From Behind Enemy Lines: Harrison Salisbury, the Vietnamese Enemy, and Wartime Reporting During the Vietnam War

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Annessa C. Stagner
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by
ANNESSA C. STAGNER

has been approved for
the Department of History
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

______________________________

Chester J. Pach, Jr.
Associate Professor of History

______________________________

Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

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On December 24, 1966, Harrison Salisbury became the first mainstream American journalist to report from North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. From his position behind enemy lines, the New York Times reporter revealed that America’s bombing campaign was causing many more civilian casualties than the Johnson administration had acknowledged. Additionally, he challenged how Americans perceived their enemy by portraying North Vietnam’s culture and political ideology as legitimate. Evaluation of governmental and public responses to his stories reveals the significance of these reports. They sparked controversy that undermined American and international confidence in the Johnson administration’s credibility, decreased support for U.S. policies towards North Vietnam, and put increased pressure on the Johnson administration to increase efforts towards peace. This thesis analyzes those effects, the Johnson administration’s complicated relationship to the journalist, and the broad debate among journalists over the proper boundaries of wartime reporting.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Chester J. Pach, Jr.

Associate Professor of History
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: A Wartime Journalist Behind Enemy Lines: Creating a New Perception</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Public Reactions and the Johnson Administration’s Response</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Secret Side of the Vietnam War from Behind Enemy Lines</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Journalists Debate the Image of the Enemy and the Value of Reporting from Behind Enemy Lines</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Images</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABREVIATIONS

Hanson Baldwin Papers, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives..................BP

Harrison E. Salisbury Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
Columbia University..................................................................................SP

Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library ......................................................LBJL

Declassified Document Reference System ..................................................DDRS

National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD ...............................NACP

National Archives Building, Washington, DC..........................................NA

Record Group...............................................................................................RG

Department of State ....................................................................................DOS

*New York Times* ........................................................................................NYT

*Washington Post* .......................................................................................WP
INTRODUCTION

On 24 December 1966, American journalist Harrison E. Salisbury of the *New York Times* stepped off an International Control Commission plane and onto North Vietnamese soil. It was evening, and the night was crisp and cold. Salisbury would soon miss his overcoat that he had accidentally left in his seat on the plane. Yet his excitement was extraordinary. This, he knew, would be one of the biggest, most important newsbeats of his life. He was an American reporter, and he had stepped behind enemy lines.¹

Salisbury’s reporting from North Vietnam became much larger than what he had ever anticipated. He was the first mainstream American reporter allowed behind enemy lines during the Vietnam War, and he revealed that contrary to U.S. governmental assertions, America’s bombing campaign was killing a substantial number of civilians. Moreover, his first-hand accounts challenged American thinking about the war by portraying the North Vietnamese enemy as genuinely good-natured and their culture and political ideology as legitimate. His unprecedented series of reports landed on the front page of the *New York Times*, dozens of newspapers around the country, and many more around the world. Just as soon as the articles appeared, they provoked national and international controversy among government officials, peace advocates, and journalists. Salisbury’s reports not only raised questions about Johnson’s policies in North Vietnam but also challenged the limits of what many of his peers considered proper wartime

The central purpose of this thesis is to provide a thorough investigation of Salisbury’s reports from North Vietnam and the subsequent controversy they raised. It argues that in his role as a journalist behind enemy lines Salisbury had a significant effect on public opinion in the United States, international relations, and the profession of journalism. It consists of four chapters, focused around four main themes of his reporting. First, this study evaluates Salisbury’s articles. It examines how Salisbury portrayed the bombing of the North and the image of North Vietnamese society he produced through his articles and photographs. Part of this assessment includes a comparison between his reports and those of government officials and other journalists in the years just prior to his stories. Beyond the reports themselves it follows Salisbury’s continued activism in relation to his experience in North Vietnam after he returned home through his television appearances and testimony before government officials. Finally, it investigates Salisbury’s intentions as a journalist, evaluates the accuracy of his reports and testimony, and looks at how his background, political stance, and the nature of his visit influenced his reporting.

The second chapter investigates the controversy Salisbury’s stories raised within the government and society at large. This chapter utilizes newspapers, White House correspondence, and the memoirs of Tom Hayden and other peace activists to examine how Salisbury’s stories affected domestic and international public opinion on the war. By examining both private and public governmental responses to Salisbury’s stories, it also uncovers the influence the *New York Times* reporter’s articles and subsequent
statements had on how domestic and foreign political leaders including members of Congress and top British officials viewed the Johnson administration’s policies in Vietnam.

In order to give a full account of the controversy surrounding Salisbury’s stories, this chapter also addresses how the Johnson administration responded to Salisbury’s reporting and attempted to reestablish its credibility. It explores how Johnson used public statements to respond to criticism. Looking beyond his public statements, it investigates additional actions the Johnson administration took in an effort to defend its policies in North Vietnam.

The third chapter attempts to take the effect of Salisbury’s reporting a step further as it uncovers how his presence behind enemy lines played into the Johnson administration’s private thinking about secret peace initiatives, Operation Marigold and Operation Sunflower. Salisbury’s presence behind enemy lines suggested new possibilities for direct communication between North Vietnam and the United States through an American journalist. Although such arrangements did not originate with Salisbury, examining this specific case reveals how a third party could become deeply involved in international political exchanges between top governmental officials in North Vietnam and the United States. Moreover, it illuminates how Salisbury’s actions outside of his reporting helped to create a cold and bitter relationship between the journalist and the Johnson administration once he returned home.

Finally, the fourth chapter examines how other journalists received Salisbury’s stories. Many historians point out that well-known journalists were highly critical of
Salisbury for violating a long held journalistic taboo by reporting favorably on the enemy from behind enemy lines. This chapter investigates the criticism as well as the support Salisbury received. It provides a thorough evaluation of journalists’ opinions extending beyond the editorials of newspapers and exploring the personal views of the managing editors of the New York Times and other important commentators such as those of the Columbia Journalism Review, NBC, and the Pulitzer Prize nominating boards. It contends that Salisbury’s stories, rather than being barraged with criticism, actually resulted in significant debate among journalists about their own role as reporters during wartime.

Salisbury was a tall, slim 58-year-old man in 1966. That year his associates at the New York Times labeled him an “autocratic and often quixotic editor.”² Throughout his career, Salisbury was, as one journalist put it, one who “delighted to upset apple carts.”³ He was a man of deep passions, but few boundaries in his personal or professional life. He often broke the bonds of his marriage to experience true love just as he disregarded limits in his reporting to uncover the hidden story. Though late in life Salisbury remained faithful to his second wife, he had been discontent in his first marriage and often found himself in passionate love affairs during his international travels.⁴ In his reporting he

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⁴ The information on Harrison Evans Salisbury has been compiled from three autobiographical books: Salisbury, Harrison Evans Salisbury, A Journey for Our Times: A Memoir (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); Harrison Evans Salisbury, A Time of
thrived on controversy. As a student, he used his position as the editor of the University of Minnesota’s student newspaper, The Daily, to protest the administration and many of its policies such as a no smoking ban at the campus library. For his article, the university expelled him. Soon after, he landed a job with the United Press and became an international reporter covering World War II. He stayed in London during the air raids, visited the war front in North Africa, and directly observed the siege of Leningrad. Afterwards he wrote of what he saw in Leningrad in a book entitled 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad. The book, which remains an important history of the event, explores individual Soviet experiences with emotional descriptions and brutal honesty, characteristics of Salisbury’s style of reporting.

After his tenure with the United Press, Salisbury joined the staff of the New York Times and became their Soviet specialist. During that time Salisbury spent years in the Soviet Union and many other communist countries, writing reports that, like his work as a student, often pushed and overstepped boundaries. When he returned to the United States from Moscow in 1954, for example, he wrote a series of articles exposing the crimes of the Stalin era and revealing that Moscow had embarked upon a “new look” – punning on Eisenhower’s New Look in defense policy – that broke sharply with the old Stalinist policies. Salisbury’s claim that Moscow was making changes in their party line led to accusations in the United States that he was soft on communism. Simultaneously,

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the Soviet Union blamed him for exposing what the Kremlin wished to conceal and placed him on a blacklist, barring him from a visa. Afterwards, however, he gained much recognition for his reports, winning the 1954 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

Such controversial articles were regular occurrences for Salisbury. He incurred the wrath of segregationist Eugene “Bull” Connor, Alabama’s Commissioner of Public Safety, and earned himself and the New York Times a civil suit during the 1950s for exposing the racial divides and turmoil in Birmingham, Alabama in an article entitled “Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham.”6 Returning to international reporting, he wrote about a growing rift between China and the Soviet Union and the revival of a neo-Stalinist movement. Both subjects again disturbed his readers in the United States, and his host country, the Soviet Union, once more placed him on its blacklist. “My opinions on Russia and other areas seldom seem to satisfy the officials either in Washington or in Moscow,” Salisbury wrote to a government official. “I like that. It tells me that I am bound by no party line and probably hitting a good deal closer to the reality than is possible for officialdom at either end of our polarized world.”7 Harrison Salisbury was an iconoclast and a rebel. He believed his purpose as a journalist was to expose those unpleasant realities that individuals in power wished to keep hidden. “The truth,” as

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6 The lawsuit against Salisbury also involved other NYT reporters and finally ended when the Supreme Court broadly affirmed the right of the press to criticize and report activities and conduct of public officials in Sullivan v. NYT. Salisbury, A Time of Change, 58-60; Salisbury, A Journey for Our Times, 534.

7 Letter, Salisbury to William Bundy, Catalogued Correspondence, William P. Bundy, SP.
Salisbury wrote, “is the most dangerous thing. There are no ends to which men of power will not go to put out its eyes.”

Like many of his previous reporting assignments, Hanoi attracted Salisbury because it was impenetrable. Although many journalists had attempted to gain admission to North Vietnam, prior to December 1966 the North Vietnamese government had refused to issue visas to mainstream American reporters. Foreign correspondents from countries such as Sweden, Poland, Japan, and France gained admission. English reporter James Cameron had been writing from Hanoi since 1965, and Bernard Fall, who came from a European background and academic position, gained admittance. The only three Americans who had visited North Vietnam were Herbert Aptheker, an historian and member of the Communist Party, Tom Hayden, founding member of Students for a Democratic Society, and radical Yale Professor Staughton Lynd. Besides being communist sympathizers prior to their departure, they never gained the approval of the U.S. government for their visit. In short, the North Vietnamese government had not allowed any mainstream U.S. reporter with a valid U.S. visa to enter North Vietnam, making thorough American reporting on the enemy difficult, if not impossible. As a

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8 Salisbury, A Journey for Our Times, 94.


mainstream American reporter, Salisbury hoped he might be the first to remedy this great deficiency in U.S. war coverage.

Besides the sheer fascination of being the first American journalist from a major news publication to report from North Vietnam, exploring North Vietnam’s perspective on the war fascinated Salisbury. Although he was not a pacifist, he opposed the Vietnam War. He followed the line of many of his coworkers and the publisher of the *New York Times* who had become increasingly dissatisfied with the military’s inability to secure and stabilize South Vietnam and the escalating destruction taking place there. Salisbury was particularly concerned with the immense human sacrifice that came with war. When Salisbury reported during war, he often remembered the World War II journalist Ernie Pyle’s descriptions of soldiers’ great sacrifices in war, and the destruction upset him. Salisbury also kept regular contact with Wilfred Burchett and other foreign journalists in North Vietnam. Through their sympathetic descriptions of the North, Salisbury came to believe that the war was inflicting a heavy toll on not only U.S. soldiers but also the Vietnamese people themselves. He simply felt this war was not worth its cost.

In many ways Salisbury’s concern for the lives of civilian Vietnamese drew him behind enemy lines. Salisbury was particularly concerned with the bombing of North Vietnam. President Johnson had first initiated retaliatory air attacks during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, when the administration declared that the North Vietnamese had attacked American ships. After sporadic bombing raids on North Vietnam, the practice became an institutionalized part of U.S. policy on March 2, 1965 in an operation called

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Rolling Thunder. The raids had been controversial from the beginning. Many international parties, particularly the French and Russians, believed that the bombing had little effect and ruined any chance of future negotiations. For Americans, Johnson’s bombing – first on the edge of North Vietnam and then closer and closer to Hanoi itself – seemed to signal a slowly escalating war, a war out of control. Salisbury identified with those concerns. Even more he questioned Johnson’s repeated assertions that his continuous bombing of the North was “directed at concrete and steel, not human life,” that those strikes were “controlled with the greatest of care.” Johnson insisted American bombs caused minimal civilian damage compared to the “reckless” attacks carried out by “terrorists” in the South. Salisbury’s World War II experience had taught him that no bombing could be as precise and accurate as the administration claimed. Moreover, he had read from other foreign correspondents such as Jacques DeCornoy of the French *Le Monde* and Burchett that the bombing was not at all accurate and killing civilians. Salisbury counted every life taken by war a real tragedy. Consequently, the Johnson

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13 For earlier visitors to North Vietnam, see *They Have Been in North Viet Nam*. Salisbury acknowledges Aptheker, Cameron and DeCornoy in Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 5-6, 29. Also see Herbert Aptheker, *Mission to Hanoi* (New York: International Publishers, 1966); Cameron, *Here is Your Enemy*.
administration’s dismissal of evidence of civilian destruction in North Vietnam deeply disturbed him.  

Salisbury’s dream of reporting from North Vietnam became reality when he set foot in Hanoi on 24 December 1966, just nine days after he had received a cable from the North Vietnamese government informing him that it had approved his visa for travel to North Vietnam. Salisbury did not know why the North Vietnamese had chosen him, among fifty-eight other U.S. reporters who had also applied for entrance, to be the first mainstream U.S. reporter. Though their decision still remains a mystery today, there is ample evidence to suggest that the North Vietnamese invitation had much to do with the failure of Operation Marigold. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the North Vietnamese terminated this secret peace initiative the day before extending their invitation to Salisbury, insisting to their Polish intermediaries that they would not negotiate because of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. Why the North Vietnamese chose Salisbury may have much more to do with Salisbury himself. Salisbury did more than any other reporter did to make himself known to Hanoi and demonstrate his eagerness to report from their country. “I had been battering their doors for some eighteen months,” he later recalled.

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14 Salisbury’s frustration with the Johnson administration is reflected in Salisbury, Behind the Lines, 3-5. His general feelings on war and the cost of war in terms of human life are evident throughout his articles on North Vietnam, discussed in Chapter 1. Salisbury also expressed his feelings on war in Salisbury, A Journey of Our Times, 9.

15 Murrey Marder of the Washington Post, John Hughes of the Christian Science Monitor, and journalist Stanley Karnow, for example, had been approved by the State Department in anticipation of their travel. Memorandum to Secretary, “Travel of Americans to North Vietnam,” 29 December 1966; Weekly Focus Reports 10/1966-10/1971; 10/1966-03/1969 to 02/1967; Executive Secretariat, DOS, RG 59, NACP.
He continually applied for entrance, sending letters to Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister of North Vietnam, and cabling the North Vietnamese government. More aggressively, he took a two and one-half month tour of the periphery of China in order to make more contacts with the North Vietnamese government, and in doing so applied for entrance again at the embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Additionally, Salisbury worked hard to gain contacts who would send recommendations to North Vietnam on his behalf. By December, he had recommendations from communist officials in the Soviet Union, Tom Hayden who had visited North Vietnam, and Anne Morrison, the wife of Norman Morrison who had burned himself to death in protest of the war in front of the Pentagon in 1965.

Beyond his determination and constant petitions, Salisbury had personal success and prestige. His credentials were outstanding. He had won a Pulitzer Prize, and he was assistant managing editor of the New York Times, one of the largest, most well known news outlets in the world. This point deserves emphasis. The New York Times reigned as the newspaper of record in the 1960s. Not only did the paper maintain a high number of respected domestic reporters, but also had a high number of well-qualified foreign correspondents. A survey published in 1963 called the New York Times “an opinion making bible.” Seventy-seven percent of national leaders not in government relied on the

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16 Oral History Interview with Harrison Salisbury, 26 June 1969, LBJL,

17 After seeing bomb damage in the North, Tom Hayden suggested to the North Vietnamese officials to allow a well-known journalist into their country. He recounts his suggestion of Salisbury in Tom Hayden, Reunion: A Memoir (New York: Random House, 1988), 236. For discussion on Anne Morrison’s request to North Vietnam and Salisbury’s communist contacts see Salisbury, Behind the Lines, 8-9.
New York Times for information on world affairs.”18 Congressional leaders and nearly all government officials also depended on the New York Times for accurate, detailed information.19 In another survey ninety percent of newspaper journalists themselves cited the New York Times as the most fair, reliable news source.20 Consequently other newspapers, newsmagazines, and even TV news took their information from the New York Times powerhouse.21 Internationally the paper also had a high reputation, especially in terms of informing on U.S. foreign policy issues. As a state department official said, “If the Times ran a piece about American policy toward Costa Rica, and it was all cockeyed and came from a postal clerk, it would still take at least an assistant secretary to convince the Costa Ricans it wasn’t true.”22

The world understood that, as William Rivers wrote, the New York Times had “a passion for the facts.”23 The New York Times’ power and Salisbury’s determined


19 Rivers wrote that “every official, even the most powerful, needs a New York Times, for he is to some extent insulated from the realities his own administration creates by the fears and the ambitions of his subordinates, not to mention the confusion in communications.” Rivers, The Opinionmakers, 78.

20 Ibid., 54.

21 Baughman, for example, argues that Time magazine relied on the New York Times for its information in Henry R. Luce, 39-41.

22 Rivers, The Opinionmakers, 71.

23 Ibid., 77-78.
personality and love of controversial reporting worked well for the North Vietnamese, who would convey information to the journalist that contradicted the statements of his own government. As Clarence R. Wyatt, author of *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* asserts, it was “much more difficult for the American press, government, and people to ignore reports from North Vietnam by a respected representative of an important American news organization.”

Salisbury’s visit came at a particularly crucial time. By December of 1966, many Americans were becoming increasingly frustrated with the Johnson administration’s policies in Vietnam. There were almost 400,000 Americans in uniform in Southeast Asia, yet victory was only a distant hope. The president’s credibility gap—his lack of candor when discussing U.S. policies or the situation in South Vietnam—added to public anxieties about the war. Just half of the American people supported the administration’s war policies. Meanwhile December of 1966 was a crucial time for the North Vietnamese. The rapid escalation of U.S. military commitment in Vietnam had stunted Northern military success, and Hanoi was looking for new political and diplomatic strategies to boost their sagging troop morale. A U.S. bombing raid on December 13 and 14 just

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25 The North began a “wave of political activities called ‘Resolve to defeat the American aggressors,’” which suggests the North Vietnamese were looking for political solutions to their increasing military problems. Merle L. Pribbenow, ed. and trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 182-183. DRV also discussed new diplomatic initiatives to supplement their military strategy. See Mark Atwood Lawrence, "Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi
miles from the center of Hanoi heightened tensions further and deeply angered both Hanoi and Moscow.26 Salisbury as well as top leaders in Hanoi and Washington understood many of these developments and that reporting on them from the largest, most trusted American newspaper would have dramatic implications.

Although Salisbury’s reporting has rarely been the central focus of historical scholarship, several writers note Salisbury’s reporting in their works on the media and the Vietnam War. According to existing scholarship Salisbury’s primary purpose in visiting the North was to inspect the damage caused by the U.S. bombing. In that respect, his reports did two things: they questioned the effectiveness of U.S. tactics and demonstrated that the bombing injured many more civilians than the U.S. government’s statements suggested. Salisbury made clear that U.S. bombing raids in the North were not effective. He pointed out, for instance, that the North Vietnamese repaired their roads and facilities with such speed that the transportation of supplies and war material continued with relative ease.27 As Phil Goulding who served as Assistant Secretary Defense for Public


Affairs, has written, what made his reports especially controversial was the moral issue they raised regarding the North’s civilian population. Salisbury contradicted U.S. government assertions that bombing inflicted only minimal civilian damage by reporting that it was extensive and devastating civilian noncombatants.

Salisbury also went beyond reporting on military affairs in his accounts by providing a favorable assessment of everyday life in North Vietnam. He described the North Vietnamese as a strong and determined people who held common political and religious ideals with Americans. Salisbury said the North Vietnamese cherished freedom and independence just as Americans did, and he emphasized that French and American missionaries had created a substantial Catholic following in the North. He portrayed the North’s industrial towns as modern, reflecting a sophisticated society, and described the simplicity of the countryside peasants. In The “Uncensored War,” Daniel Hallin points out that Salisbury’s portrayal was not the “one-dimensional image of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical.” Instead, as Wyatt states in Paper Soldiers, Salisbury showed “another people trying to make a life for themselves and their children amid hardship and sacrifice.”

Through combining an investigation of U.S. bomb damage with a detailed assessment of North Vietnamese life, Salisbury described a thriving society ravaged by a

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30 Wyatt, Paper Soldiers, 156.
U.S. bombing campaign – a bombing campaign that was neither breaking the North Vietnamese will to fight nor stopping the flow of men and materials to the South. Such an assessment did not bode well for public opinion concerning U.S. policies in North Vietnam. Loren Thompson points out in *Defense Beat: The Dilemmas of Defense Coverage* that during the Vietnam War fewer restrictions and considerable more freedom than past wars allowed major news outlets such as the *New York Times* to publish reports that were critical of U.S. governmental policies.\(^3\) During World War I and II, for example, war correspondents accompanying military forces were subject to censorship in the interests of maintaining military secrets. The Office of War Censorship implemented during World War II further censored reporting based on the interests of the U.S. government. Censorship lifted during the initial stages of the Korean War, but tougher constraints were imposed after Chinese entry into the war. The concern, as always, remained what effect news reporting might have on military success or failure in the field. What might happen, for example, if the enemy learned of American strategy or position through American reporting? During the Vietnam War, however, reporters enjoyed much more freedom for a number of reasons. The U.S. government found implementing censorship without an official declaration of war problematic. Government officials also believed concealing information in an international arena would be impossible. Furthermore, by allowing communications to remain open, Johnson hoped to promote a congenial relationship with the media, one that would

produce favorable coverage of his administration’s Vietnam policies. Consequently, although government officials discussed implementing censorship at various times, they maintained only a system of voluntary restraint.

This system of voluntary restraint quickly led to complications. Reporters like Neil Sheehan, Michael Herr, David Halberstam, and Charlie Morh in South Vietnam learned not to trust military reports, which were often misleading. Such distrust resulted in friction between the military and the media. As journalists became more apt to question the government line, friction only worsened. The armed forces, for example, barred correspondents from missions that would result in negative news coverage. Still, negative coverage existed. But as many of these reporters admitted, negative stories often drew much criticism from both governmental officials and the American public. Indeed, such tension between the media, the government, and the American people in regard to the journalist’s duty in reporting on war were highlighted with Salisbury’s reports.

Recalling his reports, Salisbury wrote in his memoirs, “I didn’t put any spin on it.” Yet as historian William Hammond contends, Salisbury’s accuracy came under sharp criticism from both government officials and journalists. Only days after his first report, evidence mounted that he had used a North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet entitled “Report on U.S. War Crimes in Nam-Dinh City” as his main source of

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33 Salisbury, A Time of Change, 133.
information. Some journalists argued that, although official reports from Washington were objective, no report from behind enemy lines could ever be objective because of enemy propaganda. Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post*, for example, called Salisbury “Ho’s chosen Instrument,” a pawn of North Vietnamese propaganda. Some historians have agreed. In *America in Vietnam*, Guenter Lewy describes the similarities between the North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet and Salisbury’s reports in detail. In *Why We Were in North Vietnam* Norman Podheretz takes an even more one-sided approach, claiming that Salisbury’s reports contained no truth, that he was nothing more than a mouthpiece for the North Vietnamese. Though Salisbury had attempted to maintain an unbiased stance, this incident caused questions about the accuracy of a reporter who went behind enemy lines.

