have reached the

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stage of boredom for many of you who visited Saigon. I remember the plea repeated so often by visiting firemen "Don't you want to hear about...?" and the rude "NO" in response as we returned to the subject of Vietnam with renewed passion. As a debate went on, perhaps the atmosphere that was generated is best reflected in what came to be the preliminary to any assertion of opinion: "Now let me finish my blanketey blank sentence before you disagree with me." Of course, no one paid the slightest heed and I am not sure I ever finished a sentence. Against this background, need I add that today's opportunity for an uninterrupted monologue is doubly welcome.

Those discussions inevitably also turned to shop talk - to the question I posed earlier, to the performance of the government and the performance of the press. And, out of the heat of those discussions came an awareness of the problems that faced us both.

Insofar as the government's performance is concerned, I hope you will forgive me the understatement of simply recording that the government was not usually treated gently in those exchanges. I suppose I am one of the few men alive who can claim the equivalent of a four-year college course in the infinite variations of the use of the word "deception." However, my purpose today is not to defend the government's performance nor even to rehash it with you. Your evaluation of that has been thorough and blunt, as it should be, - and I might add not without effect. For while I am not prepared to accept all your criticisms as having been justified, I would also concede that the government profited from the exchange and sought to make adjustments in response to your criticisms. The results were not always completely to your satisfaction although

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some correspondents on occasion would confide that we were doing all right - after checking to make sure that they were out of earshot of their colleagues.

Rather than pursue further this particular aspect of the problem, let us agree today that the performance of the government must be improved and that we need to develop more effective means of communicating with the electorate as well as with people of other nations.

Let us turn to the other half of the problem. The Vietnamese say "The tongue has no bones. It can be twisted in any direction." What was the direction of the press? In seeking to respond, I make no claims to definitive judgment or that my particular presentation represents the views of your colleagues in the field - though I would note that the more thoughtful ones were as relentless in probing the problems of the press as those of the government. The difficulty in giving an unequivocal answer to the question I have posed is the same consideration that applied to almost everything else in Vietnam. There were very few blacks or whites. There were instead shadings of gray and a judgement as to the particular degree of gray depended on the outlook of the individual - and that in turn on his vantage point, his experience, his preconceptions. Judgments by me may be affected by the nature of my work in Vietnam and recognizing this, let me resort to my claim of friend and associate and attempt only to identify areas that at least deserve analysis for any comprehensive evaluation of the performance of the press in Vietnam.

The first major point to make in this attempt is that generalization about the press in Vietnam was as treacherous as generalization about virtually every other aspect of the situation. There was always an exception, a "yes, but".

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During most of the past few years, there were anywhere from one hundred to three hundred working journalists on hand at any given time together with supporting cameramen, technicians and assistants -- though my first daily briefing in my office in September of 1964, the start of that institution that eventually came to be known so widely as the "Five O'clock Follies" that even government press officers began using the label, catered to less than fifteen correspondents. Over the years, about two thousand different individuals were accredited and, including second and third and fourth visits by many of these, about four thousand accreditations were registered. These correspondents covered the full spectrum of competence -- from many of the best journalists available, to those for whom the label was only a thin camouflage for partisan evaluation, to the inevitable adventurers who had somehow obtained the necessary letter of endorsement. To lump all these into a single group labelled the "press" is obviously unwarranted and misleading and my observations today refer only to legitimate correspondents, not those whom I would describe as "non-journalists".

The second major point is that any evaluation of the press in Vietnam must recognize and pay tribute to that part of the record which was in keeping with the best traditions of a free press. The score of journalists who gave their lives in Vietnam attests to the degree of raw personal courage displayed by many of your colleagues. The professional recognition you have given the work of many reflects the high degree of their competence and integrity. Let there be no doubt that whatever the discomfort on occasion for officials, the press in Vietnam played its historic and proper role: the zealous judge of the government's performance, the independent interpreter of events. It did so under trying circumstances in which every facet of professional skill was necessary. The

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general assignment reporter in Vietnam had to be a journalist for all seasons - a combat reporter, a political analyst, a sociologist, an economist, an investigator. He faced the most complicated of assignments - the reporting of a so-called people's war that was alien to all previous American experience. A the response by many of your colleagues to this challenge was distinguished.