Despite his critics, Salisbury’s stories had an impact on public opinion towards the Johnson administration’s policies in Vietnam, and consequently ignited debate both within the government itself and journalistic circles. Phil Goulding recounts that Salisbury’s stories were a public relations disaster for the Pentagon because many people came to believe that the government had been dishonest with the American public about the reality of civilian damage caused by their bombing campaign. Creating a stir in Washington, Salisbury set off a series of debates, and, as historian William Hammond


writes in *Media and the Military*, contributed to the growing friction between the government and media during the Vietnam War.

Most historians contend that journalists aligned themselves with the government and tried to stop this growing friction by criticizing Salisbury’s reports. Ted Carpenter argues in *The Captive Press: Foreign Policy Crisis and the First Amendment* that the government and media banded together to discredit reporters such as Salisbury. Similarly, in *The Press and the Cold War*, James Aronson maintains that Salisbury’s fellow journalists worked as the “handmaidens” of the state, protecting state interests and attacking the credibility of their fellow journalist. Wyatt concludes that the criticism Salisbury’s stories received demonstrated the media’s unwillingness to go out on a limb for their reporters. Mark Lawrence provides the most recent and comprehensive account of Salisbury’s reporting in his article “Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury’s Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War.” Although Lawrence offers a detailed assessment of the reports themselves and journalists’ initial reactions to them, his account does not extend beyond January of 1967 or adequately assess the support Salisbury received from the journalistic community. Instead, he reaffirms previous historians’ contention that most journalists followed the government in condemning Salisbury’s stories, a fact he believes demonstrates the constraints that operated within the news media to stifle dissent against the war.37

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Though historians are right to point out the criticism Salisbury received, their analysis provides an inadequate assessment of his reports’ significance for the Johnson administration’s war effort and the profession of journalism. In *Lyndon Johnson’s Dual War*, Kathleen Turner suggests that Salisbury’s reporting had broader implications. Though journalists had long distrusted governmental reports, Turner asserts Salisbury’s accounts reinforced journalists’ belief that they needed to question whether or not they were getting the whole truth from government sources. Yet Turner’s analysis offers only a short overview of Salisbury’s reporting with little detail.38 None of the existing accounts records Salisbury’s additional actions such as his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, gives a comprehensive explanation of government actions in response to Salisbury’s activities, or looks at how other media commentators outside the newspapers received his stories. This thesis, then, attempts to provide an all-inclusive examination of Salisbury’s reporting, going beyond the existing accounts to analyze not only the controversy in more depth but also its long-term implications.

Salisbury’s reporting had long-term implications. As this thesis argues, it increased American opposition to the war, stimulated additional international pressure on the Johnson administration to alter its policies in North Vietnam, and encouraged journalists to question governmental assertions in an effort to report accurately on the war. Additionally, this examination provides an in-depth look at how wartime media portrayed the wartime enemy and how individuals reacted to an alteration in that image. It demonstrates how the Johnson administration publicly prepared for and responded to

criticism. Finally it reveals the depth with which feelings on the Vietnam War and its portrayal in media divided journalists and newsrooms.

When Harrison Salisbury reported from North Vietnam he took an unprecedented step. In doing so, he provided information about the U.S. bombing campaign and North Vietnamese society that caused his readers to rethink their beliefs about North Vietnam and Johnson’s military actions there. Salisbury’s reports raised questions we continue to ask today. *Does the government have an obligation to provide the American public with detailed information regarding war efforts? What constitutes fair journalism, and should journalists portray enemy beliefs as legitimate?* Salisbury’s reporting reveals that the answers to such questions are complex. In searching for those answers, one gains a deeper understanding of the turbulent years of the 1960s, the evolution of government and media relations, and the profession of wartime journalism.
CHAPTER 1: A WARTIME JOURNALIST BEHIND ENEMY LINES:
CREATING A NEW PERCEPTION

By 29 December 1966, only five days after Salisbury’s first report, his stories had become a sensation across the United States and around the world. Without access to North Vietnam, most American reporters had relied on long held assumptions about the enemy rather than informed knowledgeable facts, and, as a result, Salisbury’s accounts stood out. From behind enemy lines he became an eyewitness informant who could provide his readers with exceptional detail. His accounts also attracted attention because his assertions about North Vietnamese society and America’s bombing campaign there sharply contrasted with existing ideas about North Vietnam expressed in U.S. governmental and media rhetoric. Salisbury presented an alternative image of the enemy in his reports and continued to do so through television interviews and meetings with government officials when he returned home.

This chapter examines the image of North Vietnam produced through the statements of government officials and other journalists in the years just prior to Salisbury’s reporting. It then looks at Salisbury’s portrayal of the bombing of the North and the picture of North Vietnamese society he produced through his articles and photographs, revealing how his portrayal contrasted with the previous images. Following Salisbury’s actions when he returned home through his television appearances and testimony before governmental officials, it demonstrates the consistency with which Salisbury asserted an alternative image of the North Vietnamese. Finally, it investigates Salisbury’s intentions as a journalist and evaluates how his background and opinions
played into his portrayal and affected the accuracy of his testimony. Such understanding becomes a key, as his testimony greatly affected how Americans and governmental officials came to see their enemy and their war against North Vietnam.

**Envisioning the North Vietnamese Enemy**

In February of 1967 Senator J. William Fulbright, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated, “The conflict in Vietnam, as is often said, may be the best reported war in history, but there has probably never been a war in which we knew so little about the people with whom and against whom we are fighting.”\(^{39}\) Fulbright’s observation highlighted the lack of knowledge in the United States about Southeast Asia. U.S. government officials and intelligence analysts knew little about North Vietnam; the average American citizen knew even less. As historian William Duiker notes, “The nature of the enemy was the subject of endless speculation, but little informed knowledge.”\(^{40}\) As of December 1966 on the eve of Harrison E. Salisbury’s departure for North Vietnam, dominant media outlets such as the *New York Times* and *Washington\(^{39}\) Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Harrison E. Salisbury's Trip to North Vietnam: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 1.

Post had failed to correct this deficiency, providing limited and often biased coverage of North Vietnam and its people.

From March 1965, when Johnson introduced ground combat forces, until 25 December 1966, Vietnam was at the forefront of news coverage in the New York Times. But the articles overwhelmingly focused on operational aspects of the war. Hanson Baldwin evaluated the effectiveness of new weapons such as airplanes and bombs. Baldwin reiterated a senate committee’s finding that “the policies being followed may not produce victory.” Although James Reston generally focused his writing on the politics of the war, he also argued in one article, “We are chasing guerrillas with bombs and it is apparently having much more effect on the Vietcong than anybody thought possible, but in the process, we are attacking and often destroying the areas we want to pacify.”

Though these articles questioned the success of current policies, they said little about the nature of the Vietnamese enemy.

Instead of reporting directly on the North Vietnamese, many journalists reinforced


official government beliefs about America’s cause in Vietnam and in doing so created their own perception of America’s enemy. U.S. government officials saw South Vietnam as a sovereign nation and North Vietnam as an invading enemy. They associated the North’s communist government with China and the Soviet Union, and identified North Vietnam as an aggressive, expansionist enemy. President Johnson reiterated that America’s cause was a “fight for freedom,” not only for the independence of the South, but for the free world itself.43 Government officials constantly reinforced the belief that the fall of South Vietnam to communism would be a victory for the Soviet Union and create a domino effect across Asia, a situation that threatened the balance of power in the Cold War and made victory against the North imperative. A loss in Vietnam, as journalist E.W. Kenworthy pointed out, could have global consequences.44

New York Times’ journalists confirmed official government statements by describing the North Vietnamese in terms of its aggressive and threatening ideological interests. Writers did not separate the North from the National Liberation Front, and in doing so automatically linked terrorism against the South to North Vietnamese aggression. They blurred ideological distinctions between North Vietnamese beliefs and interests and those of China or the Soviet Union by labeling all people of those countries “Reds” and “communists.” Joseph Alsop, a well-known columnist for the Washington Post, reinforced the belief that North Vietnam’s aggression would inevitably produce a

43 “Text of the President’s Address on U.S. Policies in Vietnam,” NYT, 8 April 1965.

domino effect across Southeast Asia, condemning South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to communism. As Homer Bigart observed, “American support to Vietnam has always been based on the fear that Communist control of this country would jeopardize all of Southeast Asia.”45 Journalists repeated that the United States wanted peace. It was Hanoi, as Baldwin asserted, that “was neither willing nor able to [negotiate] now.”46 The President had not chosen war or escalation voluntarily, but the aggression of North Vietnam had forced him to do so.

Government officials and reporters saw the North Vietnamese exclusively through the lens of communism, in terms of a dichotomy placing Vietnamese communist aggression against American freedom. Through that lens, journalists reasoned the North Vietnamese government had forced and manipulated the North Vietnamese people into a state of compliance. “The average recruit,” one writer concluded, “is fighting because he has been offered land in the future—or because the Vietcong has threatened him or his family.”47 Suppression and propaganda bred hostility. One article stated, “Schools have been rallied against the United States with the campaign slogan, ‘Greater hatred, great determination, and great victory.’” As early as 1961 Joseph Alsop wrote, “Ho Chi Minh’s people live in a state of regimented wretchedness,” which in turn led to a “bitter,


disillusioned, and hostile,” society. For many reporters like James Reston, the North’s guerrilla tactics exemplified their callous character. In one of his few assessments of the enemy, Baldwin quoted a soldier who said, “They just keep shooting the wounded.” North Vietnamese behaved irrationally; they remained tactically unpredictable and violated accepted norms of warfare.

The assessment that reporting on the American enemy was infrequent yet extremely negative in America’s major newspapers is congruent with what other historians have found in their research of other news outlets. Edward Herman asserts that in the *New York Times* “the United States was leading the free world’s fight to contain aggressive communism…just as the French had fought a seven-and-a-half-year struggle” against “foreign-inspired and supplied communists.” James Landers confirms weekly newsmagazines “presented the Vietnam war within the framework of the ideological contest between communism and capitalism,” portraying the enemy “as brutal, devious, fanatical, subhuman and warlike.” Herbert Schiller draws similar conclusions in *The Mind Managers*. Daniel Hallin contends television coverage “painted an almost perfectly

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one-dimensional image of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical.”

Articles in the New York Times and Washington Post did not portray the enemy as subhuman as Landers found in his own research. Instead these papers neglected detailed assessments of the enemy and reasoned that propaganda and depravity encouraged the enemy to act irrationally. Thus, as Hallin contends, Americans assumed their enemy to be cruel, ruthless and fanatical. This enemy was aggressive and bitter and opposed to freedom and world peace. The image, in short, provided a clear cause for American involvement in a war in Southeast Asia, a war that would protect the values that Americans themselves held so dear.

There were a few notable exceptions to this typical reporting. On July 17, 1966, for example, the New York Times published the “Text of Ho Chi Minh’s Radio Statement.” Nothing gave a clearer picture of the official ideology of North Vietnam. “The barbarous U.S. imperialists have unleashed a war of aggression in an attempt to conquer our country,” Ho Chi Minh stressed. His account emphasized the defensive nature of his people’s war. The North Vietnamese fought against an outside threat to gain the freedom to govern themselves. “Nothing is more precious,” Ho Chi Minh explained, “than independence and freedom.” The North Vietnamese wanted the United States to accept four points. North Vietnam required recognition of the independence,

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sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam and the withdrawal of United States forces from the area; pending reunification of Vietnam, respect for the military provisions of the Geneva agreement barring foreign forces; settlement of South Vietnam’s internal affairs by the South Vietnamese under the guidance of the National Liberation Front; and peaceful reunification of Vietnam by the peoples of the North and South without foreign interference.\textsuperscript{52} The North Vietnamese cherished peace, Ho said, but the genuine peace that comes with independence.\textsuperscript{53} 

Reprinted news from foreign correspondents represented another notable exception. Bernard Fall was one of the most senior foreign correspondents in North Vietnam. As a citizen of France receiving his doctorate degree in the United States, Fall was able to go to North Vietnam for substantial periods of time when many American and other foreign correspondents could not. Consequently, his work, which began in 1953, reflected a deep amount of first hand research. Additionally, he became a major critic of those journalists who attempted to write on North Vietnam without visiting it themselves.\textsuperscript{54} Just days before Ho Chi Minh’s speech, on 10 July 1966, the New York Times published a three-page essay in which Fall shed light on the nature of the North Vietnamese. Fall saw Ho’s government as a Communist dictatorship, with conformity


“achieved by a variety of devices” ranging from educational programs at school to party membership. This agrarian society was not “free.” Yet, Fall wrote, “It certainly is freer [than Red China or the Soviet Union] in terms of individual existence, and more flexible in terms of ideology.” He also argued that the people believed in and supported their government’s fight against the United States.\textsuperscript{55} In addition to Fall, English journalist James Cameron wrote firsthand observations about the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. The \textit{New York Times} reprinted his sympathetic accounts, and his reports were published in a book entitled \textit{Here is Your Enemy; Complete Report from Vietnam}.\textsuperscript{56} These reports, however, still received little attention in the United States. Although the \textit{New York Times} reprinted the articles, they never made front-page news. Moreover, Americans had yet to receive such reports from one of their own mainstream journalists.

\textbf{Salisbury Describes the North}

When Harrison Salisbury stepped behind enemy lines American citizens saw reports from a respected mainstream journalist physically present in North Vietnam for the first time. The \textit{New York Times} itself was ecstatic. As Clifton Daniel said, “We ought to let people know we have a man in Hanoi,” and they most certainly did, placing Salisbury’s articles on the front page. More significantly, his articles provided a sharp contrast to existing information on North Vietnam. As readers opened their 1966 Christmas Day edition of the \textit{New York Times}, they saw the first of Salisbury’s twenty-

\textsuperscript{55} Bernard Fall, “Report on North Vietnam The Other Side of the 17\textsuperscript{th} Parallel,” \textit{NYT}, 10 July 1966.
\textsuperscript{56} Cameron, \textit{Here is Your Enemy}. 
four articles on North Vietnam. His stories covered a wide array of issues based on his daily encounters and experiences. The journalist saw cities and towns devastated by bombing and spoke with local men, women and children. He observed Vietnamese culture and met with local government officials and priests, foreign diplomats, and notable North Vietnamese leaders including Premier Pham Van Dong and Nguyen Van Tien, the National Liberation Front’s permanent spokesman in Hanoi. Salisbury’s reports provided a detailed description of the bomb damage in the North as well as an unprecedented three-dimensional view of the enemy’s ideology, government and character, all of which challenged the negative image portrayed by the government and American newspapers.

As stated in the introduction, Salisbury wanted to inspect the damage caused by the bombing campaign President Lyndon B. Johnson had initiated in early March of 1965. Beyond the international concern for heightening tensions in Southeast Asia, Salisbury – along with many others in the United States and abroad – was concerned about the livelihood of North Vietnamese civilians. Johnson had reassured the American public that the U.S. military aimed their bombs exclusively at military targets, keeping civilian damage to a minimum. Yet even the most recent observer, Jacques DeCormoy of the French Le Monde, asserted that American bombs “were erasing substantial portions of the civilian life of North Vietnam along with military targets.”

58 Salisbury, Behind the Lines, 10, 29.
served to confirm DeCornoy’s reporting. American bombing endangered and killed civilians.

Salisbury witnessed U.S. aircraft bomb railroads and highways and experienced bomb alerts and air attacks from his hotel in Hanoi. He saw the destruction of civilian housing and businesses, “damage so severe that whole blocks had been abandoned.” Bombing had destroyed Roman Catholic churches and cemeteries. Worse still, he found casualties high, especially among children. American bombing, for example, had killed one man’s wife and five of his children. His only surviving son was “badly wounded.” Bringing the destruction in North Vietnam home to his readers, Salisbury wrote, “There is a nightmarish quality that is hard to avoid.”

Although American bombing was inflicting much damage on civilians, Salisbury argued it was neither weakening the North’s resolve to fight nor hindering the country’s military operations. Although one highway had been bombed “again and again,” for example, it remained “capable of operation almost continuously regardless of how many bombs [were] dropped.” The writer further cast doubt on whether some U.S. military


targets even existed. He implied the U.S. government was negligent of the fact their bombing was doing much to injure the lives of innocent civilians while accomplishing little militarily.63

Beyond his coverage of bomb damage in the North, Salisbury found that North Vietnam had limited association with either communist China or the Soviet Union and fought solely for national survival. He made no mention of Chinese troops in North Vietnam, for example, and instead said that Hanoi insists “on running its war its own way.”64 Nguyen Van Tien, the National Liberation Front’s permanent spokesman in Hanoi, emphasized that the NLF was a separate entity from Hanoi. The NLF did not represent an invading force from North Vietnam, but was composed of South Vietnamese themselves who wished for independence from U.S. domination. Salisbury recognized that Hanoi was an active force fighting against the United States. Yet he discredited the notion that Hanoi itself was only a puppet government of communist China or the Soviet Union. The Hanoi government, he wrote, would not pledge allegiance to the United States. But it also would not pledge allegiance to China or the Soviet Union.65 Using language very similar to that employed by the founding fathers of the United States, he wrote that for Hanoi, the war was “a sacred war” for freedom and independence. As


Salisbury repeatedly emphasized, “They say, it is better to die than to be enslaved.”  

The North Vietnamese government remained genuinely concerned with the well-being of its citizens. “Unlike most communist countries, Hanoi has no massive government buildings, no grandiose sports palace, no glittering opera house,” Salisbury wrote. Instead, government funds went “towards factories and housing.” The Vietnamese enjoyed considerable freedom under their government. Salisbury referred to the thriving Catholic contingent in the North as his evidence that, despite the fact that many Catholics had fled south after the Geneva agreements in 1954, Catholicism flourished in the North, unhampered and even supported by the government. This, according to Salisbury, provided a sharp contrast with other nonwestern communist states.

Rather than fostering a bitter, hostile population, the kindness of the North Vietnamese government encouraged the people to voluntarily support their government and its fight against the United States. “North Vietnamese” he explained, “speak simply and often about heroism and their willingness to die for their country.” Commenting on the prevalence of guns in the North, Salisbury presented the testimony of one local who remarked, “North Vietnamese are aware that it is unusual especially in a Communist


country, to find so many ordinary persons with guns in their hands. . . . Here you can see for yourself that the people support their government.  

North Vietnam did not exist in a barbarous depressed state, but a beautiful, innovative one. Salisbury found Hanoi aesthetically appealing with “broad boulevards over which arch leafy trees; and with squares, public gardens with pleasant lakes.” He also paid special attention to the dozens, sometimes hundreds of bicycles that lined the city’s streets. Bicycles, Salisbury explained, were indispensable to the North Vietnamese, who used them for personal transportation and to keep the economy functioning amidst war. “It is the bicycle,” Salisbury wrote, “that carries fantastic burdens when rail and truck links are impeded by bombing.” For Salisbury, bicycles were not archaic, but signs of North Vietnamese innovation.

Salisbury also characterized life in the North within the framework of a modern industrial society. Women visited beauty parlors to have their hair waved, couples sat in lakeside cafes and drank tea, and shoppers exercised consumerism in local stores. Young people attended public schools, visited movie theatres and participated in concerts and

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plays. Additionally, Salisbury emphasized that as a result of French occupation in the 19th century, many North Vietnamese practiced Catholicism. Neglecting much discussion of peasant and country life in the North, Salisbury described the country as a thriving modern industrial society that had adopted many traits of western culture and religion.

Finally, Salisbury described the population of North Vietnam as young, gentle and peaceful. “Hardly anyone seems to be more than 30 and most are under 20,” he wrote. Salisbury described the women as “slender,” “petite” and “pretty.” The gentle physical features of the women reflected the people’s “warm, direct” nature. Even being a correspondent in enemy territory, he “did not experience the slightest sign of ill will, unfriendliness or hatred because of being American.” “Hanoi citizens,” he wrote, “are notably honest and theft is almost unknown.” He did not characterize them as an aggressive fighting people, but as a gentle, peace loving society.

On January 4, Salisbury gained the opportunity to meet with Premier Pham Van Dong, one of the North’s highest officials. After his long, three-hour interview with the


Premier, Salisbury abandoned descriptions of bomb damage and Vietnamese culture in his reports and focused on the potential for U.S.-North Vietnamese peace negotiations. In speaking with the Premier, Salisbury found the North’s cause legitimate. He wrote, “The declarations that Hanoi statesmen make about national honor, about independence, about survival seem entirely genuine.” Relaying the words of Pham Van Dong, Salisbury argued the war had reached a turning point. Peace, he emphasized, was in the hands of the United States. Salisbury did not ask the Premier why previous bombing halts had not led to negotiations. Instead he emphasized the Premier’s pledge that North Vietnam would now negotiate if only the United States would stop its brutal bombing campaign. Because the North Vietnamese officials received him so warmly, Salisbury became convinced that they wanted no more than freedom, independence, and peace. Moreover, the Premier’s kindness and openness led him to see North Vietnam’s desire for friendship with the United States as genuine. Dismissing the obvious ideological differences between the United States and North Vietnam, Salisbury concluded that “the North Vietnamese and the Americans could well end up excellent friends” once the two countries resolved this “misunderstanding.”

Salisbury provided a mirror image of his written reports in photographs. In total, twenty-five pictures of North Vietnam accompanied his articles. The first photograph

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79 Four additional pictures accompanied Salisbury’s articles on 28 December and 8 January, but were prints from the Associated Press, and thus not included here.
appeared with his sixth dispatch on 30 December. It showed the bomb desecrated Phue Tan Street in Hanoi. In the forefront of the picture was a young Vietnamese boy with big eyes and an innocent, questioning face. As Salisbury exposed Americans to their enemy for perhaps the first time, he presented them with an image of an innocent child. Some pictures need no explanation, and this was certainly one. Here, America, was your enemy.

Only two of Salisbury’s photographs featured bomb damage. One showed ruined homes and the other a demolished Roman Catholic Church. Altogether, only seven dealt with bomb related issues. Those reflected the war-torn society of the North, including a camouflaged vehicle, women making bomb shelters, and a man holding a part of a defused rocket. Most captivating of these pictures was one of a Roman Catholic lay leader holding his young son, who had lost his leg in an explosion.

The remaining sixteen photographs conveyed the everyday lives of the North Vietnamese. Salisbury pictured North Vietnamese and their bicycles loaded with supplies. He photographed peasant women as they walked out to a field. He showed young children playing with toys, women walking through town, and the interior of a

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80 See Image 1.


82 “North Vietnamese Roads Come to Life at Nightfall,” NYT, 12 January 1967.


busy women’s hair parlor. All the individuals were young, and they were all smiling. Even Nguyen Van Tien, the National Liberation Front’s representative in Hanoi, and Premier Pham Van Dong seemed genuine and friendly in their photographs. The picture of Premier Dong was especially revealing. He sat in a wide cushioned chair, in a relaxed position with open arms, a most certain physical sign of honesty, openness and peace.

After Salisbury left Vietnam he wrote several additional articles for the New York Times and granted interviews to ABC, NBC, and CBS during a short stay in Hong Kong. Once he returned home, the journalist’s testimony remained in the forefront of government and public discussions as he met with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy, spoke with other notable government officials, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and made several public addresses regarding his experience in North Vietnam.

Salisbury’s interview with NBC and two-part interviews with ABC and CBS covered three major themes: first, the effectiveness of American bombing, second, North Vietnam’s relationship to the National Liberation Front in the South, and third,

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87 “A Turning Point in War is Seen,” NYT, 18 January 1967. Also See Image 7.
negotiations. The journalist’s posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice demonstrated his confidence and his critical journalistic eye. He clarified each of his statements with what “they said” from his own beliefs and demonstrated his credibility and expertise as a reporter.

During the interviews Salisbury acknowledged the practicality of U.S. bombing of North Vietnamese supply depots and supply routes. He believed that the benefit of U.S. bombing was that it forced the North Vietnamese to devote their energies towards repairing transportation. As Salisbury stated, bombing cost the enemy “enormous expenditures of manpower, enormous expenditures in material, and enormous effort.”

What he emphasized, however, was that the bombing did not stop men and supplies from moving south. In addition, he found the bombing – like all bombing – could not be precise or accurate enough to prevent civilian casualties as government officials suggested. Referring to his experience reporting during World War II in his interview with ABC, he asserted that “bombing tends to bring a people together.” Thus, “the divisions that would normally appear in a Communist country between the leadership above and the people below are not there.” Bombing united the country and furthered the North’s resolve to fight.

As for the relationship between the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam,

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Salisbury made sure to distinguish what the North Vietnamese and NLF said from his own beliefs. “Now the NLF said,” Salisbury emphasized, “that we run the war.” He had reported this point from Hanoi in one of his articles. But, Salisbury went on, “I got some double talk on both sides and I don’t think I entirely accept that answer. . . . By implication I thought they [the government in Hanoi] felt more responsibility for it [the NLF] than they were willing to admit.” Referring to negotiations in the same interview, Salisbury thought that North Vietnamese statements, “like all their statements is [sic] a little bit vague and cloudy.” He claimed he found no assurance on peace negotiations, but got the “impression they might . . . but would not take the first step.”

Salisbury emphasized that North Vietnamese government surrounded its citizens with propaganda. Consequently its citizens remained “naïve” in their thinking about their American enemy. However, the citizens were not the communist robots he had expected. Through such distinctions Salisbury exercised his ability to critically examine the facts North Vietnamese officials presented to him. Yet as Salisbury continued his activities in the United States, these criticisms regarding the obvious value of American bombing, the NLF, and the fictional character of the North’s propaganda faded away as he turned his full attention to the subject of achieving peace.

Salisbury’s first stop once he returned home was Washington to meet with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William P. Bundy and speak before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Salisbury gave Rusk and Bundy a private and detailed account of what he had observed.

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in the North. In an oral history interview conducted later Salisbury recalled that he had wanted to relay back further information from his interview with Premier Pham Van Dong concerning the potential for peace negotiations. Although Salisbury had been less than forthright about the possibility of negotiations in his television interviews, he told Rusk and Bundy that he was convinced the North would embrace a settlement.

Salisbury also emphasized peace negotiations in his hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. As early as December 29, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were already expecting “the widening controversy over civilian casualties to be examined in hearings on the war that are due to start in mid-January.” Although some members of Congress were not interested in such an inquiry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. William Fulbright, ensured that on February 2, 1967 Salisbury met with the committee. Opening the meeting, Senator Fulbright expressed how little Americans knew about their enemy: “Our ignorance of the history, culture, and traditions of Vietnam and Southeast Asia have [sic] contributed much to the tragic conflict in which we now find ourselves.” The Foreign Relations committee was

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95 These were Senators McGee, Percy, and Hatfield.

96 Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Harrison E. Salisbury's Trip to North Vietnam: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 1.
interested in hearing from Salisbury about their enemy as well as the effects of the Johnson administration’s bombing campaign in the North.

Fulbright proceeded to thank Salisbury for his invaluable insight into the culture and tradition of the Vietnamese and then opened the floor for Salisbury to comment on his written statement. The *New York Times* reporter clarified many misunderstandings prevalent about North Vietnam. Salisbury emphasized that although the bombing was physically productive, damaging supply routes and slowing infiltration, it did not quell the North’s resolve to fight. He reiterated his finding that the NLF and Hanoi government were separate entities. In response, Senator Fulbright said, “It is very curious, because you know our attitude has been the NLF is just a tool or a puppet, if you like of Hanoi.”97 Finally, Salisbury restated his belief that the war had reached a turning point. He asserted that further U.S. military action in North Vietnam would cause Hanoi to turn towards China, who was eager to supply Hanoi in greatly escalating the war. On the other hand, if the United States would take the first step to initiate private negotiations, Hanoi would not turn towards China and instead willingly negotiate for peace.

As will be discussed in the Chapter 2, Salisbury experienced mixed reactions to his statements at the meeting. Even so he stood firm against criticism. He contended that his firsthand experience provided him with enough information to assert ideas about the enemy and enemy society that contradicted his fellow journalists. He truly believed the

97 Ibid., 45.
war had reached a turning point. Hanoi now stood ready for private peace talks, and the United States needed to act quickly to embrace Hanoi’s overtures for peace. If U.S. governmental officials failed to communicate with Hanoi, they would miss a crucial opportunity to end the bloodshed in Vietnam. If the United States did not achieve peace now, Salisbury asserted, the war would only continue to escalate, making peace in the future even more difficult.  

The strongest appeal Salisbury made for peace was in his book, *Behind the Lines: Hanoi, December 23, 1966-January 7, 1967* released on 17 April 1967. Salisbury described the enemy and North Vietnam just as he had in his articles. In the closing paragraphs, he wrote, “To my thinking the arguments ran strongly toward an effort at negotiation.” Salisbury believed that only a little effort by the United States could bring about a settlement.

Throughout the following months and years, Salisbury spoke with other government officials on the topic of peace. He met with many public figures including Arthur Goldberg, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, Dr. Howard Schomer, president of the Chicago Theological Seminary, and Wilfred Burchett. Salisbury also spoke with Harry Ashmore and William Baggs, two other mainstream American journalists who also visited Hanoi just shortly after him. As late as 1968, Salisbury recorded these various meetings in his private

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98 Ibid.


100 “Vietnam 1967 Memos,” folder 5, box 590, SP.
papers, meetings where he continually asserted his belief that the United States could do much more to facilitate peace negotiations.

Salisbury also carried his observations to various nongovernmental individuals and groups. He spoke to the Columbia School of Journalism, The New School for Social Research, and Colby College. His television appearances included “The Martha Dean Show,” “The Today Show,” “The Helen Meyner Program,” “News Front,” and a special news program entitled “Vietnam Perspective: Air War in the North” with other participants including General William C. Westmoreland. Additionally, he spoke on various radio programs including WRVR “Vietnam: What Hopes to Peace,” WNEW-AM “New Close-up,” and WBAI “Report from Hanoi.”

Many of Salisbury’s activities directly dealt with ending hostilities between the United States and North Vietnam. He gave the keynote address at the annual Eleanor Roosevelt Peace Award ceremony in early 1967. He also accepted an invitation to participate in the International War Crimes Tribunal’s opening session in Paris beginning 24 April 1967. Later in February of 1970 Salisbury also joined the East Asia policy talks as part of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Salisbury’s wife, Charlotte Salisbury, also joined his advocacy for peace,

101 List compiled based on show advertisements in “Television” section of the NYT from January and February 1967.

102 Letter, Bertrand Russell to Salisbury, General Correspondence files, 31 March 1967. SP.

sometimes asserting her husband’s ideas even more fervently than he did. After her husband’s trip behind enemy lines, she became active in several peace organizations in New York City. More strikingly, Mrs. Salisbury sent at least eighteen harsh letters to Lyndon B. Johnson ranging from April 1967 to mid August in 1967. In these short notes, she bluntly told him “to stop this terrible war.” The administration did reply to at least one of her “angry and threatening letters” early in April, yet she continued to write. Expressing her feelings on U.S. credibility in world affairs and the state of civilians in North Vietnam, she believed U.S. policy in North Vietnam was “suicide as well as murder.”

The American public and government showed interest in learning more about North Vietnam from this New York Times journalist. This interest begins to suggest the centrality Salisbury’s testimony would come to have in discussions on U.S. policies toward North Vietnam discussed in the next chapter. Just as significant, it also demonstrates that Salisbury remained eager to share his story. As “the expert” on North Vietnam, Salisbury continually spoke to Americans about North Vietnam, giving them an interpretation that contrasted sharply with current news and called for an awakening to a realistic goal of peace.

Salisbury’s interpretation of North Vietnam challenged that of the mainstream media. The media portrayed North Vietnam as an aggressive communist nation that threatened to expand communism worldwide, an interpretation that allowed government

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104 Memorandum, Mr. Kinter regarding Letter to President Johnson from Charlotte Salisbury, 20 April 1967, White House Central File, Harrison E. Salisbury, box 32, LBJL.
officials and journalists to justify U.S. actions as defensive. The United States, they espoused, had an obligation to protect the South against its aggressive, bitter and irrational northern neighbor. Salisbury, by contrast, argued that neither communist China nor the Soviet Union guided North Vietnam. He further wrote that North Vietnam did not run the National Liberation Front, the enemy combatant force American writers often associated with extreme brutality. The government had not bred hostility; it cared deeply for its people and encouraged positive ideas of freedom and independence. The people fought voluntarily to gain the country’s independence. Salisbury characterized North Vietnam as an innovative, modern industrial country with high cultural values much like the United States. In his reports, the North Vietnamese were young, peace loving, and genuinely good-natured. Such an interpretation not only contrasted with previous ideas about the enemy, but also created a new foundation for common ideological ground between American citizens and their distant North Vietnamese enemy.

**Interpretation and Accuracy**

Some of what Salisbury said about the North proved true. The State and Defense Departments were well aware that U.S. bombing destroyed residential areas. In addition, the Pentagon Papers reveal that even prior to Salisbury’s trip Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had questioned the usefulness of bombing in reducing the

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flow of men and materials to the south. He concluded bombing was ineffective. In fact, U.S. government statistics showed that more troops and more material moved from North to South in 1967 than when the bombing began in 1965. Another report revealed, just as Salisbury had argued, that the bombing “clearly strengthened popular support of the regime by engendering patriotic and nationalistic enthusiasm to resist attacks.”

Due to his Soviet experience, Salisbury also demonstrated a keen ability to see the subtle distinctions between communism in North Vietnam and Russian or Chinese communism that Americans associated with Southeast Asia. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam sustained its independence from China and the Soviet Union. Whereas Salisbury observed that the primary goal of the Soviets was socialist revolution, he recognized that Ho Chi Minh’s version of communism remained intimately connected with the nationalist movement for independence. For the Vietnamese, national liberation – a unifying factor – came before social revolution.

Salisbury also understood the harsh reality of the Soviet system under Stalin. Terror came from the government itself, including secret police, massive killings, and no freedom of speech or religion. In fact, as he wrote in his autobiography, to even make a joke about Stalin could lead to death. The North Vietnamese approach helped to create a

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uniquely open communist atmosphere. Ho Chi Minh appeared as a warm, welcoming father to his children. The innovative ability of the North Vietnamese to use bicycles for transportation and the speed with which they rebuilt roads also stood in sharp contrast to what Salisbury had experienced in the Soviet Union, where repairing one road could take years and transportation remained inefficient. Finally, Salisbury often commented that life in Russia was painful and bitter. In Vietnam he saw children and adults smiling even amid hardship. Perhaps most surprisingly, instead of the “classic peasant hatred for the foreigner” that Salisbury experienced in the Soviet Union, he found the peasants in North Vietnam kind and accepting. North Vietnam was different from other communist countries, and Salisbury – an old-hand Soviet correspondent – recognized the distinctions. The aspects of North Vietnamese society that he emphasized in his dispatches – their fight for freedom, their efficiency, and their kindness – were the very aspects of North Vietnamese society that he found exceptional based on his own travels and experiences with communism in the Soviet Union.

Clearly Salisbury’s past experience helped him to recognize the distinctions between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. While he described North Vietnam with his Soviet experience in mind, however, he failed to identify an important aspect of his own visit North Vietnam. He neglected to mention, for example, a most crucial point:

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108 See, for example, Duiker, Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam; William J. Duiker, Ho Chi Minh (New York: Hyperion, 2000); and FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake.

109 Salisbury’s stay in the Soviet Union had deep and profound effect on his perception of the world and his own journalism. Salisbury recounts the impression the Soviet Union made on him in his memoir, Salisbury, A Journey for Our Times.
North Vietnamese officials had chosen all the specific destinations Salisbury visited and had escorted him to and from every one of those destinations. North Vietnamese officials decided whom he spoke with and where he visited. Though Salisbury eventually described the censored conditions under which he was writing in one of his reports for the *New York Times*, he never directly acknowledged the highly controlled nature of his trip. In his reports as well as the book he published in April, he emphasized the North Vietnamese officials’ flexibility in allowing him to see almost everything he requested. Even so, the way the North Vietnamese conducted his visit ensured that his assessment of North Vietnam would be skewed.

In emphasizing the uniqueness of communism in the North, Salisbury glossed over the authoritarian and undemocratic nature of Ho Chi Minh’s government. The North Vietnamese government, for example, did use coercion to compel loyalty and obedience. Although the journalist indicated some skepticism in his CBS television interview as to the separation between the National Liberation Front and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, he often failed to mention their critical connections. Furthermore, although Hanoi claimed to act independently of China and the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China was supporting Hanoi’s efforts in significant ways. In addition to providing military supplies, PRC troops were in North Vietnam during Salisbury’s visit, a fact Salisbury either failed to acknowledge or never learned.\(^{110}\)

While Ho Chi Minh focused on national liberation, his government’s ultimate goal remained social revolution, a reality that later left a bitter taste in the mouths of many of his nationalist followers.¹¹¹ Salisbury did not mention that although Catholics were “free” to practice their religion, they often experienced persecution from some party members who were suspicious of their loyalty.¹¹² In emphasizing the prevalence of Christianity, he also failed to provide any serious discussion of most Northerners’ beliefs, a “blend of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.” His repeated references to Catholicism suggested that it was the dominant religion in the North when Catholics represented less than nine percent of the total population.¹¹³ He also devoted many of his reports to life in Northern cities when the majority of the population lived in the country.

Finally, Salisbury believed that the Johnson Administration could arrange a negotiated settlement if it would just stop its fruitless bombing campaign and initiate secret peace talks. What Salisbury did not know, as Chapter 3 reveals, was that secret peace negotiation attempts through dozens of different channels had been underway in

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¹¹¹ See, for example, Truong Nue Tang, David Chanoff, and Doan Van Toai, A Vietcong Memoir (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).

¹¹² Duiker, Sacred War, 97-101.

¹¹³ Calculations based on "Vietnam," The World Book Encyclopedia (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1965). The World Book Encyclopedia states there were 2,000,000 reported Catholics living in Vietnam, most of whom had moved South after the Geneva Convention. Even if all 2,000,000 remained in the North, they still only represented less than nine percent of the total Northern population of 17,500,000 (the combined population of both North and South was 33,450,000). Further information on the prevalence of Buddhism may be found in Erik Zurcher, "Beyond the Jade Gate: Buddhism in China, Vietnam and Korea," in The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard F. Gombrich (New York, N.Y.: Facts on File, 1984). Quote from FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake, 14.
the administration for quite some time. None of them had come to fruition.

Salisbury argued throughout his life that he had written impartially about North Vietnam.114 His understanding of Soviet communism clearly aided him in this respect as he made careful distinctions between Soviet communism and that of North Vietnam.

Even so, it must be remembered that Salisbury’s reports were colored by his own experience. Moreover, the journalist himself never intended his reports to be value free. Even before he left for North Vietnam he wrote in his diary:

I think my trip is supposed to convey an image of confidence, of hardihood in the face of U.S. bombing; of horror at what we have done; a positive image of North Vietnam but at the same time it is designed [by the North] to bring peace or a truce or talks nearer, in part by assuring the U.S. and U.S. opinion that the present policy is not winning; in part by showing a reasonableness on the part of North Vietnam.115

Salisbury, then, believed the North Vietnamese government invited him into their country to help further their agenda. In his diary, he acknowledged he would follow their request; he would report U.S. policies were not working and argue the United States needed to make greater efforts towards peace. It appears that Salisbury had already determined his conclusions in advance. He seemed prepared to disregard any contradictory evidence in an effort to fulfill what he perceived was his purpose, to put forth a sympathetic portrayal of the North to persuade the American public to embrace negotiations and end the war.

Salisbury’s experience in the North not only confirmed his belief that the government in Hanoi wanted him to help facilitate peace, but also his own desire for it.


After viewing the damage to civilian quarters on Pho Nguyen Thiep Street, Salisbury said, “How nauseated I was to witness again this banal newsreel which history had played over and over in my lifetime now being put into reruns by men who did not understand the meaning of its banality or did not care.”116 Salisbury’s interview with Premier Dong convinced him that the North Vietnamese were ready to end the bloodshed in the North and that they wanted him to carry that message back to Washington. “I returned from Hanoi” Salisbury recalled, “convinced that a settlement of the Vietnam War by negotiations lay within our grasp.”117 In an oral history interview in 1969, Salisbury again stated, “the essence of it [what he was supposed to communicate back to the American government] was that they [the North Vietnamese government] were in fact prepared to begin secret conversations in spite of all the things that had happened.”118 Furthermore, he “only hoped that the talk [with Premier Dong] would have the positive effect upon negotiations which, I was certain, it was intended to have.”119 Clearly before, during, and after returning to the United States, Salisbury continued to see himself as not just a reporter, but as a messenger and an advocate for peace.

Given his intentions to prepare American society for negotiations, it becomes clear that Salisbury used his position as a reporter to appeal to his American audience’s humanitarian senses and persuade them to embrace peace. He emphasized the aspects of


118 Oral History Interview with Harrison Salisbury, 26 June 1969, 18, LBJL.

North Vietnamese society with which his American audience could relate. The North Vietnamese too, Salisbury implied, enjoyed contemporary modern lifestyles and valued history. They too practiced Catholicism, a western religion, and treasured freedom and independence. They were also young, gentle, and peace loving. He continued this very activism when he returned home. How could one justify bombing such a people? Perhaps Salisbury intended his American audience to ask just that question, and they most certainly did.

Conclusion

Salisbury constructed an image of the enemy that sharply contrasted with those of previous U.S. journalists. Indeed no U.S. reporter before Salisbury had given American readers such a detailed portrayal, and previous assumptions of villainous, barbarous nature of the North Vietnamese paled in comparison to Salisbury’s eyewitness observations. Yet even as Salisbury searched for accuracy behind enemy lines, his portrayal became one not only informed by his previous experience as a Soviet correspondent, but also colored by his own yearnings for peace and love of the North Vietnamese people. In an interview shortly after his trip to North Vietnam, Salisbury stated that, “I myself have always thought that the most important thing to do was to get the facts, and if there might be a temporary gain for the enemy, in the end . . . the value would come to us, because if we don’t know what we’re doing we’re not going to be able
to do it very well.”  Reflecting on his stories much later in life with a broader understanding of what his own interpretation of North Vietnam had missed, Salisbury admitted, “this was the first of the separating images which, as time went on, showed me that in war, as in the simplest things in life, truth is multifaceted, a crystal that refracts light in many forms and many shapes, the quicksilver of the mind.”

The question of Salisbury’s accuracy becomes significant knowing that he was not just sending that image back to his friends; he was sending it through the most influential newspaper in the United States. The image of North Vietnamese society that Salisbury formed and his activism in expressing it would greatly affect how the American and international world viewed the Johnson administration and its policies in North Vietnam. The image he created of a peace-loving people in North Vietnam challenged the morality of U.S. bombing in the North and the threat of the North Vietnamese as an expansionist enemy.


CHAPTER 2: PUBLIC REACTIONS AND THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION’S RESPONSE

Harrison Salisbury’s distinctive eyewitness reports from North Vietnam gained widespread attention. In total, twenty of Salisbury’s twenty-four articles made the front page of the *New York Times*, one of the largest and most well known media organs in the world. Moreover, his first report appeared on the front page of nearly every major newspaper in the United States and many in other countries.\(^{122}\) After he appeared on television and before government officials, his testimony became the focal point of many discussions on U.S. foreign policy toward North Vietnam. Salisbury’s stories continued to receive much publicity through January, February and March of 1967 as the general public, U.S. officials, and international leaders incorporated his perceptions into their ideas about North Vietnam and U.S. war policies.

The widespread attention Salisbury’s reports received demonstrates the demand that existed in the United States and abroad for detailed information about North Vietnam, and at the same time indicates the importance of Salisbury’s testimony in shaping domestic and international public opinion towards Johnson’s war policies in

\[^{122}\] Salisbury’s Christmas day report appeared on the front page of the *Dallas Morning News, San Francisco Chronicle, Wheeling News-Register of West Virginia, The Denver Post, The Evening Sun of Baltimore, Houston Chronicle*, and many others. Salisbury’s article also made front-page appearances in such newspapers such as *The Times* of London, *Svenska Dagbladet* in Sweden, and *Le Figaro* in France. For copies of the front-page articles see folder Vietnam I Reaction, Editorials, etc., box 454, SP.
Vietnam. This chapter explores how Salisbury’s perspective of North Vietnam – which contrasted sharply with other American journalistic accounts – affected domestic and international attitudes towards Johnson’s foreign policy in Vietnam. It also addresses the actions the Johnson administration took to regain lost credibility in the face of Salisbury’s accounts. Salisbury’s reports fueled growing protests against the bombing of North Vietnam among religious groups, academics, and students, influenced congressional perceptions of U.S. war strategy in Vietnam, and put increased international pressure on the Johnson administration to publicly defend its policies and make adjustments in its foreign policy efforts towards North Vietnam.

**Domestic Public Response**

In January of 1967 *New York Times* journalist James Reston wrote,

> For Americans who have been told by their government that the bombing of the North is “miraculously accurate” in hitting only “steel and concrete,” it naturally comes as a shock to find that homes, women and children are getting bombed too.\(^{123}\)

For many Americans Salisbury’s reports confirmed that the United States was not defeating an evil communist villain but instead killing an innocent North Vietnamese population. Salisbury’s accounts confirmed the accusations of leading anti-war activists who had for several months accused the Johnson administration of killing civilians in North Vietnam. In a letter to the *New York Times* David Dellinger, one of the most vocal spokesmen for the antiwar movement, thanked the *New York Times* and Salisbury for

their “valuable public service.”124 He had long waited for such reporting from someone “who would have more credibility with the media than [he] would, given [his] identification with the antiwar cause.”125 Similarly Tom Hayden, founding member of Students for a Democratic Society, had wanted Hanoi to admit an “American correspondent” who could give a voice to the damage in the North.126 Salisbury not only provided that, but, as Dellinger states, “created new dynamics in the antiwar movement.”127 Salisbury’s reporting led to an outpouring of concern for North Vietnamese citizens among religious groups, academics, and students. Through their actions, letters, and public statements these individuals and groups voiced special concern over U.S. bombing and the Johnson administration’s approach to negotiations.