The third major point is that the record revealed problems and raised questions - problems and questions which grew out of the situation itself, and the nature of our system of journalism as it is practiced today.

Perhaps the most complex of these problems was the question of qualification of correspondents for this new form of war -- an insurgency war with its compound of military, political, social and psychological elements. There were a significant number of highly qualified journalists in Vietnam -- men who have been covering Asia for years; men who had sufficient professional experience to perform competently in any situation; men who prepared conscientiously for the task. But there were also many whose qualifications at best were doubtful. Qualification is not a matter of age or even of desire. It is a question of outlook, experience, knowledge, perspective. And the war in Vietnam required more than most a knowledge of the history, culture, politics and circumstances of the people. There is a cultural adjustment involved in going overseas for the first time, particularly to Asia. There is a personal shock effect in coming face to face with war for the first time. These can affect the nature and tone of reporting -- and the only way to reduce their impact at all is to prepare in advance. Perhaps few reporters would have responded as one did to my question as to whether he had read a single book about Vietnam before his assignment

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with the answer: "No, I didn't want to clutter up my mind." Or one who interrupted a military briefing to ask "What is a battalion?" If these cases are not representative, are they essentially different from asking, as editors did so often, for a definitive interpretation on the first or second day after arrival in Vietnam from a correspondent who has been plucked out of a domestic assignment with little warning and plunked down in Vietnam twenty-six hours later?

The problem was not unique to the press. The government faced the same question but, though we did not solve it completely, literally thousands of officers, both civilian and military, received training in Vietnamese history, culture and language for periods ranging from a few weeks to a full year before taking up their assignments.

Corollary to this problem of qualification was the problem of turnover. Again, there were notable exceptions and again the problem existed for the government as well but it seemed to be particularly severe in the case of the press. Correspondents are not born with experience and a period of training and acclimation is to be expected -- and was unavoidable in the case of Vietnam in view of the shortage of Vietnam specialists when the war began. Furthermore, war coverage is a young man's game though I might note that a number of veterans of World War II covered Vietnam with considerable distinction. But granting all this, does it make sense to transfer a correspondent quite so often after he finally gets that experience? I have admiration and respect for those correspondents who have stayed with it through these many long years but they are a relatively small group. Six month tours for "resident" correspondents and one and two week tours for transients were hardly exceptional. Just the number of

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accreditations alone indicates some measure of the extent of the problem. You would find it hard to believe the number of times we received cables that I finally concluded were a standard form provided by Western Union. The text would read: "Arriving Saigon Thursday morning PanAm Flight One. Please meet and arrange appointments with Bunker, Westmoreland, Komer, Thieu, and Ky. Also representative Vietnamese. Request travel Danang for interview Walt, Pleiku for quick review Montagnard situation and Delta where hope to see Vann. Also interested meeting with Gen. Thang and Major Be if time permits. Keep Sunday clear since I must file before departure early afternoon that day." And you know, sometimes they did it all. Vietnam must seem like something viewed through the window of a fast-moving train to these instant experts.

I am not troubled by the question of whether qualification or length of service in Vietnam resulted in criticism or support of the war; I am troubled by the question of the validity of the reporting when these are not present.

Another related problem was the one of sources. Few American correspondents knew Vietnamese; not too many knew French; and yet many of the most worthwhile sources in Vietnam were comfortable only in those languages. What limitations did this lack of language place on a correspondent in obtaining and evaluating sources? How much did he depend on other correspondents rather than undertake independent inquiry? How much was he a captive of his Vietnamese assistant or interpreter -- and what were his sources, qualifications and prejudices? What motivated the Vietnamese who sought out the journalist with information and interpretation? How much did the established Vietnamese source now respond out of habit with outdated comment on the general situation because

he had come to believe the correspondents wanted to hear it that way? Certainly, the official American position should be questioned carefully and providing public exposure for the dissenter is an honorable tradition in journalism but what were the motives and qualifications of the critic in the official structure? These are questions that must be faced and answered by a competent journalist in any involved story, particularly overseas, but in Vietnam, the problems were more complex and the judgments harder to make.