Evidence of a high number of civilian casualties in North Vietnam, North Vietnamese ideological beliefs as non-threatening, and U.S. failure to negotiate with a willing North Vietnam caused a public uproar among religious leaders in the United States. In response to Salisbury’s testimony, Quakers sent aid to North Vietnam and other religious leaders called for an immediate end to, as the President of the American Jewish Congress said, the “inevitable slaughter of innocent victims.” Rabbi Edward T. Sandrow, President of the New York Board of Rabbis, also spoke out “concerning the horrors of war, with its loss of lives and its utter disregard for human values.” Similarly

124 Letter, David Dellinger to NYT, 2 January 1967, folder1, box 676, SP.
126 Hayden, Reunion, 193-194.
127 Dellinger, From Yale to Jail, 236.
Reinhold Niebuhr applauded Salisbury’s accounts, calling *The Times* the “[closest] thing to a national newspaper we have.” In his first public comment on international affairs in four years, he called on “universities, the church and informed communications media to seek an end to the Vietnam War.”

Another vociferous call for an end to hostilities came from academics. Salisbury’s accounts convinced them that Johnson’s bombing tactics impeded negotiations. Four hundred sixty-two faculty members at Yale University signed a petition urging the United States to put an end to the war. The Yale faculty wrote,

> We are very much strengthened in this view by the events of the last few days, particularly U Thant’s growing conviction that the cessation of bombing is the necessary key to the opening of peace talks, and Pham Van Dong’s interview with Harrison Salisbury in which a new flexibility seems to have been indicated.

Two hundred thirty-nine professors at Cornell sent Johnson a similar petition. Rhodes Scholars wrote to Johnson pleading for peace. Another petition, published in the *New York Times*, included “6,000 signatures of faculty members at 200 colleges and universities in 37 states.” It similarly “urged the President to end the bombing.”

Just as Salisbury’s articles caused concern over civilian casualties and

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negotiations, they also led to increased distress that President Johnson was secretly escalating the war through bombing. Seeing Johnson’s bombing campaign as a clear sign of escalation, one group of twelve religious leaders “raised anew the issue of the Administration’s truthfulness about Vietnam policy.” Likewise, columnist Joseph Kraft believed U.S. military bombing actions in the North demonstrated “an unpremeditated escalation – war out of control.” Many like the President of the American Jewish Congress came to believe that the “nation’s tragic involvement in this unwanted war grows deeper every day.”

A 6 January 1967 weekly activity report at the White House noted that “the week’s public mail was heavily in favor of extending the Christmas truce, and against the bombing of Hanoi and resulting civilian casualties.” The president and most of his top aides still favored the bombing. Even so, Salisbury’s reporting had inflamed significant amounts of protest in the United States. The actions of Quakers, the outpouring of sympathy by religious leaders, the frustration demonstrated by academics, and the public’s increased anxiety about the escalation of the war confirms that Salisbury’s reporting added to increasing dissatisfaction with the war.


133 Memorandum, Dixon Donnelley to the Under Secretary, 6 January 1967, Weekly Focus Reports 10/1966-10/1971; 10/1966-03/1969 to 02/1967; Executive Secretariat, DOS, RG 59, NACP.
Congressional Response

Salisbury’s reports caused a similar uproar in Congress. Through public statements a number of Congressional figures showed interest in Salisbury’s reporting and the public upheaval it had caused. Although Congress remained divided in its position towards Vietnam, it took steps to investigate the matter of civilian casualties further and put additional pressure on Johnson to alter his policies in North Vietnam.

After Salisbury’s first reports were printed, members of Congress quickly voiced their concern over civilian casualties and their interest in further inquiry. Senator William Proxmire, Democrat of Wisconsin, said Salisbury’s testimony constituted “a very serious statement by a highly respected reporter,” and wanted Congress to look into the matter. Representative Ogden R. Reid, Republican of New York, “requested Congressional hearings on the Government’s handling of information relating to the bombing of North Vietnam.” He also “asked the Defense Department to produce aerial photographs that would either confirm or disprove Mr. Salisbury’s reports from bombed areas.” Representative John E. Moss, California Democrat and chair of the Government Information Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations also expressed concern.134

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee incorporated Salisbury’s testimony on the issue of civilian casualties into their hearings on the war.135


For well over a year the chair of the committee, William Fulbright, had inquired about the number of civilian casualties in Vietnam. The information he had received left many questions unanswered. Senator Fulbright had obtained a report for January and February of 1966 from U.S. Army General William Westmoreland via the Secretary of Defense, for example, that counted six total civilians killed and fifteen wounded in all of Vietnam “as a result of United States military action there.” Fulbright knew, however, that a separate report compiled by Representative Clement Zablocki based on information from the 1st Casualty Division counted twenty-four civilians killed and one hundred thirty-one wounded in all of Vietnam for the same time period. After repeated inquiries to the Secretary of Defense, information on civilian casualties remained unclear. Consequently, although not all members of the committee were interested in an examination of the matter (Senator Bourke B. Hickenlooper, Republican of Iowa dismissed Salisbury’s accounts, alleging that Salisbury was a North Vietnamese sympathizer), many members like Karl E. Mundt, Republican of South Dakota and Chairman Fulbright were eager to obtain first-hand information on civilian casualties in North Vietnam from Salisbury.

Salisbury’s testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on

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February 2, 1967 attracted widespread attention. Seventeen out of nineteen members of the committee were present for his testimony. Beyond that, three additional Senators from outside the committee also attended the hearing as well as numerous reporters and other observers.  

Aside from the arguments that Salisbury posed at the meeting, which are covered in depth in Chapter 1, the text of the Committee’s meeting and the discussion that took place between Salisbury and various committee members reveals a tense atmosphere. Senator Fulbright – who New York Times writer Max Frankel called “the most celebrated public critic of the nation’s foreign politics” – applauded Salisbury’s testimony. Yet others on the committee remained skeptical. Senator Frank Lausche of Ohio for example, found the inquiry one-sided. Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, who may have been the Senate’s most vociferous advocate of bombing as a way to achieve military success in Vietnam, asked that contradictory evidence also be included in the final report. Such evidence included articles like those of Joseph Alsop who wrote that bombing the North effectively reduced the infiltration of North Vietnamese materials and men into the South.

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138 The Senators were Gale McGee of Wyoming, Charles Percy of Illinois, and Mark Hatfield of Oregon. For pictures of the committee hearing, see folder 12, box 321, SP.


The tension in Congress surrounding Salisbury’s articles extended beyond the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the floors of both the House and Senate. Democratic Representative William Ryan of New York ensured that twenty-three of Salisbury’s articles made it into the extension of remarks in the *Congressional Record*.\(^{141}\) Democratic Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island referred to an extensive article by Salisbury, “Is there a way out of the Vietnam War?” in the *Congressional Record*. Pell believed, as Salisbury argued in the article, that the United States needed to make stronger efforts towards negotiations. Pell saw the article as “full of ideas and really probing to find areas of agreement rather than areas of disagreement.”\(^{142}\) Senator George McGovern, a Democrat of South Dakota and avid opponent of the war, was still commenting on Salisbury’s stories as late as 25 April in a discussion on the bombing of North Vietnam. McGovern asserted that, “Harrison Salisbury, who was in North Vietnam – which is not true of General Westmoreland or of any of our field commanders – and other on-the-spot observers have reported that the bombing is doing what bombing usually does: it is hardening the will of those under attack.”\(^{143}\) Many Senators and Representatives accepted Salisbury’s stories as true and integrated them into their

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\(^{142}\) Congress, Senate, Senator Claiborne de Borda Pell speaking on A Way Out of the Vietnam War, 90\(^{th}\) Cong., 1\(^{st}\) sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. 7 (12 April 1967) : 9251-54.

\(^{143}\) Congress, Senate, Mr. McGovern speaking on the Lessons of Vietnam, 90\(^{th}\) Cong., 1\(^{st}\) sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. 8 (25 April 1967) : 10622-23.
thinking on U.S. war strategy in the North.

Amidst the stir that arose because of Salisbury’s testimony, some members of Congress urgently expressed their desire to see the war come to an end. In a personal letter, Senator Ralph Yarborough urged Johnson to make further efforts to explore “all avenues to peace in Vietnam.” He suggested a “high ranking Presidential Peace Commission from the international community.” Three months later Senator Frank Church and fifteen other senators signed a statement entitled “A Plea for Realism.” Echoing Salisbury’s argument that the war had reached a turning point, the letter argued that “the conflict [in Vietnam] now appears to have reached an acute phase.” Sent directly to the President, the letter urged him to end the war by “negotiation of a mutually acceptable settlement.” Although neither plea directly referenced Salisbury’s testimony, the language of the authors suggests that they concurred with Salisbury that now was the time to initiate negotiations.

While Salisbury found much support, many other Congressional figures criticized and rejected the journalist’s articles. Representative F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana, who subsequently served as chair of the Committee on Armed Services from 1971-75, stated that Salisbury had done “a disservice to his country.” He had “played right into the hands

\[144\] Yarborough to President, 4 January 1967, folder January 1-14, box 12, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, National Security File, LBJL.

\[145\] Signers included Frank Church, John Sherman Cooper, George McGovern, J.W. Fulbright, Frank E. Moss, E. L. Bartlett, Lee Metcalf, Vance Hartke, Gaylord Nelson, Quentin Burdick, Joseph S. Clark, Stephen N. Young, Robert F. Kennedy, Mark O. Hatfield, Wayne Morse, Claiborne Pell. Memorandum Senators to the President, 17 May 1967, folder Senator Clark 3 of 5, box Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 90th Congress, Senators Carlson, Clark, Cooper, and Dodd, NA.
of the enemy who were handed a good propaganda weapon and could point out the fact that the story was written by a representative of a reputable newspaper.”\(^{146}\) Similarly Republican Senator Margaret Smith of Maine requested an article by Claude Witze entitled “Hanoi Managers our News” in the February 1967 issue of *Air Force and Space Digest* be reprinted in the *Congressional Record*. The article referred to Salisbury’s reports as part of the “recent wave of Communist-inspired propaganda, misrepresenting the true nature of our use of airpower in North Vietnam.”\(^{147}\)

Some hawks in Congress who believed that the North Vietnamese hoped to stunt the success of U.S. bombing through Salisbury’s reporting advocated an increase in air raids over the North. The article by Claude Witze submitted by Senator Smith, for example, reasoned that U.S. bombing had been so successful that it had forced the North Vietnamese to step up their propaganda campaign in an effort to regain their position. The article concluded, “Airpower remains a key tool to bring about the kind of peace the American people are entitled to.”\(^{148}\) In other words, airpower remained a successful tool for breaking the North Vietnamese will and encouraging negotiations on U.S. terms. Senator Richard Russell, Chair of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, agreed. He commented that Salisbury’s testimony, rather than signaling the need to limit bombing in

\(^{146}\) Congress, House, Felix Edward Hebert speaking on reports of Harrison Salisbury of the *NYT*, 90\(^{th}\) Cong., 1\(^{st}\) sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. 3 (16 February 1967) : 3595.

\(^{147}\) Congress, House, Margaret Chase Smith speaking on Hanoi Managers our News, 90\(^{th}\) Cong., 1\(^{st}\) sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. 2 (1 February 1967) : 2235-36.

\(^{148}\) Ibid.
the North, confirmed the need to stand firm against the pressure to alter policy.\textsuperscript{149}

Salisbury’s reporting divided Congress on the issue of U.S. bombing in North Vietnam. Generally, those who supported Salisbury were already peace advocates while those who accused Salisbury of being a puppet of North Vietnamese propaganda were hardliners who had been calling Johnson to step up the bombing for some time. Such division suggests, as William Hammond concludes in \textit{Public Affairs: the Military and the Media}, that Salisbury’s reporting heightened the growing gap between doves and hawks in Congress. It deserves emphasis, however, that Salisbury’s reporting did not simply further divide these public officials, but created new evidence for debate among them. Whether they saw his reports as new insight towards negotiations or evidence of an increase in Vietnamese propaganda, Congressional figures used his reports to further their own arguments on the U.S. war effort and North Vietnam. Salisbury’s reports strengthened the beliefs of many members of Congress, helped to mold how they viewed the war, and shaped the arguments they pressed onto the Johnson administration for altering the course of the Vietnam War.

\textbf{International Response}

While debate over U.S. bombing in North Vietnam heated up at home, tensions heightened abroad as Salisbury’s reports increased the world’s opposition to U.S. foreign policy objectives in Vietnam. Salisbury’s reports validated accusations from foreign dignitaries who criticized U.S. bombing in North Vietnam. On December 15, for

example, the *New York Times* noted that Tass, the Soviet press agency, had said U.S. bombing raids “struck workers’ housing units within the city limits of Hanoi.” High Polish officials also had complained that U.S. military actions in North Vietnam hindered peace initiatives. The Soviets and Poles often made sweeping allegations against the United States, hoping ultimately to facilitate U.S. withdrawal. As an eyewitness American observer, however, Salisbury confirmed two of their accusations: U.S. bombing did injure civilians and hindered negotiations.

Salisbury’s portrayal of civilian bomb damage in North Vietnam and the superficial nature of U.S. attempts to negotiate led to an international uproar. The *Times* of London concluded that U.S. credibility had “been shattered.” According to an editorial in the French *Le Monde*, the American people had now caught their own President in his continual “flagrant act of lying.” The editor of the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* called Salisbury’s information “a service to the truth,” and criticized Johnson’s public statements as “propaganda.” Soviet General Secretary of the Communist Party, Leonid I. Brezhnev joined the growing criticism. He argued that recent American air strikes in the Hanoi area constituted “new obstacles to a peaceful settlement of the Vietnam war.” Salisbury’s reports provided a first-hand example of the insincerity of U.S. attempts at peace.152

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As a result of the popular outcry against the Johnson administration, powerful international figures began putting pressure on Johnson to change his policies in Vietnam or at least do something to stifle the growing public outrage. United Nations Secretary General U Thant, who had become frustrated with the bombing, argued that by continuing to bomb the North, the United States “virtually reject[ed] peace” and requested that the United States end their bombing raids. Pope Paul VI complained privately to the U.S. representative in Rome “about how badly [the U.S.] case was being presented in the world.” He stated that the Salisbury articles had a disastrous effect on the administration’s credibility abroad and encouraged the administration to make “a gesture – noble and generous . . . such as suspending the bombing.”

The heaviest international pressure on the Johnson administration came from government officials in Great Britain where aggravation with American bombing had exploded into public protests. British Foreign Minister George Brown sent an urgent telegram to Dean Rusk on 30 December 1966 saying,


154 Telegram, Department of State to Secretary of State, 17 January 1967, folder Vietnam: January-March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt W. Rostow, National Security File, LBJL.

155 “Bombing Protests Increase in Britain,” NYT, 30 December 1966. Also see memo, Walt Rostow to Bill Moyers, 29 December 1966, folder December 14-31, box 12, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, National Security File, LBJL.
I must tell you quite frankly and as an old friend that these articles have worried me . . . there seems little doubt now that American bombs have caused civilian casualties in North Vietnam. . . . This is going to generate a lot of political steam here and I expect trouble both in the House of Commons and outside it. We shall be asked again why we don’t dissociate. My object remains, as it always has been, to help you get this war stopped satisfactorily; but in the short term I think I may be in some difficulty, not only with shades of British opinion who would not normally be critical, but also with the Russians. I shall do my best to damp everything down, but I think it right to warn you that if the pressure increases I might have to refer to civilian casualties more bluntly than I have yet done.

Ending his telegram, Brown encouraged Johnson to help him quell anxieties in Great Britain. He suggested that perhaps the President could focus on civilian casualties caused by “Viet Cong ruthlessness” in the South.\footnote{156 Telegram, British Foreign Minister to Mr. Rusk, 30 December 1966 available from Declassified Documents Reference System, Gale Online Database, Item CK 3100505366.}

Brown’s telegram reflects the uneasy relationship Great Britain maintained with the United States during the years of the Vietnam War. As Sylvia Ellis demonstrates in *Britain, America, and the Vietnam War*, American leaders attached particular importance to the thinking in London, and the Johnson administration realized that without British support, discontent in Congress and among the press would increase substantially. Among many concerns of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was the domestic political price to he would pay for backing U.S. policy. Wilson, however, at least partially feared losing American financial support if he broke publicly with the Johnson administration over Vietnam. Financial support in the form of loans to Great Britain was crucial to the Wilson government as it strove to avoid devaluation of sterling amidst its growing economic crisis. Consequently Great Britain did not provide military assistance,
but it continued to publicly endorse the war while simultaneously encouraging the United States to achieve a negotiated settlement.157

Although Brown made suggestions to Johnson to help settle the international uproar, it was not long before he took action himself. Only a few hours later on 30 December, he spoke with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Rusk reported to Johnson that George Brown and Harold Wilson “are very stewed up at the present time about the build up from Harrison Salisbury from over there.” Although Rusk emphasized that they did not intend to disassociate from the United States or talk more bluntly about civilian casualties, they wanted “to show people at home that they [were] sympathetic to the situation and they want[ed] to do so in a way without criticizing the United States.”158 Rusk subsequently outlined their proposal, which requested that representatives from the United States, North Vietnam and Great Britain meet in a neutral British territory to discuss an end to the war. Once again, then, Salisbury’s reporting had caused the British government to waver on its tightrope of public association with U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam. While still uneasily supporting Johnson, public pressure persuaded the British government to once more put pressure on Johnson to initiate negotiations.

Opponents of the Johnson administration’s policies toward North Vietnam garnered much strength from Salisbury’s reports. The Johnson administration not only had to face a hostile general international public, but also answer to other governments,


158 Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dean Rusk, 30 December 1966, Citation #11237, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.
most especially Great Britain. Pressure to act against the bombing of civilians and to begin negotiations abroad was strong; it too, like domestic public opinion, put much pressure on the Johnson administration to take action.

**Government Response**

On 15 December 1966, the very day that Salisbury received his invitation to visit North Vietnam, Secretary of State Dean Rusk had again warned the President of an old concern - that American bombing could have negative repercussions in terms of public opinion. He said,

> We are in danger of being trapped into a situation where the Poles or the Soviets could cause us grievous harm by a charge that there was a serious effort by Hanoi toward peace and that we rejected it by intensified bombing.\(^\text{159}\)

Despite the fact that top officials were clearly aware of the public relations danger that bombing the North and civilian areas posed, the administration had done little if anything to prepare to answer critics. Phil Goulding, who was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, later explained that officials not only lacked preparedness, but also failed to respond as quickly as they should have on Salisbury’s stories hit the press.\(^\text{160}\) Goulding recounts that “McNamara and Arthur Sylvester were out of the country at a NATO meeting when the trouble began.”\(^\text{161}\) Johnson was at his ranch in Texas for

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\(^{159}\) Quoted in Hershberg, “Who Murdered ‘Marigold,’” 58.

\(^{160}\) Goulding, *Confirm or Deny*, 53-54.

\(^{161}\) Ibid., 67.
Christmas. George Christian, Johnson’s fourth press secretary in three years, had just replaced Bill Moyers on 15 December and was not prepared for such a discussion.\textsuperscript{162} Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs announced his own resignation on 5 January 1967 and officially resigned 3 February. (Sylvester did little to help matters when on 19 January he referred to the reporter in a Chicago speech as “Harrison Appallsbury” and to his publication as “The New Hanoi Times.”)\textsuperscript{163} When the bombing became a major public affairs problem with the publishing of Salisbury’s eyewitness accounts, the administration stood ill prepared to deal with the criticism.

Although the administration was reluctant to admit that U.S. bombing did strike civilian populated areas of North Vietnam, Salisbury’s accounts forced them to do so. On 27 December 1966, two days after Salisbury’s first report, the Johnson administration publicly conceded that “American pilots had accidentally struck civilian areas in North Vietnam while attempting to bomb military targets.”\textsuperscript{164} Four weeks later, as Representative Ogden Reid had requested, intelligence sources released aerial photographs of the bombing. The photographs, as the \textit{New York Times} wrote, “showed considerable damage to civilian structures as well as to military targets in some places in

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North Vietnam.”165 Government sources had confirmed Salisbury’s observations.

The administration’s efforts to defend its policies against Salisbury’s reporting seem only to have occurred as a reaction to the increasing public outcry concerning Salisbury’s testimony. As public discussion continued into January, Cyrus Vance, the under secretary to McNamara, began to call Salisbury’s reporting a “major public affairs problem.” He concluded that “Salisbury’s articles [had] stimulated considerable criticism both at home and abroad of our bombing policy itself and the information we have given out about it.”166 For nearly the full month of January the topic of Salisbury’s articles was the subject of daily news summaries at the White House. The “public relations problem” landed on the agenda of McNamara’s briefings of the President. Although no transcripts are available, meeting agendas reveal that Johnson himself further discussed what to do in response to the uproar caused by Salisbury’s reports with Walt Rostow, Robert McNamara, General Maxwell Taylor, Dean Rusk, and Arthur Goldberg.167

As the administration’s concern grew, so too did its efforts to defend its policies.


166 Memorandum, Undersecretary to U, Weekly Focus Reports 10/1966-10/1971; 10/1966-03/1969 to 02/1967; Executive Secretariat, DOS, RG 59, NACP.

167 Salisbury’s stories were a constant topic of the administration. See, for example, Current News, “Current News” Sept. 1966 – Feb. 1967, Records of Robert S. McNamara, RG 200, NACP; memorandum, William P. Bundy to the Undersecretary, 30 December 1966, Weekly Focus Reports 10/1966-10/1971; 10/1966-03/1969 to 02/1967; Executive Secretariat, DOS, RG 59, NACP; “Agenda, Lunch Meeting with the President: 31 January 1967,” file January 1-14, box 12, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, National Security File, LBJL; Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Arthur Goldberg, 31 December 1966, Citation #11240, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.
Finally on 31 December 1966 – an entire week after Salisbury’s first report – Johnson made a public statement on Salisbury’s stories. At a news conference at the LBJ Ranch, Johnson stressed that although there was civilian damage, “only military targets have been authorized.” He further emphasized the military’s efforts to avoid civilian deaths. Additionally, as British Foreign Minister George Brown had encouraged, Johnson agreed to meet for negotiations. He also reminded his listeners of the utter destruction the Viet Cong caused in the South and reemphasized that the North Vietnamese government supported it.168

Several well-known U.S. officials also stressed how important bombing was to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. Making a strong case for the bombing, General William C. Westmoreland said the air campaign “impeded the flow of supplies and equipment to the South.” Without the air war, he argued, “the North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops would have been better supplied with weapons and ammunition than was actually the case.” Along with Westmoreland, the Defense Department and even former President Dwight D. Eisenhower pointed out that the United States used “precise, careful bombing,” that provided a valuable contribution to the increasing success of U.S. troops in Vietnam.169


Against accusations that American bombing delayed negotiations President Johnson reaffirmed his desire for peace. He stated the United States would be “very glad to do more than our part in meeting Hanoi halfway in any possible cease-fire, truce or peace-conference negotiations.” Encouraged by Ambassador Goldberg, President Johnson replied with letters to Rhodes Scholars and other student groups who had petitioned him to end the bombing of North Vietnam. He also responded to Ralph Yarbrough, reminding the senator of how much he was trying to aid the peace process. Johnson said, for example, that he “already [had] a “peace team” headed by Averell Harriman.” In public appearances and by mail he continually emphasized that, unlike what Salisbury had reported, it was not the United States that had hampered negotiations but the North Vietnamese. Dean Rusk urged a “Face the Nation” television audience


Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Arthur Goldberg, 31 December 1966, Citation #11239, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

Memo, President to Ralph, 9 January 1967, file January 1-14, box 12, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, LBJL. This file also contains the administration’s response to the students.

to demand concessions from Hanoi as well as from Washington. U.S. officials implied that Hanoi’s overtures towards peace were probably insincere. The bombing halt North Vietnam wanted, they argued, was only part of a larger military strategy to gain international support.