Standards and definitions were also a source of difficulty. What yardsticks were used to measure Vietnamese society? Western concepts and standards or measurements that were relevant and realistic in an Asian country in the midst of war and transition from a traditional society to a modern state? Even if we needed reference to our own standards to make coverage meaningful to an American audience, were we applying these standards as they exist in fact or as they are stated in textbooks? Why should we measure -- as some correspondents did -- the Vietnamese elections of a year ago against standards more demanding than "any election held in the United States"? We've been at it almost two hundred years; they, just a handful.

How were we to measure the war itself -- this most complicated of all wars where the people rather than territory was the objective? The use of statistics had severe shortcomings but was there a better yardstick or were we to depend on the divining rod of each individual? How valid in Vietnam was the normal practice of generalization based on the particular, of measuring the thousand by examining the few? And how did you evaluate the attitude of people in a

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country where sophisticated research techniques were limited at best and most interviews were suspect because the person being questioned assumed the inquiry was sponsored by the government and responded accordingly. I suppose the extreme example in this context was one correspondent who loudly proclaimed within twenty-four hours after his arrival in Saigon: "Hell, I know what the Vietnamese think. As a matter of fact, I talked to two of them today." Not quite. Not even when interviewed by both Gallup and Harris.

I don't think we ever agreed on definitions of relative words in Vietnam. Perhaps it was not possible to do so -- and expect the audience to have the same definition as well. But certainly the meaning of relative words represented a problem area. What was the meaning of progress in this unconventional war? What did the government mean and what did the press mean when it used the term? What was victory and corruption and democracy and stability and military capability -- in Asia and in a war of this nature? Were we talking about the same benchmarks or were we talking across each other?

Consider the problem of fairness -- not objectivity because that word is in journalistic disfavor today. Accepting the new standard, there was still a question of definition. Fairness as determined by whom and in terms of what attitude? What was the fine line between reporting and advocacy -- and had the line shifted? Was it "fair" to send a confirmed pacifist to cover a war -- and not inform the reader of his viewpoint? And how often in a situation where apparent proof of almost any interpretation was available, did the correspondents -- or his editor -- simply seek confirmation of preconceptions or protection of prior judgments? What was the price paid in terms of fairness by the Vietnamese

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government for its lack of experience and its shortage of facilities and qualified personnel in dealing with several hundred correspondents representing twenty or thirty nations while not a single correspondent from any country -- including the Communist states -- had unrestricted access to the other side during the entire war?

And finally, the institutional characteristics of modern journalism. What were the results of competitive pressure on correspondents? Did that rocket from the home office lead to more emphasis on the eye-catching, dramatic version that would outdo the competition than the niceties of complete accuracy? I am aware of the essential nature of journalism but I am also mindful of Heywood Broun's admonition that "there is no deadline for truth." Did the presence of so many lead the individual to try to justify his presence to his editor and audience by overreaching for the story that would distinguish him from his colleagues? How often was a story kept alive beyond its intrinsic value in order to satisfy the demand for more copy?

What was the effect of the volume of coverage of the war? That it was enormous is unchallenged. But did this volume contribute to clarity and comprehension for the reader or to confusion? How much of it was he able to absorb or did he ultimately just become dazed? The test is not the weight of the product but its value.

Have we learned to handle television -- or better phrased, has television learned to handle war and particularly this type of war? There is no question about the impact of the medium. But what was the cost in comprehension for the audience when the medium brought combat in vivid color into the family

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living room every day but because of its nature was unable to provide the same drama for the intangible or the humdrum that may have been more meaningful in the long run?

These are troublesome problems. Many are common to complex stories anywhere but some are unique to Vietnam and all were intensified there. I present them in some detail because I think that for you, as for the government, the problems demand more attention than the successes.

They do not constitute an indictment of the press nor does the posing of them necessarily imply conclusions that are critical. They do however represent areas which deserve frank recognition and searching examination for the lessons they contain and the guideposts they can provide for the future.