The Johnson administration also made some specific efforts to quell protest abroad. An unnamed assistant to the Secretary of Defense prepared “a memorandum on the general question of the extent to which international law imposes restrictions upon our bombing of North Viet Nam.” On 31 December, the Department of State issued a telegram to all American diplomatic missions. It told its readers that the Department of Defense had reviewed the recent series of articles by Harrison Salisbury. Carefully checked against information in Washington, it described the importance of the military targets in Nam Dinh, the city Salisbury had visited. Moreover, the telegram asserted that Salisbury’s reports “contained exaggerations” and were “not clearly based on Salisbury’s own observations.” The telegram closed, “Our attitude toward the Salisbury articles should be that they are simply one man’s observation augmented by hearsay and that he


can report only that which he is allowed to see.”

In response to British concern, Johnson publicly accepted British Foreign Secretary George Brown’s proposal that the representatives of the three countries meet in any suitable British territory to arrange a cessation of hostilities. The Johnson administration believed that the North Vietnamese would not agree to negotiate, but for the administration it provided a gesture of good will to help quell international dissatisfaction with the war and maintain ties with Great Britain.

The Johnson administration also gained one other advantage in disproving Salisbury’s articles. Through an unknown channel the Washington Post acquired information that linked Salisbury’s statistics to those in a North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet entitled “Report on U.S. war Crimes in Nam-Dinh City” prepared by The Committee for the Investigation of U.S. Imperialists' War Crimes in Viet Nam of Nam Ha Province, in October 1966. Although Goulding claims he never saw the pamphlet, it had been freely distributed in English to foreign correspondents in Moscow, and the Defense Department had obtained a copy. However the Washington Post obtained the copy, its findings clearly discredited Salisbury’s reports and bolstered the


administration’s position. On 1 January 1967 the *Washington Post* published an article by George C. Wilson entitled “Salisbury’s Casualties Tally with Viet Reds.” It asserted that Salisbury’s figures were “identical to those in a Communist propaganda pamphlet issued in November.”

Salisbury’s figures did in fact match those official statistical figures of the Vietnamese government and its pamphlet. It bears emphasis, however, that those figures were accurate. A CIA document dated 23 February 1967 confirmed that bomb damage in North Vietnam was severe, that pilots did hit civilian areas, and that the propaganda pamphlet’s statistics were even below the estimates of bomb damage that U.S. officials had expected. The CIA document stated, “These casualty estimates do not appear exaggerated.” The report concluded,

> The statistical information concerning damage to civilian areas in the North Vietnamese “Report on US War Crimes in Nam Dinh City” is accurate. Total damage claims fall remarkably close to estimates based on post strike photography. . . . Reported casualties fall within casualty estimates made by use of the World War II Japanese bombing experiences.

Salisbury’s figures, then, remained trustworthy even though they matched those in the pamphlet. The examination raises an interesting question. What exactly defines


180 Salisbury later obtained a copy of this report. See folder 2, box 454, SP. Although Guenter Lewy claims that Salisbury’s articles were purely propaganda, he provides a thorough examination of the similarities in the two reports in his book, Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 400-406.

181 “Analysis of North Vietnamese Propaganda Regarding Nam Dinh,” 27 February 1967. CIA-RDP 78S02149R0002000060002-1, CIA Research Tool (CREST), National Archives and Records Administration, NACP.
propaganda? In this particular case Salisbury’s mistake had simply been citing statistical information gathered and disseminated by the North Vietnamese government, statistical information that U.S. intelligence afterwards proved accurate.

Salisbury’s use of North Vietnamese governmental statistics had little effect abroad, but became the subject of much attention specifically among journalists in the United States. It came to the forefront of discussion as they debated whether or not going behind enemy lines as Salisbury did could produce trustworthy journalism. In that way, as we shall see in Chapter 4, it perhaps did the most to support claims that Salisbury’s reports were merely serving North Vietnamese propaganda purposes.

Phil Goulding concluded that overall the Johnson administration did an ineffective job of quelling the growing criticism created by Salisbury’s reporting. As the uproar created by Salisbury’s reports suggests, the administration’s failure to prepare for negative publicity and its slow response left critics unsatisfied. Perhaps this lack of organization within the Johnson administration suggests something of the administration’s inability to deal with the media in a prompt, proactive manner. More directly, however, it reveals the power one notable journalist and the press more generally to garner the public’s support and trust against the efforts of the United States government.

**Conclusion**

It was Salisbury’s articles, the way he wrote them through his choice of words and style, his portrayal of the enemy, and his conclusions about the character and political
ideology of North Vietnam that ultimately persuaded many of his readers to embrace peace. As the government reluctantly admitted the realities of their bombing campaign, Salisbury’s reports decreased the Johnson administration’s credibility in the eyes of both American citizens and the international world. His reports put pressure on the Johnson administration to alter its public appearance towards the bombing of North Vietnam and publicly support renewed negotiations.

The government’s efforts did little to stop the growing protests against the bombing among religious groups, academics, congressional leaders, or foreign citizens and government officials that had begun on 26 December and carried even through April of 1967. Salisbury’s testimony had aided the anti-war campaign in America and abroad. Simultaneously, by causing this uproar the reports had also directly aided the military and political campaign of America’s wartime enemy, North Vietnam. A CIA intelligence information cable from North Vietnam on 4 January 1967 read,

The North Vietnamese were very pleased with the results of the visit by Harrison Salisbury, assistant manager of “the New York Times.” The North Vietnamese are now considering additional visits of this kind by “sympathetic” correspondents.182

Beyond this report, little else is known about what North Vietnamese leaders thought of Salisbury’s visit in terms of its political benefits. Certainly, however, they were pleased that Salisbury’s reports had created further tension between the United States and the

international community and decreased support for Salisbury’s own government’s war policies against North Vietnam.
CHAPTER 3: THE SECRET SIDE OF THE VIETNAM WAR FROM BEHIND ENEMY LINES

The consequences of Salisbury’s presence behind enemy lines on international relations extended beyond the effect his controversial reporting had on public opinion. Despite the public skepticism the Johnson administration expressed regarding Salisbury’s articles, the administration itself privately viewed Salisbury as a trustworthy source of information and a potential intermediary for direct discussions between the United States and Hanoi. Unknown to the journalist, his trip behind enemy lines also came on the wing of a crucial secret peace initiative, Operation Marigold, giving Great Britain and the Johnson administration further hope that Salisbury might hold the key to secret negotiations.

This chapter follows the evolution of the Johnson administration’s relationship with Salisbury. It addresses how Salisbury unknowingly influenced the administration’s private thinking on negotiations. Additionally, this chapter attempts to shed light on the miscommunications that took place between the journalist and his government while he was in North Vietnam. Those miscommunications contributed to a cold and bitter relationship between Salisbury and the administration that materialized with Salisbury’s return home.
Finding Peace

As early as 1961 and continuing after Salisbury left North Vietnam, the United States made “contacts with other governments and individuals, Communist and non-communist, to encourage negotiations.” The administration kept these efforts secret to help create an atmosphere free of outside pressure and one conducive to settlement. No third party attempt was ever successful in bringing leaders in Washington and Hanoi to the conference table. When Salisbury stepped behind enemy lines in December of 1966, however, he did so during a key moment in this ongoing secret negotiation process, just as one of the most promising initiatives, Operation Marigold, was coming to an end. Because Marigold offered perhaps the best chance of peace during 1966-1967, Salisbury’s limited role in it becomes significant.

Operation Marigold had been underway for many months before Salisbury stepped behind enemy lines. In fact, secret talks between U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Italian Ambassador to South Vietnam Giovanni D’Orlandi, and Polish ICC Representative Januscz Lewandowski had begun as early as June of 1966. The talks became the foundation for Operation Marigold, which came to represent a series of indirect contacts between Hanoi and Washington brokered by Polish intermediaries. Operation Marigold climaxed in December. On 1 December 1966, Lewandowski told Lodge that he had presented a ten-point statement of U.S. views in Hanoi, and that the


North Vietnamese now wanted a United States diplomat to meet directly with a North Vietnamese ambassador in Warsaw. The mission showed much promise. Although the initial meeting was delayed, evidence suggests that a DRV representative actually went to Warsaw and waited there for more than a week to meet with the U.S. ambassador. Miscommunications stalled their meeting, and on 14 December (the day before Salisbury received his invitation to visit North Vietnam), the DRV representative left Warsaw and the North Vietnamese terminated the mission.185

President Johnson believed that North Vietnamese leaders terminated the mission because they were not ready to talk. Historians George Herring and Allan E. Goodman agree.186 The North Vietnamese, however, blamed the failure of the mission on U.S. bombing. American planes struck targets in the vicinity of Hanoi for the first time in six months on 2 and 4 December 1966.187 After the bombings, the North Vietnamese made clear to their intermediaries that they would not negotiate if the United States insisted on bombing their capital. Despite warnings and protests by Adam Rapacki, the Polish Foreign Minister, to the American ambassador in Warsaw, John Gronouski, new U.S. air strikes occurred again on 13 and 14 December.188 After the air strikes, the North Vietnamese terminated the negotiations.

188 Ibid.
After the second round of air strikes, North Vietnamese Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh stated, “We cannot allow for the USA to realize the plan for indirect or direct contact when it constantly bombards North Vietnam. . . . The USA continues to be stubborn and insolent.”\footnote{189} Pham Van Dong told the Polish intermediary Jerzy Siedlecki that the “latest strikes on Hanoi had caused a “serious deterioration” in the situation, and discontinued “all contacts with the USA.”\footnote{190} Clearly, as historian Ilya Gaiduk points out, Johnson’s bombing of Hanoi had deeply angered the North Vietnamese. If there had been any chance of a negotiation, American bombing extinguished it.\footnote{191}

The North Vietnamese invited Salisbury to come to North Vietnam on 15 December, the very day after the DRV terminated Operation Marigold. Salisbury claimed Hanoi tried to send him an earlier telegram through the \textit{New York Times} Paris office, and that his timing was coincidental. Neither Salisbury nor anyone else, however, ever saw that earlier telegram.\footnote{192} Moreover, Salisbury’s timing seems crucial given the subject of his reports, U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. U.S. bombing had destroyed portions of North Vietnam, inflicted civilian casualties, and resulted in the termination of

\footnote{189} Hershberg, “Who Murdered ‘Marigold,’” 73.  
\footnote{190} Ibid., 73, 49.  
\footnote{191} Gaiduk, \textit{The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War}, 91.  
\footnote{192} Salisbury, \textit{A Time of Change}, 143.
a secret peace initiative.\textsuperscript{193} It seems evident that even if the timing was coincidental, the North Vietnamese had an obvious interest exposing the effects of U.S. bombing on citizens to the world. Salisbury’s reporting, then, not only revealed the devastating effects of American bombing on North Vietnamese citizenry to his readers, but also sent a clear message to the Johnson administration. The North Vietnamese warnings were genuine. Although they had been willing to consider negotiations while under air attack, they would not consider negotiations if the United States continued to escalate its bombing campaign, and especially when the United States directly attacked Hanoi.

As late as 22 December 1966, the Johnson administration was still attempting to resuscitate Operation Marigold by restricting its air attacks. On that date it initiated a bombing restriction, pledging not to bomb within ten nautical miles of the center of Hanoi. Hanoi responded on 30 December that “this latest action cannot make up for the damage done by the 13-14 December raids in Hanoi. The Polish intermediary talks are to be terminated.” Rapacki stated that only “unconditional stopping of bombing NVN might create the atmosphere for peaceful solution.”\textsuperscript{194}

Despite North Vietnam’s reply, the Johnson administration continued to hold out hope for negotiations. The administration limited American bombing of North Vietnam, restricting bombing to ten nautical miles away from the center of Hanoi. Members of the

\textsuperscript{193} In addition to above notes, also see Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 203-204. For an account of the frustrations of Hanoi and Moscow, see Gaiduk, \textit{The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War}, 91.

administration also kept watch for signs that the North Vietnamese might still be willing to negotiate. More specifically, they watched Harrison Salisbury – the only non-military, free American in North Vietnam at the time – because they believed he might hold the key to initiating talks. In fact, they soon came to see Salisbury himself as a potential intermediary for peace. The Johnson administration based their knowledge of Salisbury’s trip to North Vietnam largely on information conveyed to them through the British and their Consul in Hanoi, John Colvin. After some casual conversations with Salisbury, Colvin came to believe that the North Vietnamese would be willing to negotiate with the United States through Salisbury. He conveyed that to Great Britain and subsequently the Johnson administration. Unbeknownst to Salisbury, Colvin sent a telegram to George Brown, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, on 2 January reporting that Salisbury believed the North Vietnamese were treating him as “an unofficial emissary.” Colvin emphasized that Salisbury had repeated that remark to him several times. Colvin continued,

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195 Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Arthur Goldberg, 31 January 1966, Citation #11238, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1972), 768; On the attentiveness of the Johnson administration to Salisbury’s visit and reports, see Memo, Mike Mansfield to the President, 6 January 1967, folder Jan 1-12, box 12, Memos to the President, LBJL. Also see “Comparison of Salisbury Notes on Interview with Pham Van Dong,” 3 January 1967; and “Salisbury Interview with Pham Van Dong,” 2 January 1967, both in folder Jan. 15-31, ibid., LBJL.

Brown believed that the recent statements by DRV officials and Salisbury’s impressions signaled the DRV’s readiness to negotiate, and their intention to communicate that through Salisbury. The British Secretary of State – who was always looking for ways to end the war – quickly forwarded Colvin’s telegram to William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs. He encouraged Bundy to take action.

After examining the telegram, Bundy sent a memorandum to Dean Rusk. Based on Salisbury’s impressions he also felt that the North might want to negotiate. Though Bundy remained somewhat skeptical, he concluded that, “The matter seems to me clearly to be followed up in any event and doubly so in view of George Brown’s entreat.” He continued,

> I recommend that we pass the British the following message to Consul General Colvin and to Salisbury. . . . If in fact members of the North Vietnamese government have suggested, or do suggest clandestine direct talks with the US, Salisbury is authorized by us to tell the North Vietnamese that he can convey this to us through the British secure channel.198

Salisbury’s discussions with the British Consul and British interest in it encouraged the Johnson administration to follow through. On 3 January, Rusk sent a telegram to Salisbury authorizing the journalist to use the British channel and initiate private

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197 Ibid. Also see telegram to Washington, 4 January 1967, ibid.
198 Memorandum, William Bundy to the Secretary, 3 January 1967, folder Vietnam: January – March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt. W. Rostow, LBJL.
negotiations on behalf of the United States.

The administration also took further actions to prepare for the negotiations they believed could follow. They placed the mission under an umbrella of new attempts at negotiations called Operation Sunflower. Walt Rostow, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, began outlining the details of the negotiation process. In a memorandum to the President, Rostow wrote that based on Salisbury’s comments to Colvin, he too had “come to believe it conceivable, if not probable, that they [the North Vietnamese] are trying to get out of the war but don’t know how.” He then laid out a plan for how and where U.S. and DRV representatives could conduct direct talks.199

In Rostow’s plan, Salisbury only served as the first, primary contact. After the DRV confirmed their desire to negotiate with Salisbury, Rostow planned for the Johnson administration to take over the settlement process and arrange for representatives of both sides to convene and conduct secret meetings. Rostow said he believed “a secure facility could be provided for our emissaries to meet without diplomatic or journalistic knowledge, close to Rangoon. . . . We have canvassed all the other possibilities; but Rangoon appears the best place.” Rostow still expressed caution. He wrote to Johnson, “Be clear, I don’t give this very high odds.” Nevertheless, he was serious about attempting negotiations, and about the possibility of Salisbury sending them a message of confirmation to begin the first step of the process. As he concluded, “I have had a

199 Rostow to President, 3 January 1967, folder Vietnam: January – March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt. W. Rostow, LBJL.
nagging feeling that they could well be in a position of wanting to get out . . . I think it is worth a try.”

**Working with a Journalist**

Rusk’s request to Salisbury was not the first time the State Department had turned to journalists as intermediaries in issues related to U.S. foreign relations. The administration, for example, had long looked to journalists to gain information on American Prisoners of War (POWs) in Vietnam. Moreover, they had looked to Salisbury specifically to gain that information.

The U.S. government’s ability to get information on American POWs was extremely limited during the Vietnam War. Neither the Democratic Republic of Vietnam nor the United States officially declared war during the Vietnam War. Consequently, as historian Richard Falk has argued, North Vietnam considered American pilots and soldiers in their custody war criminals subject to the laws of North Vietnam rather than prisoners of war. This situation negated the use of the normal procedures outlined by the Geneva Convention of 1949 for dealing with prisoners of war and made obtaining information on American military personnel held in North Vietnam extremely difficult.201 The best hope of the United States for obtaining information on the men they considered POWs was through humanitarian efforts initiated by third parties who identified

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200 Ibid.

themselves as distinct and separate from governmental interests.\footnote{When the first POWs were released in 1969 and 1970, the North Vietnamese insisted on civilian escorts for their return. The fact that the DRV threatened to cut off further releases if the U.S. government became involved highlights the DRV’s sensitivity to the issue of U.S. governmental involvement in the freeing of POWs. See Ibid.; and Howard S. Levie, "International Law Aspects of Repatriation of Prisoners of War During Hostilities: A Reply," \textit{The American Journal of International Law} 67, no. 4 (Oct., 1973).}

As early as 9 June 1966, the State Department identified U.S. foreign news correspondents as individuals who, having no governmental affiliation, could potentially gain information on American POWs. Although the State Department recognized that these individuals might be hesitant to act as “agents of the U.S. Department of State,” they saw gathering information on American POWs not as a governmental assignment, but as a “humanitarian” mission. In one telegram the State Department specifically identified “Karnow, Topping, and Jaffee” as “responsible reporters” who would be “suitable intermediaries for contacting Burchett regarding American POW’s in VC Hands.”\footnote{The telegram does not identify the reporters by their first names. Obviously it meant Stanley Karnow and Seymour Topping. I am unsure, however, of who Jaffee refers to. I believe the writer may have meant Jaffe, in which case the telegram could be referring to Samuel A. Jaffe of ABC, who had been approved earlier that year by the State Department for travel to North Vietnam.} Wilfred Burchett, of course, was a reporter located in North Vietnam during the war. The telegram listed Harrison Salisbury, who was touring the perimeter of China at the time, as a fourth possibility. All had access to Cambodia, and, as the telegram stated, “can probably be relied upon to keep their mouths shut for as long as may be necessary.”\footnote{Telegram, Hong Kong to Department of State, 9 June 1966, available from Declassified Documents Reference System, Gale Online Database, Item CK3100002657.} The U.S. government was at least in part reliant on correspondents for
information on American POWs, and they trusted Salisbury as a possible contact.

When the North Vietnamese admitted Salisbury, his involvement in the POW situation became a real possibility. A Defense Department memorandum on 30 December 1966 acknowledged that the Department had created a direct mail system for “sending packages to a number of Navy and Air Force prisoners in connection with Christmas,” but had no way of knowing if the channel succeeded. The Defense Department did not make contact with Salisbury prior to his departure. Now, however, they hoped confirmation might come “from reporters such as Salisbury, Lomax or Greene” whom they believed might gain access to North Vietnam. Salisbury was the only one of the three reporters who made it to North Vietnam. As the sole American in that forbidden country, he stood the best chance of obtaining any type of information on American POWs.

The Defense Department sent Salisbury a telegram requesting that he find information on the well-being of some POWs. Salisbury accepted that request. He did so, he later recalled, “for humanitarian reasons,” on behalf of those prisoners’ families and loved ones. Salisbury put much effort into fulfilling the government’s request. He

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205 Confidential Memorandum, Philip Heyman to The Under Secretary, Weekly Focus Reports 10/1966-10/1971,10/1966-03/1969 to 02/1967, Executive Secretariat, DOS, RG 59, NACP. Again this telegram does not refer to first names. I believe Lomax refers to Louis Lomax, an African American reporter with ties to the communist party. I am unsure of who Greene refers to. What is clear is that the State Department believed these individuals could get access to information in North Vietnam unobtainable by U.S. officials.

206 CBS television interview, 12 January 1967, reel A76, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, RG 330, NACP.
renewed his plea for information on American POWs four or five times while in North Vietnam. Later Salisbury lamented, “I’m sorry to say that I left Hanoi neither having visited the prisoners nor gotten any information on the names I had submitted to them.” Although his efforts accomplished little he continued his activism on behalf of American POWs even after he returned home.

While Salisbury was unsuccessful, his mere efforts demonstrate the communication flows and cordial relations that could exist between this U.S. reporter and the Johnson administration during his time in Hanoi. The Johnson administration viewed Salisbury as a reporter they could trust in highly confidential and important international matters. Salisbury’s positive efforts on behalf of his government were clearly due to his concern for the POWs themselves and their families more than any desire to fulfill U.S. government requests. Even so, his efforts on behalf of POWs along with his obvious desire for the United States to reach a peace agreement with North Vietnam may have given the administration some hope that this reporter could help facilitate negotiations.

Miscommunication, Misperception, and a Missed Opportunity

What transpired in North Vietnam after Rusk sent his telegram to Salisbury was not what the British or the Johnson administration had hoped. Although Salisbury stated that the North Vietnamese were treating him as an unofficial emissary and although he reported that the North Vietnamese were willing to negotiate, the correspondent refused to communicate with the Johnson administration on this matter while in North Vietnam.

In a reply to the administration via Colvin’s British channel, Salisbury promised to “keep mum on the delicate matters.” However he did not agree to share any information with the administration or act as an emissary in any way.208 “I didn’t think much of communicating third or fourth hand,” Salisbury later recalled. “I told that to Colvin and said he could tell Rusk I would be at his disposal as soon as I got to the U.S.A. probably by January 11.”209 Rusk then attempted to contact Salisbury a second time by telegram. He also sought to communicate with him through Salisbury’s publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr.210 All of this was to no avail. The reporter agreed not to discuss specific negotiation matters in his reports, but remained unwilling to communicate with Rusk until he returned to the United States.

In an oral history interview two years after the incident, Salisbury explained that he did not want to communicate with Rusk on this matter because he and the managing staff of the New York Times had wanted to keep his presence in North Vietnam “purely a news operation.”211 His reasoning, however, seems flawed since he did respond to the

208 Telegram to the foreign office, 5 January 1967, folder Vietnam: January – March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt. W. Rostow, LBJL. The latter telegram states, “I am trying to give him Rusk’s message today. (He refused offer to him of cipher facilities), and he is conscious of the need for clandestinely. He said ‘his position’ would not allow him to discuss with me the transmission of north Vietnamese messages over our channel. But he may have discussed it with the prime minister. His articles will not include references to negotiations, etc.” Also see Sunflower (A Chronology), folder Sunflower Chronology, box 256, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, LBJL.


210 Oral History Interview with Harrison Salisbury, 26 June 1969, LBJL, 18.

211 Ibid., 7.
administration’s request to find information on American POWs. He also took his reporting beyond “purely news” in fervently advocating for negotiations once he returned home.

Much later in life Salisbury confessed that he wished he would have responded to Rusk’s request and done more to help facilitate the peace process. He defended his refusal to do so saying that he had not known of the secret peace initiatives when he went to North Vietnam and had never realized the true nature of Rusk’s entreat. He said that when he had picked up the telegram from Colvin, the British Consul was understaffed and working alone and “had not been able to decode the whole of the lengthy cable [from Rusk] before we met.”212 Even if Salisbury had received the full message, however, it is unlikely he would have responded positively. Salisbury’s contemptuous view of the Johnson administration’s policies in North Vietnam and his lack of faith in the Johnson administration’s honesty would have made it difficult for him to believe anything Rusk said. Salisbury’s journal reveals that he believed Rusk wanted to talk to him to manipulate his reporting. When Salisbury received the telegram, he contemplated its significance in a few lines in his notebook: “Telegram from Rusk. Where to contact. Crossed mind to Sec. of State. (he) in a State. Can’t get to Vietnam. Out of his mind with all this going on.”213 Salisbury thought that Rusk was “out of his mind” not being able to get to North Vietnam to control his reporting. Cooperating with the administration to

212 Salisbury, A Time of Change, 165.

213 Notebook, folder Hanoi: Orb. Notebook, Burchett, Colvin, Wash : Commentary, box 401, SP.
achieve private negotiations never entered Salisbury’s mind. His failure to respond, then, seems a result of both a miscommunication due to the incomplete nature of the telegram and misperception of Rusk’s intentions on Salisbury’s part.

The extent of the misunderstanding between the journalist and the Johnson administration becomes apparent in Salisbury’s description of a private meeting he had with Dean Rusk and William Bundy once he returned home. Salisbury eagerly told Rusk and Bundy that the DRV was ready for talks, but that the talks needed to be bilateral and secret. Salisbury remained enthusiastic about the talks. But he found that Rusk’s enthusiasm for his information had faded away. The atmosphere was antagonistic. Salisbury felt that Rusk “wasn’t really interested in the very important information” he had on the North’s willingness to negotiate. Although Salisbury thought that “Bundy was very eager and interested,” he remembered that “Rusk was stiff and on guard, especially at the start. He kept trying to start arguments with me.” Salisbury recorded the conversations he had with Rusk, putting in parentheses his own impressions and puzzlement at the seemingly inconsequential questions Rusk kept asking:

Rusk: Did they make any mention of any other contacts between ourselves and them?
Me: No.
Rusk: What does Pham Van Dong mean by appropriate steps (in relationship to their response if we stopped the bombing)?
Me: I tried and tried to get him to specify but he wouldn’t.
Rusk: We have been trying to find this out for months (Rusk did not follow up this line and made no effort to persuade me that they actually

214 Oral History Interview with Harrison Salisbury, 26 June 1969, LBJL, 22.

215 Ibid; Also see Memorandum, Salisbury talk with Rusk, 13 January 1967, folder Rusk 1967 Foreign Affairs Article, 8, box 591, SP.
Salisbury’s ignorance and refusal to help initiate negotiations when he had the chance frustrated Rusk. Meanwhile Salisbury could not piece together the reasoning behind Rusk’s questions, and only grew more frustrated, believing that Rusk was ignoring his pleas for private negotiations. “I thought that I should talk to the President,” Salisbury recalled two years later. “It seemed to me that I had information that would be useful to him regardless of how his emotions might have been aroused by the trip.” Again and again Salisbury emphasized his dissatisfaction with the administration as he went before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and spoke to various organizations around the United States. While Rusk and Johnson moved on toward new secret peace initiatives and away from working with the journalist, Salisbury continued to express his dismay over Johnson’s refusal to meet with him and attempt private peace negotiations.

**Continuing Efforts**

Salisbury’s refusal to communicate with Washington regarding negotiations while in North Vietnam was not the end of Operation Sunflower. In fact, just as the members of the Johnson administration were looking at Salisbury as a potential intermediary, they were simultaneously also working with the British, who hoped to connect with Hanoi through a Soviet intermediary. This larger aspect of Operation Sunflower continued to take shape through January and on 6 February 1967, Soviet Premier Kosygin traveled to

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216 Ibid., 4.

217 Oral History Interview with Harrison Salisbury, 26 June 1969, LBJL, 18.
London to meet with Prime Minister Wilson. Operating as intermediaries for North Vietnam and the United States, the two leaders discussed the situation in Vietnam and specifically a U.S. approved two-phase proposal for negotiations.\(^{218}\)

It is worth noting that the British and the Johnson administration continued to rely on Salisbury’s impressions as an indication that the North Vietnamese were willing to negotiate. Salisbury had ensured the administration received a detailed copy of his interview with the North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, and that interview became an important reference for the administration in its ongoing attempts to establish negotiations. Salisbury’s interview increased hopes that the DRV was willing to talk.\(^{219}\)

As historian James Hershberg writes, Washington’s willingness to turn to Moscow was both a result of hints from Soviet diplomats “and Pham Van Dong’s seemingly forthcoming attitude toward talks taken in conversations with \emph{New York Times} correspondent Harrison Salisbury.”\(^{220}\)

Salisbury’s impressions also helped to mold the specific proposals the Johnson administration approved. The administration continued to limit its bombing of North Vietnam, and in the ten-point proposal emphasized direct, confidential discussions to achieve a peaceful settlement and the termination of bombing in exchange for a halt in DRV infiltration into the South. As Rusk attempted to arrange meetings in Moscow, he

\(^{218}\) Goodman, \emph{The Lost Peace}, 47.

\(^{219}\) Telegram, DOS to Saigon Embassy, 6 January 1967, folder 2, box 148, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, LBJL.

bolstered his arguments for U.S. terms of negotiation using Salisbury’s interview. He mentioned Salisbury’s report, for example, in his talk with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Based on what Pham Van Dong had said in that interview, Rusk argued that the two countries were close to agreeing on terms of negotiations.221

Operation Sunflower also involved a wholly separate attempt at negotiations carried out directly by the Johnson administration. On 2 February while Wilson and Kosygin were discussing Vietnam in London, President Johnson sent a letter proposing negotiations directly to Ho Chi Minh. The letter read,

In the past two weeks I have noted public statements by representatives of your government suggesting that you would be prepared to enter into bilateral talks with representatives of the U.S. government, provided that we ceased unconditionally and permanently our bombing operations against your country and all military actions against it.” 222

Johnson then promised that if Ho would ensure that infiltration of men and materials to the South stopped, he would cease bombing indefinitely. In addition to the bombing restriction still in place from 22 December, the United States implemented a six-day

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pause of all bombing in North Vietnam from 7-13 February. 223

These latter simultaneous efforts only further stunted negotiations. Miscommunication between Prime Minister Wilson and Washington resulted in Hanoi receiving two differing proposals and much confusion between Wilson and the Soviet Ambassador. Wilson, for example, told Kosygin that Washington needed an authoritative pledge from Hanoi that in return for an end to the bombing, NVA infiltration would stop. If they would pledge to stop infiltration, the United States would stop bombing. In his letter to Ho, however, the President wrote that the bombing of North Vietnam would be ended “as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam by land and by sea has stopped.” 224 What might appear a minor difference in vocabulary was in fact quite important. It changed who was responsible for taking the first step and altered the proposal’s meaning significantly.

No one understood the significance of this miscommunication more than Wilson himself did. As he wrote to President Johnson, “I’m in a hell of a situation.”

On the vitally important question of whether as I have told [Kosygin] a cessation of bombing depends on a prior secret assurance by Hanoi that infiltration will stop or as now seems to be the case from your recent messages . . . will only take place after infiltration has stopped on this question I face very great difficulties. You must realize that at lunchtime on Friday he suddenly bit hard on what I said to him, namely that all that was required was a private assurance that infiltration would stop. He bit on this because he clearly knew as I did not, that your message to Hanoi was the tougher version which required a prior stopping of infiltration before bombing could cease. He thought I was telling him something new. I thought I was merely repeating what I had told him earlier with as I


224 Goodman, The Lost Peace, 47.
thought your authority... I can only now get out of this position if I say to him either that I am not in your confidence or that there was a sudden and completely unforeseeable change in Washington which as a loyal satellite I must follow.  

The confusion only further complicated negotiation efforts, and without a reply from Hanoi, the Johnson administration resumed bombing on 13 February, ending the six-day bombing halt and the bombing restrictions around the capital of Hanoi still in place from 22 December.  

Operation Sunflower officially ended on Wednesday 15 February 1967 when President Johnson received Ho Chi Minh’s written reply:

The Vietnamese people have never done any harm to the United States... The United States government is entirely responsible for the extremely serious situation in Vietnam. The U.S. war of aggression against the Vietnamese people constitutes a challenge to the countries of the socialist camp, a threat to the national independence movement and a serious danger to peace in Asia and the world. ... The Vietnamese people deeply love independence, freedom and peace. ... If the U.S. government really wants those talks, it must first of all stop unconditionally its bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.  

The letter ended, “the Vietnamese people will never submit to force, they will never accept talks under the threat of bombs.” By mid-February 1967, the optimism that had characterized the nature of secret peace attempts from early December had vanished.

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225 Message for the President from the Prime Minister, 12 February 1967, folder Vietnam: January – March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt. W. Rostow, LBJL.


227 Ibid., Informal transmission to Lyndon B. Johnson 10 February 1967, 47-48, folder Vietnam: January – March 1967, box 6, Files of Walt W. Rostow, LBJL.

228 Ibid.
Conclusion

It is difficult to say whether or not Salisbury’s direct involvement in negotiations would have been fruitful. It was only one of several initiatives during Operation Sunflower, and Operation Sunflower was only one of thirty-one such attempts by the Johnson Administration to establish peace talks with the DRV in late 1966 and early 1967, all of which failed. Perhaps it is more likely that, as George Herring has noted, “Neither side could afford to appear indifferent to such efforts, but neither was willing to make the concessions necessary to bring about negotiations.” Even so, as an American journalist behind enemy lines, Salisbury’s involvement in these secret peace initiatives reveals the complexity of Salisbury’s influence on American foreign relations, complicates his relationship with the Johnson administration, and further reveals the difficulties he faced in reporting fairly from behind enemy lines.

Salisbury’s presence behind enemy lines signaled the end of Operation Marigold yet also the beginning of Operation Sunflower. With the British watching eagerly,

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230 Herring, America's Longest War, 201.
Salisbury’s actions persuaded the Johnson administration – which continued to have low hopes of establishing negotiations – to once again pursue negotiations. Beyond what he wrote in his reports it was what Salisbury said privately to the British Consul and his interview with Pham Van Dong that compelled the Johnson administration not just publicly to state a desire for private negotiations, but actually take steps to initiate them. Although the administration did not significantly alter its position on negotiations in January and February of 1967, it did make some efforts to establish new connections with Hanoi. Similarly, although the Johnson administration did not significantly alter its bombing policy, Salisbury’s private reports helped to encourage the administration to limit U.S. bombing temporarily. Despite the fact that Salisbury’s actions did not result in significant change, he had nevertheless had become deeply entangled in international policymaking, extending his role in Vietnam well beyond that of a bipartisan journalist.

Salisbury’s involvement with the negotiations suggests the multi-dimensional relationship Salisbury held with the Johnson administration during his time in Hanoi. The very correspondent who ignited a public affairs disaster for the Johnson administration was the same reporter the Johnson administration turned to for information on peace negotiations and American POWs. Likewise the correspondent who assumed a humanitarian role and attempted to gain information about American POWs was the same reporter who refused to communicate with Rusk regarding negotiations. Indeed the tension that developed between Salisbury and the Johnson administration was in a large part the result of complex miscommunications and ran much deeper than Salisbury’s controversial reporting.
Salisbury’s reporting from behind enemy lines entangled him in international politics and humanitarian efforts, and exposed a larger ethical issue. Salisbury’s presence behind enemy lines placed him in a position in which he acted as both a journalist and a political actor. He became involved in much larger political currents, some of which he did not even know about. In doing so he affected the international world in which he wrote in both intended and unintended ways.
CHAPTER 4: JOURNALISTS DEBATE THE IMAGE OF THE ENEMY AND THE VALUE OF REPORTING FROM BEHIND ENEMY LINES

*Newsweek* called Harrison Salisbury’s reports from behind enemy lines “the biggest news beat of 1966.” No one was more concerned with the effects of Salisbury’s reports than his fellow journalists were. They were not simply concerned with the consequences of Salisbury’s reporting on current U.S. policy, but also with its long-term effect on the integrity of their profession. Salisbury’s reporting stretched beyond the boundaries of what many journalists considered “legitimate” wartime reporting, and consequently, Salisbury received much criticism from his fellow journalists. This chapter argues that rather than being stifled by a united media, Salisbury’s reporting ignited a feverish debate among journalists. Their discussions, debates, and even arguments quickly appeared in the editorials of numerous newspapers and periodicals, among television commentators, and in the discussions and decisions of prize boards, such as that of the Pulitzer Prize. As journalists argued whether to criticize or praise Salisbury’s reports, they in turn raised much larger questions about their right to report from behind enemy lines and the very nature of wartime reporting itself.

**Salisbury’s Critics and Supporters**

It is worth noting that Harrison Salisbury was not the only journalist who had wanted to go behind enemy lines during the Vietnam War. A tally of State Department

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issued visas on 29 December 1966 reveals that fifty-eight journalists were attempting to gain entrance to North Vietnam in late 1965 and early 1966.\textsuperscript{232} Government officials also yearned for an American journalist to gain access to North Vietnam. In a Foreign Relations Committee meeting in August of 1966, Senator George D. Aiken, Republican of Vermont, suggested that it might be a good idea to send journalists to North Vietnam. Leonard H. Marks, Director of the U.S. Information Agency replied, “It would be an excellent idea and I wish Hanoi would open its borders and let these people come and see for themselves and report the facts.” Senator Aiken agreed: “I realize you couldn’t send American newsmen there, but . . . it seems to me that it would be quite helpful if they went there.”\textsuperscript{233} Senator Aiken believed that through journalists’ access to North Vietnam the United States could better understand its enemy and formulate war policies and aims. American journalists and the American government looked forward to gaining access to North Vietnam.

Even with growing interest in having an American journalist in North Vietnam, many journalists still did not believe a reporter should go behind enemy lines. Moreover, they saw portraying the enemy in a favorable light as a journalistic taboo. Compared to the stringent censorship guidelines in place during World War I and II, fewer restrictions


\textsuperscript{233} Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{News policies in Vietnam: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations}, 89\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 2\textsuperscript{nd} sess., 17 and 31 August 1966, 17-18.
during the Vietnam War meant major news outlets such as the *New York Times* were free to publish reports that were critical of U.S. governmental policies. In fact, as historian Loren Thompson argues, “reporters were free to write and say whatever they wished about the war so long as they did not disclose sensitive information.” Even so, journalists shied away from reports that portrayed the enemy in a favorable light because such reporting fell outside of what historian Daniel Hallin calls the “Sphere of Legitimate Controversy,” those news stories worthy of publication. It was “written into the FCC’s guidelines for application of the Fairness Doctrine,” for example, “that ‘it is not the Commission’s intention to make time available to Communists or to the Communist view points.” Although Salisbury’s articles fell outside the regulation of the FCC since his stories appeared in print media, his stories were still subject to the acceptance of his peers. Like the FCC, print journalists too saw reporting from behind enemy lines, making time available to North Vietnamese Communists, and justifying their views as overstepping the boundaries of wartime journalism.

As discussed in Chapter 2, only a few days after Salisbury’s first account, U.S. journalists began to allege that his reports were full of inaccuracies and heavily influenced by North Vietnamese propaganda. Reporters emphasized that his casualty numbers matched those of a North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet entitled, “Report on U.S. War Crimes in Nam-Dinh City” prepared by the Committee for the Investigation of

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235 Hallin, *The "Uncensored War,“* 117.
U.S. Imperialists' War Crimes in Viet Nam of Nam Ha Province, in October 1966.  
Making matters worse, Salisbury often said, “they say” in his reports, not specifying that “they” were North Vietnamese officials. He did not directly address the issue until his third report printed on 29 December when he wrote, “It should be noted, incidentally, that all casualty estimates and statistics in these dispatches are those of North Vietnamese officials.” George Wilson of the *Washington Post* broke the story, writing that Salisbury’s civilian casualty figures were “identical to those in a Communist propaganda pamphlet.” His article contained several comparisons between Salisbury’s statistics and those in the pamphlet and concluded that Salisbury’s information was flawed. Salisbury had not forthrightly mentioned the source of his information, the North Vietnamese government. His readers and fellow journalists considered information supplied by the enemy untrustworthy.

Salisbury’s failure to disclose his sources in his first reports soon led to charges that his articles were nothing more than a vehicle for North Vietnamese propaganda. Chalmers M. Roberts labeled Salisbury “Ho’s chosen instrument.” The *Long Island Newsday* said that his reports were “a concerted effort to present [North Vietnamese]

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236 As stated earlier in Chapter 2, this pamphlet was freely distributed in Moscow. The Defense Department had copies of the pamphlet and some individuals believe fed the information to the *Washington Post* in an effort to help control the damage done by Salisbury’s reporting.


propaganda through the mouths of Americans.” The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* charged that “his articles have plagiarized Red propaganda.”240 The *Chicago Tribune* quoted and supported an editorial from the *Richmond News Leader*. They stated that “the reporting by Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* from communist North Vietnam is a contribution to enemy propaganda.” On 5 January the *Washington News* described Salisbury as “gullible” and his reports as “hogwash.”241 The *Tampa Tribune* stated that Salisbury’s reporting “produced no news” but, it continued, “it is serving the propaganda purposes of the Communist world nicely.”242 The *Detroit News* called it the “greatest propaganda coup of the war.”243

Even journalists who did not believe Salisbury had intentionally supported the enemy by failing to name the specific source of his statistics still felt his carelessness was unforgivable considering the significance of his reports. The *Minneapolis Tribune* stated that “we’re pleased that he got to Hanoi and only wish his reporting from there had been as hardboiled as, say, his newspaper’s dispatches have been from Saigon.”244 An editorial in the *Daily Gazette* of Morristown, Tennessee criticized the *New York Times*


244 “Let’s not be Hasty about Salisbury,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, 8 January 1967, in ibid.
and Salisbury for not being concerned with acknowledging Communist sources.245 The News and Courier elaborated that “the very first fact in any dispatch had to be the name of the source of the ensuing information.” As an experienced journalist Salisbury should have expected the questioning of his sources and “should have seized every opportunity to help [his readers] distinguish what he was reporting from what the communists were reporting. He didn’t, and his usefulness as a war reporter will suffer accordingly from now on.”246 Howard K. Smith of “the Hall Syndicate” of the Minneapolis Star said Salisbury was guilty of “cutting corners and abandoning pretenses of balanced reporting.” In doing so, he “dug his own credibility gap.”247 To his critics his bungling of statistics and background information was unacceptable. Because Salisbury had such important information and was trusted as being an accurate reporter, some journalists felt he should have been more precise and thorough in his writing.

Rather than attack Salisbury directly, some journalists expressed their disproval by printing a bombardment of articles reiterating North Vietnamese atrocities in the South. At the Washington Post Murrey Marder condemned Salisbury’s visit because it turned attention away from the brutalities committed by the Northern Communists in the

245 “Why Salisbury Was Chosen,” Daily Gazette-Mail, 3 February 1967, folder Vietnam I Reaction, Editorials, etc, box 454, SP.

246 Editorial, News and Courier, 13 January 1967. book one, box 676, SP

An editorial in *Long Island Newsday* reminded its readers of what the “government of North Vietnam plans to do with South Vietnam.” “That government,” the editorial read, “wishes to take over the people, to destroy their will for liberty and to replace a government struggling towards self-determination with a Communist dictatorship.” The *New York News* published two similar articles. Joseph Fried turned his readers’ attention to the “everyday occurrences” in South Vietnam, where VC terrorism included “blowing up crammed buses, burning down schoolhouses, grenading [sic] movie theatres or meetings, and detonating Claymore mines in crowded market places.” Their “bosses” resided in North Vietnam. *U.S. News and World Report* labeled one of its articles, “Speaking of Killing Civilians – Look at What’s Happening to the South Vietnamese,” and accompanied it with a picture of a South Vietnamese woman on a stretcher alongside two young children. Another picture showed a GI holding a wounded boy. In a front-page article on 6 January the *Washington Post* showed before and after pictures of two American POWs, Robert W. Monhan and Thomas R. Scales. The men’s depressed, thin, and weak appearances emphasized the continual violence.

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committed by the enemy against American soldiers. In magazines, the *National Review* argued that Salisbury should ask his hosts “why their agents in South Vietnam slice the throats of mayors and aldermen and farmers . . . and moreover do so quite intentionally.” The *Arizona Republic* headlined its 16 January 1967 front page with “41 Massacred by VietCong: Women, Children Slashed.” The *Chattanooga News-Free Press* concurred, saying “the South Vietnamese civilian casualties . . . have been and still are being inflicted willfully and with malice by the Communists.” This was not the enemy of Harrison Salisbury’s articles who drank afternoon tea and went to mass on Christmas Eve. Instead, these authors reinforced the stereotypical cruel, even evil North Vietnamese enemy.

From allegations of propaganda and sloppy journalism to efforts to reinforce the negative attributes of the enemy, journalists revealed their concern that Salisbury’s reporting from North Vietnam had been tainted and injured the U.S. war effort. As columnists Joseph Alsop and John Chamberlain wrote, it was inappropriate for Salisbury to report from behind enemy lines. Alsop questioned “whether an American reporter ought to go to an enemy capital” at all. If reporters insisted on going as Salisbury did,


then Alsop and Chamberlain believed it was the Johnson administration’s duty to prevent
them from doing so. Chamberlain criticized the Johnson administration for allowing
Salisbury to go behind enemy lines and damage homefront morale and the American war
effort.257 Louis H. Simons agreed. “The issue that concerns the American people in this
particular instance is not whether Salisbury is telling the truth but rather the reason for the
State Department’s acquiescence in permitting the reporter to go there.”258 As Ted Lewis
of the New York Daily News stated, “well, it is a helluva way to fight a war, this business
of validating American passports so that U.S. citizens can go to Hanoi, mingle with the
enemy.”259 In the Washington Star Crosby S. Noyes further explained:

> For this is the first U.S. government in history to have committed
> American lives to the outcome of a war and at the same time permitted –
> one could almost say invited – the systematic subversion of this
> commitment by the press. . . . At this stage . . . there is no excuse for a
> business-as-usual attitude on the part of the government. It is simply not
> possible to justify such an attitude and also justify the sacrifice of
> thousands of American lives.260

According to Salisbury’s critics, reporters behind enemy lines were bound to write stories
that contained propaganda. Moreover, they saw that Salisbury’s portrayal of the enemy
disregarded the violence that American soldiers faced on the war front. Salisbury’s


258 Louis Simons, “New Year Reflections Show Anti-U.S. Acts,” Beaver County Times, 5
January 1967, folder Vietnam I Reaction, Editorials, etc., box 454. SP.

259 Ted Lewis, “Passports to Hanoi, a Helluva Note,” Daily News, 30 December 1966,
book 1, box 676, SP.

200, NACP.
presence behind enemy lines, they believed, cost the government valuable support at home and ultimately endangered the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. They argued not only that Salisbury should not have gone to North Vietnam, but also that the United States government should not have given him an opportunity to do so.

Although disapproval of Salisbury and his articles proved fierce, he also gained many supporters. Journalists like James Wechsler at the New York Post believed that despite Salisbury’s initial failure to cite his sources, he had redeemed himself by naming them in subsequent reports. Moreover, Wechsler said it was “plainly not the heart of the matter; the big story was the personal description and pictures of ruined civilian areas. . . . no reader was to assume that Salisbury had himself counted the casualty incidents that had taken place long before his arrival.”

The Hartford Times stated, “Any comment on Mr. Salisbury’s report and views must grant him this advantage: he was on the spot and faithfully reported what he saw, and his conclusions are based on what he saw and was told.”