Let me add a footnote here. About two weeks ago, I gave a talk to the "other house" - the Overseas Press Club - in which I raised some of these same points. Within a few days, I received a tear sheet from the Saigon Daily News with a bold front page headline "Zorthian Hits U.S. Press" and a cartoon showing what purported to be a likeness of me holding my nose at the scent of a flower labeled "The U.S. and International Press". I hope today's exercise does not produce a similar result, for my intent is neither condemnation nor provocation but rather stimulation of your own analysis of these questions.

Certainly, I present no sweeping conclusions or easy solutions, though I suggest that some of the established practices of the press may be dated for the world of today and that a story as complex as Vietnam may require the development of new techniques and new self-discipline if only to reduce the scope of the problems. I also recognize that there are no magic formulas to

some of these problems and that in the final analysis, the answer will have to be what it has been historically - reliance on the judgement of a competent professional journalist. The real challenge then becomes the training of sufficient journalists - and editors - to satisfy the requirements of the press in this age of instant communication.

Whatever the answers, one thing is clear. Friends and associates can only pose the problems. The solutions can come only from you, your editors and your publishers. I have not forgotten the advice I accepted earlier; it is not the business of government to tell the press how to run itself, but I suggest that it is the urgent business of the press to turn its well-developed powers of analysis on itself.

For what is involved is not only the standards of your profession but in the long run, the confidence of your readers and listeners.

Gentlemen, I have finished that interrupted sentence of mine and now it is your turn.

* * * *

PREPARED REMARKS BY BARRY ZORTHIAN
FOR SESSION V
"VIETNAM RECONSIDERED: LESSONS FROM A WAR"

Our meetings this week continue a process that one sometimes feels began even before Ho Chi Minh returned to that troubled land in the forties: an examination, a searching, a conference on Vietnam, its problems and its lessons. How often have we looked at this land in these almost forty years and how often have we been frustrated in finding answers. The only hope I see in our sessions this week lies in increased perspective, in the "re" in "reconsidered", in the calibre and the knowledge of the participants. Before myths become history, let us hope that we can shed more light than heat this time at least.

Except for a brief visit in the fifties, I went to Vietnam almost exactly nineteen years ago - very junior by some standards, a real old-timer by others. Mine were what I call the Middle Years - the period between the Diem government overthrow and the build-up of American forces to a figure over one half-million in mid-1968. I might note parenthetically that the press corps in Saigon grew proportionately almost as much during the same years. I speak with intimate knowledge only of these years. For the others, my experience is that of an interested and involved observer but not of a first-hand participant. The distinction is important. Vietnam was many things in many periods. There are few generalities that apply to the whole period of American involvement and few lessons that are valid for the whole spectrum of our participation and experience.

This particular panel has been given the task of evaluating the quality of reporting - a judgment that must be just as complicated and inconclusive as the attempt to evaluate all the other major aspects of this most complicated and controversial of our nation's experiences in this country. One is tempted to respond to the question of whether the reporting in Vietnam was good, bad or in-between with the flip answer "all of the above." Such a response is probably closer to the truth than any flat, conclusive judgment.

Before turning to a more detailed answer, let us remind ourselves of some of the particular characteristics of the stage upon which the actors - the press, the U.S. government, the Vietnamese, Hanoi - operated. For these characteristics which made Vietnam so unique in many ways in our national experience certainly provided a significant influence on the response to the question put before this panel.

I suggest that these were elements of considerable importance in drawing up the answers:

o Vietnam was the first open war in modern history - at least during the period I am talking about. Whatever the merits - and there is much dispute still about whether there should have been censorship or not - Vietnam was conducted without pre-censorship and with unprecedented access for the press to the war itself and to the people involved. The result was a goldfish bowl atmosphere that brought with it periodically a tendency on the part of the government to compensate.

o And yet for all this openness and the huge corps of journalists usually in that country, I would remind you that Vietnam can accurately be described as a war half-covered. Sure, there was an occasional carefully controlled visit to Hanoi; sure, a Wilfred Burchett sometimes filed a dispatch supposedly from V.C. front lines. But the North Vietnamese and the V.C. hardly faced the scrutiny of dozens of probing, skeptical and critical journalists looking at every facet of their actions and communicating their findings in great and uncensored volume to a public at home.

o Vietnam was also the first television war - the first complete exposure of all the horror and destruction of war to a mass audience in color in the comfort of the home. And while some specialists believe that television in the final analysis did not make a difference, certainly television news came to maturity in Vietnam - and its impact was considerable in intensifying conceptions and emotions.

o Vietnam was our first experience with guerilla warfare - both the government's and the media's - complicated by a distant setting for which we had little knowledge and little empathy. The subleties required for this war and for this setting were hardly in the American manner or experience. The clash was not only of men under arms but of cultures, concepts, outlooks, and, yes, even methods of communication to the world at large.

o Vietnam also developed in its early stages and continued to have throughout an element of not only the normal and desirable adversary relationship between government and press in our system but a degree of hostility and dispute that fed on itself and destroyed any prospect of mutually developed solutions to some of the problems of communication. The government was cast in the position that its word was automatically questioned until proven correct in contrast to the past when its word tended to be accepted unless proven otherwise. The word of the press seemed equally challenged in many segments of the electorate.

o Judgments made now about practices then should be based on the ground rules existing then. Vietnam came in the midst of a social revolution in the United States - whether cause or effect I leave to the social scientists. But the government's relations with the media were changing. Indeed, the government's relations with its electorate changed. Many of the problems between the government and the press grew out of these changing relationships.

o To generalize about virtually anything in Vietnam was most often misleading and frequently dangerous. The war extended through many phases and many administrations; the press - and throughout these comments I use the word to include audio-visual media as well - contained many outlets, many forms and many viewpoints. To talk about "the goverment" is as inaccurate as to talk about "the press." There was no monolithic institution or control in either category. But what comment I do make about "the press" in these remarks applies to the major media, the national media, certainly not to the dozens of "non-journalists" who were present.

Now having cautioned against the practice, let me proceed to try to answer in general terms the question that has been posed to us. But in doing so, let me set my own limitations: I speak of 1964-68; I speak of Vietnam; I speak of the coverage of South Vietnam and the operations, programs and actions there; I speak not of the Diem period or the post-Johnson administrations in the U.S., not of debate or dispute about the war in the United States, not of coverage of Hanoi, not as to whether we should or should not have been in Vietnam, not even of the morality of war.

It is not helpful in attempting to make judgments in this framework to say simply, as one distinguished journalist wrote in 1977, that "more often than not, and for far too long, what the press was getting from the government over the long, agonized, tormenting years of Vietnam...was trash." Nor to say on the other hand as another experienced journalist wrote in 1981 "But never before Vietnam had the collective policy of the media - no less stringent term will serve - sought by graphic and unremitting distortion the victory of the enemies of the correspondents own side." The truth as usual is much more difficult and complex and it should be our goal today to move a little closer to that truth so that we can learn for the future.

Here then are some bottom line responses to the question posed by our advisory group, based on the period and limitations I have stated:

o More often than not, the press was more accurate in covering the situation in Vietnam than the official government public reports - at least up until Tet. And yet far too often at key points on critical issues, there were stories that contained inaccuracies, distortions and misinterpretations.

o More often than not, the U.S. public was well served by the performance of the briefing authorities, military and civilian. And I base this judgment not just on the on-record briefings but also on the voluminous backgrounding and on the extended and constant access the media had to government sources. And again I say, this is not to mean that there were no flaws in the government's performance and no need for improvements.

o More often than not, the press covered military operations better than the political aspects; the American presence better than the Vietnamese; the individual G.I. better than the big picture.

o Far too infrequently, in fact virtually never, did reporters transmit accurately the policies and objectives of the National Liberation Front and the government of Hanoi.

o Were reporters "used"? What does that mean? Were they given information with the motive of seeing a particular story appear in print? Of course they were - by the government, by the critics, by the South Vietnamese, by the V.C., by Hanoi; and, by each other.

o As the number of U.S. troops increased, did the press switch from political analysis to an emphasis on battle coverage. No but the press did let its growing opposition and criticism of the war begin to show up in the nature and tilt of its coverage - not more often than nt but in far too many cases.