The Greensboro Daily News agreed. “No doubt Mr. Salisbury erred in not making his source clear from the outset. But the impact of Salisbury’s articles does not depend, in any event, on the exact accuracy in the casualty lists, whatever their source. It depends rather on the revelation by a reputable American reporter that the American people have been systematically lied to by their own government concerning the damage American bombs are doing to North Vietnamese populations and cities.” For these journalists, Salisbury’s statistics were of no concern. As the Greensboro Daily News

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concluded, “Mr. Salisbury saw it with his own eyes and now we must come to grips with
the fact.”

Believing in Salisbury’s eyewitness accounts these journalists found the Johnson
administration – not Salisbury – to blame for the uproar caused by the reports from
Hanoi. Joseph Kraft at the Washington Post, the New York Times’ rival newspaper,
called Salisbury’s reporting “second rate” because of the pressures of on-the-spot
reporting but added that if there was trouble it was “not in the report of the bombing. It
[was] in the bombing itself.” One article argued that his reports “leave no room for
doubt that American bombs have hit non-military areas of Hanoi.” The Denver Post
stated that the “U.S. Version Looks Phony in Hanoi.” The Los Angeles Times faulted
the government. “The administration has done the nation a disservice by trying to fog the
fact that, tragically but inevitably, some civilians are going to get hurt in the process.”
For these journalists it was the administration rather than Salisbury who did a “bad job of
answering critics.”

Grounded in the assumption that Salisbury had shown that the government was

265 “The Truth About N. Viet Bombing,” San Francisco Chronicle, 29 December 1966,
not a reliable source of information, journalists further welcomed Salisbury’s reporting as a service to the American people and even a benefit to America’s war effort. Louisville Kentucky’s *Courier-Journal* wrote that “News From Hanoi is Useful Even Though it Upsets Us.” The article read that to “know your enemy is a first principle of war. We know precious little about the men who call the turn in Hanoi.” Salisbury’s reports, the article argued, helped to fill that void.\(^{269}\) James Aronson wrote in *The National Guardian*, “They have shown that the press, once it removes government-imposed and self-imposed censorship and acts venturesomely in the true public interest, can be a powerful and effective instrument for good.”\(^{270}\) For some journalists Salisbury’s articles demonstrated the influence journalists possessed to fill gaps in American information.

Similarly, journalists argued that Americans deserved to know what was happening behind enemy lines even when such knowledge did not help the U.S. war effort. James Weschler concluded that “conceding the complexities of such a journey, it surely deserves to be viewed as an earnest effort to fulfill ‘the people’s right to know.’”\(^{271}\) The *Flint Journal* agreed. “It all boils down in our mind to that much-debated “freedom of information.”\(^{272}\) The *Great Falls Tribune* rejected “handouts from government bureaucrats.” The paper wrote, “While one may not agree with a story, or not like to

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\(^{269}\) “News From Hanoi is Useful Even Though it Upsets Us,” *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Kentucky), 19 January 1967, folder 11, box 401, SP.


learn an unfavorable truth, a worse thing than the content of a story would be to not report it at all.”

Television news figures also dismissed allegations of propaganda in Salisbury’s reporting. They heralded the reporter for his valuable contribution to the free press and the people’s right to know. CBS news reporter Marvin Kalb said Salisbury further widened the credibility gap between the American public and the White House. ABC’s Edward P. Morgan called Salisbury’s stories “a unique event in journalism.” He acknowledged that “the truth hurts” but, he continued, “deception can hurt more and self-delusion may hurt the most of all.” Walter Cronkite (one of the ten most influential individuals in the United States in the 1960’s according to writer Frank Mankiewicz) stated that Salisbury followed “in the highest journalistic tradition of going where the story is despite the obvious dangers.” In a discussion with Peter Jennings and Edwin Newman, Cronkite said, “I personally would put my stamp now on it being a great idea that he got there. I think that this has opened up a window for all of us.” He acknowledged the propaganda, but said, “We have proved the value of a free press by

273 “Truth or Consequences,” Great Falls Tribune, 16 January 1967, folder 11, box 400, SP.

274 “CBS News,” 26 December 1966, reel A76, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, RG 330, NACP.


Salisbury’s presence there. It has opened up a great number of issues for serious consideration and discussion in this country.” 277 Indeed Cronkite followed through with his argument, eventually going to North Vietnam himself.

Just how influential Salisbury had been in demonstrating the benefits of a free press and reporting from behind enemy lines becomes evident in the 1966-1967 winter edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Despite the controversy and unrest his reports had caused in the United States, the journal commended Salisbury for reporting from Hanoi. The editors contended “the journalists who criticized Salisbury had shown a lack of journalistic ‘maturity.’” They hoped those journalists were not “conceding (as they had done in past wars) that journalism stops at the front lines and the official handouts take over.” According to the editors, Salisbury’s reporting was not only acceptable, but a commendable effort towards objective reporting.278 Salisbury’s actions did much more than simply ignite a debate. The journal claimed he actually “broke ‘the pattern of acceptability.’” Now, the journal asserted, “a new, broader pattern might take its place.” The journal pointed out that since Salisbury’s visit, two more mainstream American reporters had been admitted to North Vietnam. Those reporters, William C. Baggs, the editor of the *Miami News*, and Harry Ashmore, also wrote of the detrimental effects of America’s bombing campaign on the civilian population. Writer James Boylan pointed out that their reports from Hanoi had not encountered any resistance from

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277 Transcript, “Panel discussion at a luncheon Walter Cronkite of CBS, Peter Jennings of ABC and Edwin Newman of ABC,” 3-4, folder 1: Vietnam I Reactions, Editorials, etc., box 454, SP.

columnists or editors.279 “Baggs’ dispatches, in fact,” Boylan stated, “may have marked a tacitly observed turning point, the acceptance of the fact that stories from Hanoi can now be looked at primarily as news.”280 Clearly Boylan and the *Columbia Journalism Review* saw Salisbury’s reports as incredibly significant, and not as dismissible as his critics hoped.

Salisbury had encountered harsh criticism, but also found notable supporters, evidence of an intense debate that divided journalists more than it united them. The *Des Moines Register* captures the depth of the divide among journalists over his reporting. The paper published two articles on Friday December 30 dealing with Salisbury’s stories. The opinions of the two articles were nearly opposite. In one opinion piece, Keyes Beech argued that “Hanoi had scored a smashing propaganda victory” by admitting Salisbury. The other editorial, however, said that “Salisbury and the *New York Times* have performed a notable service to the nation in their reporting. . . . This is in the traditional spirit of free journalism and full information to the American people.” Just as the *Des Moines Register* demonstrates the debates surrounding Salisbury’s reports not only separated one newspaper from another, but also journalists within each newsroom. For some journalists and Americans, Salisbury’s stories only served as propaganda and were a great disservice to the country; others criticized his lazy journalism. There were yet others who stood behind him, praising him for his efforts and demonstrating the value of expanding the limits proper wartime journalism.


The New York Times

Any discussion of the debate that ensued over Salisbury’s reporting within the media must take into account Salisbury’s own newspaper, the New York Times, and its role in supporting its journalist. When journalists criticized Salisbury, they were in effect also critiquing the New York Times for publishing Salisbury’s work. While those outside the paper debated his reporting, an internal examination of the New York Times reveals that the paper and particularly its managing staff remained strongly supportive and proud of their journalist in Hanoi.

Salisbury’s reporting did not step outside the boundaries of the New York Times and its managing editors. The newspaper had previously printed articles that criticized Johnson’s bombing of North Vietnam. Earlier in December, in fact, the New York Times had printed foreign dignitaries’ accusations that Johnson’s bombing destroyed any chance at negotiations.281 The newspaper’s management also supported and encouraged Salisbury’s efforts to get into North Vietnam. Clifton Daniel, Salisbury’s managing editor, had suggested Salisbury take the trip on the perimeter of China not only to get a closer look at China, but also to make personal contacts with various North Vietnamese embassies to increase his prospects of getting into North Vietnam.282 Salisbury was eager to get into North Vietnam; so too was the New York Times.

Even as controversy began to swirl after Salisbury’s initial reports, telegrams sent

281 See, for example, “Thant Deplores Trend,” NYT, 14 December 1966; and “Bombing the Peace Talks,” NYT, 16 December 1966.

282 Salisbury, Behind the Lines, 6-7.
to Salisbury from the management of the *New York Times* while he stayed at Thong Nhat Hotel in North Vietnam reveal that he continually received their encouragement and support. The *New York Times* made Salisbury aware of the controversy his reports were raising. On 27 December 1966, Daniel wrote that Salisbury should attribute casualty figures “which are controversial” to “the best available source.” He also asked Salisbury to “avoid expressions that readers might consider editorial comment” and make an effort to explain the censorship under which he wrote. Daniel, however, ended his telegram with “stuff looks good.”

Seymour Topping, foreign news editor for the *New York Times*, sent a message asking Salisbury to describe in detail the nature of his visit, yet also called his reporting, “outstanding.” He encouraged Salisbury, saying “your enterprise [is] drawing praise from many sides.” Daniel sent another telegram on 31 December, informing Salisbury that his reports had “opened up tremendously interesting important debate on national policy.”

Arthur Hays Sulzberger, who had retired as *New York Times*’ publisher in 1961 sent Salisbury a telegram merely to congratulate him on the success of his stories. The *New York Times* did not consider the allegations of

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283 Telegram, Daniel to Salisbury, 27 December, 1966. folder 3, Hanoi messages, box 590, SP.

284 Telegram, Topping to Salisbury, 28 December 1966, folder 3 Hanoi Messages, box 590, SP.

285 Telegram, Topping to Salisbury, 28 December 1966, folder 3 Hanoi Messages, box 590, SP. Also see Topping to Salisbury 29 December 1966 in ibid.

286 Telegram, Daniel to Salisbury, 31 December 1966, folder 3, Hanoi messages, box 590, SP.
unfair reporting justified.

Back in the United States, the *New York Times* management took further actions to support their reporter within the pages of their own newspaper. Daniel ensured statements explaining Salisbury’s journalistic credentials and accomplishments accompanied his articles. He also publicly replied to George C. Wilson’s allegations that Salisbury was using a communist propaganda pamphlet in an article in the *New York Times*. He wrote that “it was apparent in Mr. Salisbury’s first dispatch – and so stated in a subsequent dispatch – that the casualty figures came from North Vietnamese officials. Where else would he get such figures in Hanoi?” In an editorial, the paper blamed American readers – not Salisbury – for drawing “false conclusions” from his reports that suggested the United States was deliberately bombing civilians. As Salisbury would have agreed, the editorial concluded that “we want to see an end to this bloodshed . . . and we are convinced that a peaceful and honorable conclusion can come about, not through the escalation of the war that is steadily occurring, but through a positive effort to scale it

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287 Telegram, Tanner to Salisbury, folder 3 Hanoi Messages, box 590, SP. Also see memorandum, Arthur Hays Sulzberger. to Harrison, 28 December 1966, Catalogued Correspondence, SP.


Beyond the management of the *New York Times*, many of Salisbury’s coworkers joined the response, writing articles that either provided a neutral or positive review of his reporting. Drew Middleton quoted a western diplomat who said that, contrary to what Salisbury had reported, the bombing was hurting North Vietnam. Middleton emphasized, however, that the diplomat agreed with Salisbury that “now is the time for a major American peace offensive.” Tom Wicker wrote that even while Salisbury’s articles contained propaganda they proved U.S. tactics were not working. James Reston (whom Frank Mankiewicz also listed as one of the top ten most influential voices in America in the 1960s) criticized Salisbury for using unreliable statistics, but also praised him for “at least start[ing] a dialogue with Hanoi.” In mid-January, Benjamin Welles commended his articles as the cause for recent praise by European newspapers of “the United States system of democracy.” His articles testified to the freedom that existed in the United States.

Just how far Salisbury’s peers would go to defend his reputation is most evident in one particular incident involving William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, Walt Rostow, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs,

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292 Mankiewicz, "From Lippman to Letterman: The 10 Most Powerful Voices."

and Reston. During a private dinner party, Bundy and Rostow commented that they believed Salisbury had been “led by the nose” in his Hanoi stories just as he had in Moscow. Hearing from a fellow journalist of their comments later, James Reston telephoned Bundy and confronted him. In a memorandum shortly thereafter, Rostow reported to the President that “there was some implication in what Reston said to Bundy and me that the *Times* might go after us for McCarthyism with respect to Salisbury.”

Salisbury also defended himself in correspondence with William Bundy. What is unique is that Reston confronted Bundy about a mere dinner party comment, made a significant effort to defend his fellow journalist, and, in fact, proved willing to take drastic actions to do so.  Salisbury had loyal supporters at the *New York Times* who went out on a limb to preserve his reputation and the integrity of his reporting.

Not everyone at the *New York Times* defended Salisbury’s reporting. One who did not was Hanson Baldwin, the *New York Times* military editor. Just after Salisbury’s first report, Baldwin wrote that he was “extremely disturbed” by Salisbury’s articles because “they seem[ed] to put Mr. Salisbury and *The Times* squarely on the side of North Vietnam.” He thought that the way in which Salisbury organized his story encouraged readers to believe the bombing was intentional. He also believed that Salisbury had made a detrimental error in not attributing his statistics directly to Communists and emphasizing that they had not been verified. Baldwin concluded, “My chief concern is

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Baldwin’s position on Salisbury’s reporting reflected his longtime conviction that the New York Times played an important role in shaping American opinion, and consequently had a responsibility to be careful in the news that it created. As he said in a 1966 memorandum to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the publisher of the New York Times, “The Times’ editorials, of course, not only affect Vietnamese decisions and policies but will also affect The Times – and I am afraid, as time goes on, adversely.” Baldwin strongly disagreed with the paper’s antiwar leanings, which he believed hindered the creation of “objective news.” Salisbury’s reporting was simply another case where the New York Times had given way to its antiwar leanings and allowed one of its journalists to produce news that was unverifiable and harmful to U.S. governmental efforts in Vietnam.

Though the management acknowledged Baldwin’s frustration, it still supported Salisbury. Clifton Daniel responded to Baldwin’s complaint in a memorandum by

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295 Memorandum, Baldwin to Daniel, 27 December 1966, folder 558, box 11, General Correspondence, BP.

296 Memorandum, Baldwin to Sulzberger, 10 January 1966, folder 583, box 12, General Correspondence, BP.

297 Baldwin’s correspondence reveals his adversarial relationship with the New York Times and its staff just before his 1968 retirement from the paper. “Survey Questionnaire New York Times,” 29 March 1966, Correspondence, folder, 154, box 10; Memorandum, Punch [Arthur] Sulzberger to Baldwin, 1 February 1967, General Correspondence, folder 31, box 3. On the 23rd anniversary of his becoming military editor of the New York Times, Sulzberger wrote, “From one dove to one hawk heartiest congratulations.” Sulzberger was often concerned that Baldwin was getting too close to the government, and did not want him associating with governmental activities outside his reporting. See folder 583, box 12 BP.
suggesting that Baldwin write a story which defended the government’s perspective on the bombing and its usefulness. He specified that Baldwin needed to base his story on “government sources.” Daniel did not want to create the impression that the *New York Times* was divided. Furthermore, although Daniel agreed that “some of Harrison’s material had not been properly attributed,” he defended Salisbury. Daniel repeated a statement very similar to what he had written in the *New York Times* article responding to George Wilson. “When he gives casualty figures,” Daniel asserted, “he is obviously reporting what he has been told. It must be apparent to any reader that he personally wasn’t there and didn’t count the casualties.”

The *New York Times* did publish Baldwin’s report, entitled, “Bombing the North: U.S. Officers Assert It Has Proved Effective, Restrained and Essential,” on 30 December 1966. It appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* alongside Salisbury’s sixth dispatch. It is important to note, however, that the *Times*’ management placed Salisbury’s report directly in the center of the page and included a large picture of an innocent child surrounded by a neighborhood destroyed by American bombs; the editors marginally placed Baldwin’s article in the bottom left-hand corner of the page. The *New York Times* continued to support its journalist in Hanoi.

Turner Catledge, executive editor of the *New York Times*, best captures the spirit of the *New York Times* in his autobiography. “There could be little doubt that Salisbury had scored the biggest news beat of the year,” he wrote. He attributed the allegations of propaganda to an “editorial slip.” “I was sorry that we had not anticipated the objection,

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298 Memorandum, Clifton Daniel to Baldwin, 28 December 1966, folder 558, box 11, General Correspondence, BP.
but we were so excited by Salisbury’s series that we simply didn’t think of it.” His argument over the controversy holds much credence. For years Salisbury had been concerned about the issue of censorship when reporting from the Soviet Union and had wanted to ensure that his readers knew that he could not report the full story. The editors at the *Times*, however, never followed through with his request to mark his stories with “Passed by Censorship.”299 The newspaper assumed that readers would understand Salisbury’s reporting from the Soviet Union was censored. They were treating his reporting from North Vietnam, then, just as they had his reporting from the Soviet Union, assuming that his readers would understand the circumstances of his visit. To the paper’s regret, it was their fellow print journalists that did not. Perhaps, as Catledge argued, “the dispatches would have been controversial whatever we had done.”300

Hanson Baldwin retired from his position as military editor at the *New York Times* just a year after Salisbury’s reporting from North Vietnam. In his papers, one senses the growing division between him, Sulzberger and the managing editors of the paper, specifically in regard to his beliefs about “objective” journalism and the content of the *New York Times*. Baldwin believed that the newspaper should be cautious concerning the content of its articles, because whatever content it produced had the potential to negatively affect the country’s ability to fight the war in Vietnam. The obvious praise and steadfast support that Salisbury received from the paper – from his fellow writers, his managing editor, and his past and present publishers – suggest that the *New York Times*


believed differently. The New York Times would not concern itself with the effect of its stories. Knowing that journalists too were subject to mistake, they stood behind their decision to go behind enemy lines, question the government, and reappraise the purpose of America’s war effort. As Catledge stated, “The purpose was to go where the news was and report the truth, whomever it helped.”301

Salisbury and the Pulitzer Prize

Controversy over Salisbury’s reporting surfaced once more in May of 1967 with the announcement of the 1965-1966 Pulitzer Prize awards. By all estimations Salisbury appeared nearly an automatic winner for the International Reporting Award. Although the Pulitzer jury nominated him by a vote of 4 to 1 for the award, the Pulitzer Advisory Board, made up of newspaper executives, overruled the jury’s decision and recommended to the trustees of Columbia University to give the award to R. John Hughes of the Christian Science Monitor for his reporting from Indonesia.302 To many individuals his rejection pointed to a media which banded together to stifle reporters who had written stories that went against government interests. Deeper inspection, however, reveals that, like the divide among journalists, hot debate surrounded the distribution of the prize. Reexamination of his nomination, recommendation, and rejection only further reveals a media torn and divided over Salisbury’s actions, raising questions about the role of the journalist in wartime and the importance of journalistic accuracy.

301 Ibid., 292.

It came as no surprise that the Pulitzer Prize Jury recommended Salisbury for the International Reporting Pulitzer Prize. He had gained numerous notable nominations. The *New York Times* nominated him, as did his long-time friend and fellow journalist, Walter Cronkite. Cronkite wrote that his reports “inspire others to greater effort in seeking out and reporting the truth.”³⁰³ Dave Beeder, editor of *Lindsay-Schaub* newspapers, endorsed Salisbury for “information vital to understanding this country’s overriding concern, the war in Vietnam.” He further added that Salisbury’s reports demonstrated “how press can keep a democratic government honest and introspective.”³⁰⁴ In another nomination letter, Howard H. Hays Jr., editor and publisher of *The Press and Daily Enterprise*, wrote that his reports were “highly professional and highly important.”³⁰⁵ Walter Lippmann gave Salisbury the highest recommendation writing, “Mr. Salisbury has done a great honor to the profession of journalism with singular service to his country. I cannot imagine a feat of reporting that meets more exactly the ideals and purposes of the Pulitzer awards.”³⁰⁶ Such recommendations placed Salisbury in good position to win the Pulitzer Prize, and encouraged the Jury to recommend him for the award. His reporting from Hanoi, they wrote, showed “enterprise, world impact and

³⁰³ Letter, Walter Cronkite to Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board, 1 February 1967, folder Vietnam I Reaction, Editorials, etc., box 454. SP.


total significance,” outweighing “some demerits of on-the-spot reporting.”

Despite the Jury’s overwhelming recommendation, the Advisory Board, made up of newspaper executives, had an incredibly difficult time making a decision. Secretary for the Advisory Board John Hohenberg later wrote that some on the board strongly opposed Salisbury. They “argued that he had failed to give the sources of casualty figures in his initial articles, and that there were other reportorial deficiencies in his work.” Others like Joseph Pulitzer Jr., whose father founded the prizes, were adamant Salisbury supporters. Discussion on the topic lasted an entire day, and even after much debate, the Advisory Board was still divided. Overlooking the second-place candidate, Ward Just of the Washington Post, for an unknown reason, the Advisory Board voted 6 to 5 to instead recommend the award to the Jury’s third place candidate, R. John Hughes of the Christian Science Monitor. Attempting to come to a consensus, the Board renewed dialogue on the issue again the following day. After many more hours of discussion, “a secret ballot was taken.” The split, however, remained. With discussion at a close, the Advisory Board sent forward their irresolute recommendation of 6 to 5 in favor of John Hughes over Salisbury. Their recommendation, like journalistic opinion around the country, remained divided.

At the final stage of the recommendation process before the Board of Trustees,

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the issue of Salisbury’s nomination, recommendation, and subsequent dismissal caused much concern and debate. The Board of Trustees’ deliberation, according to John Hohenberg, lasted “for more than an hour,” holding up the prize announcements. An unofficial copy of the minutes of the trustees meeting on 1 May 1967 reveals the complexities of their debate.

Grayson Kirk, President of Columbia University, explained to the Trustees that the Advisory Board Members had “felt very strongly on the issue.” Salisbury had shown “enterprise to get into Vietnam.” They believed it was an “outstanding piece of international reporting.” Others, however, “had some serious questions about the accuracy and competence of the reporting done.” Kirk explained the charge that Salisbury had used Hanoi’s figures for civilian bombing casualties without attribution. That charge seemed to matter little to many of the Trustees. Percy Uris did not think Salisbury had made a terrible error. “Where did they expect the figures to come from?”

309 Hohenberg, 298.


311 Although the official minutes of this meeting will not be released for twenty more years, unofficial minutes may be found in the folder of the Columbia University Board of Trustees Central Files. Unlabeled typed notes, 1 May 1967, folder 16/29, box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library, Columbia University.
Benjamin J. Buttenwieser argued. William Gossett acknowledged that he was disappointed with the Advisory Board’s decision. Harold F. McGuire agreed, saying the reports were “well written and represented the activities of a very intrepid reporter.” William Gossett and Benjamin J. Buttenwieser were not alone. Even Grayson Kirk himself conceded that as an Advisory Board member he had voted for Salisbury to receive the award. Several other Trustees including Percy Uris, Harold A Rousselot, William E. Petersen, Lawrence A. Wien, Maurice T. Moore, the chairman, and Harold F. McGuire wanted to give Salisbury either a second award or at least some honorary mention. Only one Trustee, Frode Jensen was comfortable with the Advisory Board’s decision.

The minutes of the meeting on 1 May reveal that Salisbury had strong support from the Trustees; yet that support was constrained by the limited power vested in the Trustees to make decisions on the distribution of the prizes. According to the rules of the prize distribution, the trustees realized they could accept or reject the Advisory Board’s decision, but could not substitute Salisbury for Hughes. The Trustees’ major concern was for the credibility of the award. If they were to make two awards or show in some way that they overruled the Advisory Board’s recommendation, then, as Maurice T. Moore reminded, they would decrease the value of the award as well as the value of the Advisory Board. After much discussion the Trustees voted 10 to 4 to give Hughes the award, then took a second vote to have a second award given to Salisbury. The vote tied. Columbia University President Grayson Kirk broke the tie, voting against giving a
second award.\textsuperscript{312}

At the conclusion of the Trustees’ discussion, Harold F. McGuire added that the “advisory board [had] put the Trustees in bad light.” Indeed, the Advisory Board’s divisiveness reflected that of the country, and the announcement of the award itself soon revealed just how divided the Advisory Board as well as journalists as a whole remained over Salisbury’s reporting from North Vietnam.

President Kirk could do little to keep the Advisory Board from continued dispute, despite his best efforts to “protect the integrity of the jury system by not revealing jury discussions and votes.”\textsuperscript{313} The first to break the secrecy was Joseph Pulitzer Jr. “Forgive me,” Pulitzer wrote in a telegram to President Kirk, “but I cannot agree that the integrity of the jury system would be served by not revealing jury discussion and votes.”\textsuperscript{314} Pulitzer believed the Advisory Board’s decision was unjust, and on 2 May, he expressed his disapproval in his own paper, \textit{The St. Louis Post-Dispatch}. The Advisory Board, he believed, had “made a serious mistake in overturning the professional jury’s recommendation.” He argued that Salisbury’s reporting represented “the finest piece of work in his field during 1966.” He said that Salisbury had “reported what he saw and what he learned with courage and objectivity even though he knew his reports might call into question his own government’s credibility.” Pulitzer ended by calling the attack

\textsuperscript{312} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{313} Telegram, Grayson Kirk to Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. folder 17/29, box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library.

\textsuperscript{314} Telegram, Pulitzer to Kirk, 1 May 1967, folder 17/29 box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library.
against Salisbury “unfair and petty.”

Other Advisory Board members soon joined the debate. Barry Bingham wrote to The Nation on 12 June 1967 that “I agree with your editorial of 15 May that Harrison Salisbury should have won this year’s Pulitzer Prize for international reporting. As I have publicly stated, I spoke for and voted for his submission in the board meeting.”

Other board members, however, came to the Advisory Board’s defense. Newbold Noyes Jr., editor of The Washington Star – which had consistently written negatively about Salisbury’s reports – stated that “some people have a completely erroneous idea of what the juries are supposed to do.” He believed it was the Advisory Board’s right to overturn a jury’s decision. Another board member, Erwin D. Canham, editor in chief of The Christian Science Monitor – whose reporter won the Prize – echoed Noyes’s views.

Ralph McGill, publisher of Atlanta Constitution described the controversy as “obviously a misunderstanding about the system of awarding Pulitzer prizes.”

Some Pulitzer Prize recipients and other journalists voiced their support of Salisbury. Edward Albee, the 1967 Pulitzer Prize winner for drama, considered not even

315 “Albee, Malamud Win Pulitzers in Drama, Fiction” WP, 2 May 1967. Also see telegram, Post-Dispatch to Clifton Daniel, folder 17/29 box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library.


317 “Pulitzer Board Vetoed 2d Prize,” NYT, 8 May 1967.

318 “Pulitzer Jury Overruled on Pearson and Anderson,” The Evening Bulletin, 8 May 1967, folder 18/29, box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library. Also see “Award is Defended by Pulitzer Official,” The Record, 3 May 1967, in ibid.
accepting his own prize because of the board’s decision and expressed his opposition in his acceptance speech.\textsuperscript{319} The \textit{Charleston Gazette} titled one article, “Salisbury Victim of War Hysteria.”\textsuperscript{320} Louis M. Lyons wrote in the \textit{Boston Globe} that “a second look at [the winners] shows that the principal winner was not announced. It was the administration of President Johnson.”\textsuperscript{321} James A. Wechsler, editor of the \textit{New York Post} and longtime supporter of Salisbury’s reporting, also expressed dissatisfaction. “The important fact is that Salisbury’s overall reports had major world impact.” He believed the decision “tainted” Pulitzer ceremonials.\textsuperscript{322}

Other journalists came to the Advisory Board’s defense. The \textit{Oregonian} wrote, “in view of the favored selection of Salisbury by Hanoi and the guided nature of his observations it is doubtful that a majority of the nation’s editors, if consulted, would have awarded him the Pulitzer.” The \textit{News-Star} said, “Salisbury’s scoop over many competitors was looked upon in many places as an attempt by Ho Chi Minh to use him


\textsuperscript{320} “Salisbury Victim of War Hysteria,” \textit{Charleston Gazette}, 6 May 1967, folder 11 1967 Clippings – Hanoi reports, box 400, SP.


and his newspaper – which opposes the Vietnam War – as a propaganda ploy. And secondly, the stories seemed unduly critical of American bombing.” The Register Pajaronian of Watsonville California argued, “He used North Vietnamese bombing casualty figures without saying what his source was. . . . These are errors for which an inexperienced correspondent might be forgiven; they are a blemish on the awesome reputation of the New York Times.323

The New York Times continued to support its journalist. Many wrote to console Salisbury. Antony Austin, a coworker at the New York Times wrote, “I am sure that I am only one of a legion of newspapermen who feel you should have been given this year’s Pulitzer Prize for international reporting for your dispatches from Hanoi.”324 He along with others at the New York Times felt the Advisory Board’s decision had been politically motivated.325 Turner Catledge, who served on the Advisory Board later recalled, “I was convinced that several of my colleagues made their decision on political rather than journalistic grounds.”326 Clifton Daniel and James Reston shared similar sentiments.327

323 Register Pajaronian, Watsonville, CA, 8 May 1967, ibid.

324 Note, Antony Austin to Salisbury, 15 May 1967, folder 16, box 539, SP.

325 Antony Austin wrote “The reasons the jury’s recommendation was overridden, as reported today, strike me as specious and politically motivated. They lesson my respect for the integrity of the Pulitzer award.” 97 Also see Catledge, My Life and the Times, 298.

327 Clifton Daniel commented to Reston that, “I feel that, if the Board persists in awarding prizes to entries that are less than the best, the prizes eventually will be acknowledged for what they are, recognition for the second best.” Knowing he would soon be on the Advisory Board himself, he replied, “I only hope that I might have some influence in avoiding the sort of nonsense that apparently went on this year.” Memorandum, Clifton Daniel to James Reston, 2 May 1967, James B. Reston Papers, RS
As Catledge later wrote, “He knew, we knew, and everyone in the newspaper business knew what a fine job he had done.”

Though Salisbury did not receive the Pulitzer Prize, he did receive a great number of other journalism awards. He won the Overseas Press Club Award of Asia Magazine, “for the best report on Asia in any medium.” He won the annual George Polk Memorial Award for foreign-reporting in journalism for “pioneering news mission” and because he “contributed a new dimension to coverage of the Vietnam War.” The Mark Twain Society and Journal elected him “Knight of Mark Twain,” in recognition of his “outstanding contribution to American journalism.” The La Salle College student newspaper, *The Collegian* also gave him their annual award for “an outstanding contributor to the field of communications.” Nat Hentoff, columnist for the *Village Voice* gave Salisbury his personal award for foreign reporting, “that makes as well as clarifies the news.” Salisbury even made the top five Jury recommendations for the Pulitzer Prize the following year, with nominations from Earl Johnson, retired editor and

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26/20/120, box 33 Univ. of Illinois Archives. Memorandum, Reston to Daniel, 8 May 1967, ibid.

328 Catledge, *My Life and the Times*, 293.

329 For release, Whit Burnett Chairman to media outlets, 21 April 1967, book 2, box 676, SP. Also see Entry Blanks, ibid.


331 Letter, Cyril Clemens, editor of Mark Twain Journal to Salisbury, 23 March 1967, book 2, box 677, SP.

332 Letter, Daniel Burke to Salisbury, 23 February 1968, folder 1968 BL-BU, box 40, SP.

333 Letter, Nat Hentoff to Salisbury, folder 11, box 401, SP.
vice president of United Press International, W. E. Chilton, the publisher of the 

*Charleston Gazette*, and Harry G. Hoffmann, editor of *The Nation*. The Jury wrote:

> As the first U.S. reporter to write from North Viet Nam, Harrison Salisbury contributed a significant new dimension in the base of information for discussion of the political, military, and moral considerations of [the bombing of North Vietnam]. … this jury believes he deserves consideration for extensive and professional work on a subject which has become more significant with the passage of time than it may have appeared at the time of publication.

The Jury made specific mention of Salisbury in their recommendations for the 1968 award and even placed him among their top five recommendations for the award. The Jury did not intend for Salisbury to win the award. Through the nominating process, however, they were once again emphasizing their belief that he should have received the award the previous year. “Because the bulk of this work was published in 1966,” the jury wrote, “this jury believes the work should have received recognition in the 1966 awards.” Salisbury had not received the Pulitzer Prize, yet he had received many others. His supporters just like his critics did not disappear.

The Board of Trustees ultimately chose to support the Advisory Board’s ruling and not give Salisbury the Pulitzer Prize. Yet considering his reception from the Board of Trustees itself, his fellow journalists, and his own paper, Salisbury still had much

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335 Jury Recommendations, folder 10, box 548, Pulitzer Prize Files 7-1966-1971, Central Files, University Archives and Columbiana Library.

336 Ibid.
support. He had the support of four jurors who recommended him for the prize, five more Advisory Board members, and many more prize boards who ultimately chose to give him their prestigious awards for reporting from Hanoi. Salisbury’s efforts and reporting gained as much acceptance as it did rejection.

Conclusion

Turner Catledge wrote that the New York Times received hundreds of letters in regard to Salisbury’s articles, some “appreciative, some bitterly unfavorable.” But, he argued, “favorable or unfavorable, there was a high emotional element running through all of them.” Salisbury’s stories were highly contentious. He had not only taken the news where it had never gone before, but in doing so damaged the credibility of the United States government and decreased American support for the bombing of North Vietnam. Just as it was a controversial issue among peace activists, religious groups, and governmental leaders, it too was a contentious issue for journalists themselves. Salisbury and his actions behind enemy lines stimulated debate among journalists that raised significant questions about reporters’ relationship to their readers, obligation to their country, and duty as wartime reporters.

Studying this controversy highlights how critical accurate reporting remained for the profession of journalism. A number of journalists believed that Salisbury had a responsibility to his readers to achieve nothing less than one hundred per cent accuracy. By failing to state the sources of his statistics, he opened up the door to criticism. This

337 Catledge, My Life and the Times, 293.
reporting negligence, or “editorial slip” as Catledge called it, did much to injure Salisbury’s credibility. In such debates as took place during the Pulitzer Prize, his lack of accuracy became central and cost him the prize. Had he been more careful in his reportage, had he been cautious to cite the source of every statistic in his reports, he might have averted at least some of the criticism.

Yet beyond the doubts about the one hundred percent accuracy of his reporting were much deeper issues about a reporter’s relationship and responsibility to his or her country. The tension that split reporters and newsrooms resulted in part from the divisiveness of the war itself. Their written reactions reveal a feeling that his reporting and its effect on public opinion had important implications for the war effort. With this view some journalists took it upon themselves to criticize Salisbury’s reporting, reaffirm government statements, and even reestablish the stereotypical image of the vengeful, barbarous, evil North Vietnamese enemy. Objectors to the war, on the other hand, invited Salisbury’s reports and emphasized the truth they contained, taking it as an opportunity to critique the government’s information and policies in North Vietnam, and demonstrate the depth of Johnson’s credibility gap. They found in Salisbury’s reports reasons to distrust the Johnson administration, oppose the war in Vietnam, and subvert the government to gather further information on the war. At the least, Salisbury’s reporting lead opinion makers like Walter Cronkite and James Reston to conclude that all was not well in Vietnam.

Beyond the tensions added to the situation by the Vietnam War itself, journalists’ intense debate over Salisbury’s reporting reveals how much the profession of journalism
struggled with how best to achieve its goal of accurate, meaningful reporting during war. Some individuals believed the boundaries in place for journalists created a protection for their readers against propaganda and needed to be maintained. They blamed President Johnson for public dissent against the war, wishing he would do more to control and censor the media, and help it maintain its traditional boundaries. Those who believed the media needed to take their readers beyond the vague information given by the government, however, praised the freedom of the United States press, and Salisbury for demonstrating what journalists could accomplish through its use.

One of the greatest newspapers in the country, many noteworthy individuals, and other important publications such as the Columbia Journalism Review praised Salisbury. Salisbury was not the beginning nor was he the end of such debate, but the debates surrounding his reporting from North Vietnam provide a window into a crucial moment when journalists questioned their profession and how to best fulfill their duty to the American people. Many journalists did not know of Salisbury’s involvement with the secret peace initiatives, but their debate still addressed even that underlying theme; acting as a reporter behind enemy lines created obstacles that could color a reporter’s perception of reality, and influence international politics in unknown ways. While it led many to cry out for stricter rules of reporting during war, it encouraged others to question government assertions more frequently and expand the rigid boundaries journalists placed on themselves. Some believed they could only maintain the highest standards of reporting through established boundaries; others, however, felt it appropriate and even essential to go behind enemy lines to get the full story no matter the consequence.
CONCLUSION

Stepping onto North Vietnamese soil on 24 December 1966 became one of Harrison Salisbury’s most well known actions as a journalist. Anxiety in the United States over the Vietnam War was mounting as was the international world’s impatience for the United States to achieve peace. North Vietnamese military morale was low, and secret peace negotiation attempts were in full swing. All these factors created a fluid political atmosphere in which Salisbury’s presence in North Vietnam tipped uneasy balances and affected the international political atmosphere in which the Vietnam War was being waged.

As historians have recognized, Harrison Salisbury’s’ reporting was an exception to the negative portrayal of the enemy in American news in 1966 and 1967. Because it was an exception, however, Salisbury’s reporting deserves special emphasis and examination. Going behind enemy lines played a crucial role in how Salisbury portrayed the enemy. His position allowed him to interact with the enemy in such a way that he learned about not only their ideology, but also their daily lives, feelings, and personalities. His presence allowed him to write detailed and personal reports.

Being a first-hand observer, however, did not necessarily make Salisbury’s reports wholly fair or objective. Although he reported what he saw with his own eyes, he only saw what North Vietnamese officials chose to show him. Salisbury’s personal sympathies for the North Vietnamese people and disdain for the Johnson administration’s policies in North Vietnam further influenced how he wrote about what he saw. Salisbury’s reports were an exception not only because he reported from behind enemy
lines but also because of the way in which he reported what he saw while he was there.

Salisbury’s first-hand observations and personal beliefs about the war ultimately produced a highly sympathetic portrayal of the North Vietnamese government and war effort. Like his photograph of the young, innocent North Vietnamese boy standing amidst the rubble of bomb desecrated Phue Tan street in Hanoi, Salisbury’s written descriptions and visual images left his readers with a troubling impression of America’s fight for freedom in Vietnam. It appeared to be a fight that destroyed the homes and took the lives of innocent men, women, and children. This provided the basis for an alternative understanding of the enemy and the war itself. His portrayal questioned the morality of American bombing in North Vietnam and the American war effort in North Vietnam more generally.

The American and international public did not dismiss this exception to mainstream reporting. Because Salisbury was an eyewitness informant and a respected journalist from one of the most influential media outlets in the world, his articles gained widespread attention. Moreover, they caused individuals to reevaluate their understanding of U.S. actions towards North Vietnam, particularly with respect to American bombing and the potential for peace negotiations. The public outcry concerning American bombing in North Vietnam that followed the publication of Salisbury’s stories provides clear evidence of the influence he had on public opinion. Salisbury’s articles led to domestic and international protest against U.S. bombing in North Vietnam and fervent calls for negotiations. The outcry further raised concerns among both domestic and international leaders. His reports encouraged members of
Congress like Senator J. William Fulbright to further investigate the effects of U.S.
bombing in North Vietnam. At the same time international leaders including Prime
Minister Harold Wilson and British Foreign Minister George Brown in Great Britain and
Pope Paul VI used Salisbury’s reports and the public outcry they generated to voice their
own concerns over U.S. foreign policy in North Vietnam. Salisbury’s articles sent
shockwaves around the world, shockwaves the Johnson administration could not ignore.

The Johnson administration took seriously the concerns over American bombing
of North Vietnam and peace negotiations. They publicly defended their policies in
Vietnam and emphasized their willingness to negotiate. The public pressure placed on
the Johnson administration due to Salisbury’s reporting also contributed to the
administration’s decision to take additional steps to initiate peace negotiations. The
Johnson administration attempted to contact Salisbury and use him as an intermediary.
They agreed to work with Wilson, who met with Soviet officials, in order to find
agreeable negotiation terms. Johnson further sent a letter directly to Ho Chi Minh
expressing his willingness to negotiate. Salisbury’s reporting was only partly responsible
for these initiatives. Nevertheless, the pressure his reports placed on the Johnson
administration to take action was substantial. His eyewitness reports had a significant
effect on public opinion and the Johnson administration’s actions concerning it.

The consequences of Salisbury’s presence behind enemy lines carried beyond his
effect on public opinion on the war. His everyday interactions with North Vietnamese
officials and leaders influenced how the Johnson administration and the British perceived
the enemy’s stance on negotiations and revealed the networks in place that allowed the
U.S. government to communicate directly with a reporter overseas. Although the United States did not have an embassy in North Vietnam, its ties to the British Government and Salisbury’s interaction with the British Consul created a direct line through which the Johnson administration could communicate important information on American P.O.W.s to Salisbury. Similarly, although the secret peace negotiation process was unsuccessful, Salisbury’s involvement in it also demonstrates how the Johnson administration could use a third party to communicate with a foreign government. Just as Salisbury became involved in communicating with the Johnson administration in order to gain information on American POWs, there were communication possibilities between the reporter and his government that extended well beyond the scope of his journalism. Salisbury was unable to find information on POWs and had little effect on the long-term trajectory of the secret peace negotiation process during the Vietnam War. Yet the fact that Salisbury could become so involved in such endeavors – becoming a central point of reference for the Johnson administration – demonstrates how much influence the journalist possessed while in North Vietnam.

Reevaluating Salisbury’s agency as a potential negotiator of peace complicates how historians interpret the relationship between the Johnson administration and this reporter. The Johnson administration’s decision to maintain only a system of voluntary restraint among journalists did lead to problems, and, as Salisbury’s reporting exemplifies, created tension between journalists and the government. Their relationship with each other, however, was not always hostile. Despite the fact that the Johnson administration criticized Salisbury publicly, their private willingness and even desire to
turn towards this journalist to carry out important foreign policy initiatives suggests a much closer relationship. The administration trusted and even respected Salisbury as a journalist. Only after such initiatives failed due to misunderstandings did their relationship deteriorate and create the unfriendly environment between the administration and Salisbury once he returned home. Tension between the Johnson administration and Salisbury, then, ran much deeper than what is evident in many studies of relations between the Johnson administration and the media.

In a similar way, Salisbury’s reporting also held consequences for other journalists because he encouraged them to further question governmental assertions on the war. Journalists had been skeptical of official government statements long before Salisbury’s reporting and would continue to do so afterward. Even so, Salisbury’s experience encouraged journalists to embrace reporting from behind enemy lines as part of their mission to provide their readers with the most comprehensive, accurate information on the war. Obtaining that information meant crossing boundaries they had previously considered unacceptable. It meant giving the enemy a voice in their papers.

Although it is easy to dismiss the influence of Salisbury’s reports based on the negative reception he received from many of his fellow journalists, this conclusion is all too simplistic. The debate over Salisbury’s reporting did not unite journalists. It divided them. Some media figures like Joseph Alsop criticized Salisbury even more severely than the Johnson administration did. Yet important figures like James Reston, Walter Lippmann and Walter Cronkite voiced considerable support for him and his reports. Some journalists believed that no one could write fairly from behind enemy lines. For
others, however, such reporting became the best possible avenue for gaining information closer to the truth than what journalists could find in Washington. The discussions that Salisbury’s reporting generated reveal just how divisive reporting on the Vietnam War could be. It divided journalists and newsrooms just as it did the American public.

The simplistic notion that the government and media banned together to discredit reporters like Salisbury neglects the degree to which both saw Salisbury as a powerful domestic and international political agent whose actions would have both intended and unintended consequences. Salisbury’s articles not only encouraged some individuals to advocate for peace, as he intended, but also motivated others to voice their support of U.S. bombing in North Vietnam even more fervently. Similarly, although he hoped his reporting would have a positive effect on negotiations, his actions behind enemy lines actually prevented the very secret negotiation discussions that he favored. Just as Salisbury’s reports encouraged some journalists to step beyond previous boundaries of reporting, it encouraged others to reinstate them. Indeed, Salisbury’s actions had both negative and positive results, and no one understood those results better than the media and governmental figures who debated his very presence in North Vietnam.

The importance of Harrison Salisbury’s reporting can easily become lost as historians attempt to fit this particular series of reports into the broader history of the Vietnam War and the media’s coverage of it. Salisbury was an iconoclast and a rebel, yet one deeply aware that he was taking actions as an activist reporter. He stepped outside mainstream reporting and stood firmly for his own beliefs during a controversial moment in U.S. history. An examination of his reporting and its consequences allows us to better
understand how images and ideas about the enemy are formed, how journalists interact with their government during times of war, and the struggles journalists face in reporting fairly during wartime.

 Salisbury’s experience provides a glimpse of how individuals in the past understood and debated issues that still occupy us today. The question of whether or not the government has an obligation to provide the American public with information regarding its war efforts remains contested. Similarly, journalists continue to debate what constitutes fair journalism. What is clear is that a journalist’s personal beliefs, the way in which they obtain information and how they interpret that information based on their own perceptions shapes the actions they take and the images they produce. Salisbury, like any reporter, was not objective. His intention was not simply to “get the facts,” but to raise moral questions about U.S. war activities in North Vietnam, and his reports did just that. In doing so, he missed many important details about North Vietnam. But at the same time his reporting gave his audience an alternative perception of the war. In helping to create a diversity of news opinions, his reporting helped to reignite an important debate about the purposes of U.S. war efforts in Vietnam, a serious discussion with which any nation’s citizens should constantly be engaged with during times of war.
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APPENDIX A: IMAGES

The *New York Times* printed the following images on the dates listed. Pictures here are copied from Harrison Salisbury’s *Behind the Lines*. Captions are typed as they appeared originally in the *New York Times*.

Image 1: December 30

Ruins of the Roman Catholic cathedral of Thuongkiem in Phatdiem, 79 miles south of Hanoi. North Vietnamese officials say the damage was caused by a U.S. raid on April 24.

Image 2: January 13

Ruins of the Roman Catholic cathedral of Thuongkiem in Phatdiem, 79 miles south of Hanoi. North Vietnamese authorities say the damage was caused by a U.S. raid two weeks ago.
Image 3: January 13

WOUNDED CHILD lost his leg during an American raid, said his father, who is holding him. Father is the Roman Catholic lay leader in village of Phatdiem. Bombs also killed the child’s mother and all but one of his brothers.

Image 4: January 14

PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN: Youngsters play near Lake of Restored Sword in downtown Hanoi. Community bomb shelter, of the bunker variety, is in background
NORTH VIETNAMESE MOPPET How to cope with children who are too small to understand bombing danger has been described as difficult task.

FEMINE TOUCH: Women have their hair waved in Hanoi parlor. Picture of President Ho Chi Minh, such as one on wall, is a feature of most offices and public buildings.
Image 7: January 18