What are the lessons of all this? Certainly Vietnam was a failure in terms of government communication to its electorate. I would suggest that perhaps it was not an overwhelming success in terms of communication by the media either. How can the two sides do better in the future? The particular set of circumstances that appeared in Vietnam are not likely to be repeated elsewhere but there can certainly be situations that lend themselves to the same kind of problems of communication. If there are, let me suggest some principles that need to be observed. I regret that these may sound like they have been taken from a page of one of the School of Journalism's textbooks but they were violated sufficiently in Vietnam to require repetition.

For the government:

o Expect and anticipate an open war with full exposure to the media - to a pervasive, probing skeptical media. Censorship and control may be possible in a conventional type of war but it is not likely to be practical in the type of situation we faced in Vietnam. Remember that for better or worse, the open society which we have chosen puts a premium on the role of a free press. The American public has never accepted censorship of the press in war except for protection of tactical military information. It is not likely to do so in the future. The non-military stories and judgment which are what gave you the most grief in Vietnam are part of the ground rules that are likely to exist. Understand them, respect them and plan to operate with them in effect.

o Develop a government doctrine in dealing with the press based on a concept of an independent press and as open a government as is possible. Make such a doctrine part of the training of your military and civilian officials - particularly the foreign service and the military officer corps.

o Provide full and candid information to the electorate on your actions and judgments. Maximum candor with minimum security is a principle well worth observing. Your communication must conform with the facts and with reality on the ground. And I add that it should be consistent, between Washington and Saigon, between general and lieutenant.

o Develop a better method of collecting information on military operations to meet the needs of the press and, beyond it, of the electorate.

o Learn from the press. Use its observations as a source of information, as a check on your own channels. The added input can be extremely useful.

And for the press:

o Re-examine the current institutional characteristics of the media. The pressures of time, competitiveness, volume and dramatic impact distort and intensify coverage to a degree that obfuscates rather than informs or clarifies.

o Place more stress on qualifications. The government was criticized for putting both military and civilians in Vietnam on a short tour. It was called a revolving door policy. But was the media any different? One week wonders and six month veterans passing overall judgments on this most complicated of situations. Sure there were experienced and knowledgeable hands but how does the reader or viewer tell one from the other, particularly when the newer is making dramatic and absolute comments in the effort to make page one or the evening news. The media has a need to spend more time and resources in developing qualifications of its personnel for complex and difficult assignments - time spent learning language, culture, history, politics, mores, even the nature and conduct of war if that is what is involved.

o Don't generalize from the particular. And for the government, don't dispute the particular on the basis of the general.

o Be skeptical indeed of the government's public posture. But be equally skeptical of all your sources. Look for the motivation - even from the critics, certainly from the other side and most of all from any of the actors on stage to whom you do not have access. Need I remind you that at least one major news magazine found out after the war that its most trusted Vietnamese employee, the man who had been senior assistant to at least five bureau chiefs, was a longtime V.C. agent.

o Discriminate and limit the authority of your sources to the extent of their expertise. The President and the private both spoke in Vietnam - and the press solicited and sometimes gave equal weight to both.

o Beware of the home office and its pressure for competitive copy. Beware of the herd instinct and your peer pressures. Beware of your own biases and sympathies. Save your opinion for product labeled as such. Keep your reporting to reporting.

o And finally when you think you see everything clearly, when you feel you have all the answers, when everything makes sense, when you begin to speak in absolutes and feel you are the sole guardian of truth and morality, run, don't walk, to another country. The time for reassignment has come.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Barry Zorthian

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Barry Zorthian of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on May 6, 1969 in New York City and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) During my lifetime I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcript and tape recording shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript and tape recordings without my express consent in each case.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Barry Zorthian
Donor

Oct. 28, 1978
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

December 11, 1978
Date