A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DAVID HALBERSTAM'S REPORTING
OF THE VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST CRISIS,
MAY 29 - NOVEMBER 1 1963

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1998

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ABSTRACT

Historical and media studies have found that the themes, conventions of reporting, and cultural frames used by journalists to construct the news can affect American foreign policy. Furthermore, the literature showed that these elements of reporting affected American policy during the Vietnam War. Studies point to 1963 as being a critical year for American policy and media coverage of the war.

This study examined David Halberstam's *New York Times* coverage of the 1963 Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam to discover the major themes and conventions of reporting he used to construct the news, and what affect his reporting had on American policy at that time. The themes and conventions of reporting identified arose from a close textural analysis of his articles combined with an extensive review of the historical literature concerning this period.

Halberstam's Buddhist Crisis coverage consisted of seven major themes that emphasized the negative effect of the crisis on the war effort, the growing political nature of the crisis, the ineffectiveness of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, and the breakdown in American consensus over policy.
To construct these themes, Halberstam used a revised definition of journalistic "objectivity" that arose because of increasing government news management. It relied on the conventions of news validity, analysis, and interpretation rather than the conventional objectivity of the 1950s.

This study found that the themes and conventions of Halberstam's Buddhist Crisis reporting had an indirect but major effect on American policy in Vietnam. It forced the Kennedy administration to confront the situation in Vietnam and ultimately change policy because it brought the issue into public policy debate. Additionally, the study showed that Halberstam's reporting was able to have an effect because of a paradoxical interdependence between the media and government: both claimed professional independence but (in reality) relied on each other heavily to perform their respective functions.

Analysis of Halberstam's coverage of the Buddhist Crisis in 1963 suggests that journalism and press-government relations had entered a transitional period from the conventional objectivity of the 1950s to the more adversarial, critical journalism of the late 1960s.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Professor Joseph P. McKerns, for his guidance, mentorship, and (seemingly endless) patience in helping me complete this thesis.

Thanks also to Professors Eric Fredin and Thomas Schwartz for serving on the committee, giving me broader perspectives, and reacquainting me with critical thinking.

A special thanks goes to Marine combat correspondent Steve Stibbens of the Stars and Stripes and Associated Press photographer Horst Faas, and United Press International correspondent Joe Galloway, all of whom reported on and witnessed the events and era depicted in this thesis. They gave up valuable time and shared candid memories with me. Without their generosity, this thesis would not have been possible. To them, I am eternally grateful.

A word of thanks goes to the United States Army, who made one of my dreams, to attend graduate school, come true by funding my studies here at Ohio State.

Most of all, my deepest thanks goes to my wife Jennifer, whose love and patience gave me the time and support to make this possible.
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PUBLICATIONS

Professional Journals


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Journalism
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Media researchers have never agreed on the exact role of the media in or their effect on American society as a whole. However, studies have found that the angles, cultural frames, personal beliefs of reporters, and conventions of reporting used by journalists, among other factors, combine to construct the news. These news constructs become images of reality for those who read and use the news. The themes (central ideas) that emerge from these news images can have major effects on American political policy and policy makers.¹

Many secular and journalism historical works have studied the impact of the media on American policy in the Vietnam War. There is a degree of consensus among these studies that media coverage of the war had great impact (positively and negatively) on America’s Vietnam policy.

The tone and themes in media coverage of Vietnam changed from 1961 to 1968. The initial optimism and general support at the start of deeper American involvement in 1961
changed into growing skepticism about ultimate success and more cautious support by 1963. The cause for this change was a series of severe setbacks for South Vietnam and clear gains by the Communist Vietcong (VC) insurgency in that year. This media skepticism and cautious support remained until the disillusioning Tet Offensive in 1968. After Tet, media coverage became more critical of continued American involvement in the war.²

Many studies of the early period of the Vietnam War (1961 to 1964) point to 1963 as being a pivotal year for American policy and the media in Vietnam. Several critical events occurred that removed the initial optimism for a quick victory by the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). In January, the VC defeated a superior ARVN force at the battle of Ap Bac. That summer, the Buddhist uprising exposed the weakness, repression, and unpopularity of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. In November, the ARVN general staff staged a successful coup that ousted Diem and led to his unplanned assassination. These studies of the war and media coverage of these early events by resident American reporters in Saigon were found to have had a great impact on American policy and future media coverage of the conflict. Media coverage of this period was found to have strained relations between the government and media and instilled a degree of institutional skepticism about the war in the media.³
This thesis will study the 1963 Buddhist uprising (known as the Buddhist Crisis). Specifically, I will analyze David Halberstam's New York Times coverage of the crisis. He was the only full-time reporter from the "prestige papers" that covered the crisis. The analysis will show that the themes Halberstam constructed in his coverage not only directly affected the policy of the American mission in Saigon, but also had an effect on senior policy makers in Washington (to include President John F. Kennedy). Also, Halberstam's reporting had an effect on relations between senior political policy makers and American media policy makers as well.

I will base my overall analysis on a textural analysis of Halberstam's articles combined with an extensive review of the historical literature on this subject. The analysis starts with Halberstam's first article about the Buddhist Crisis on May 29, 1963, and ends on November 1, 1963, the day the South Vietnamese generals staged the coup that overthrew Diem.

The themes that would lead Halberstam's coverage to have a major impact on policy manifested themselves in two distinct ways. First, careful reading of the content in the articles brought out certain themes. For example, the themes pointing to a negative effect of the Buddhist Crisis
on the war against the VC, that the crisis was deeply political and not just religious, and that Ngo Dinh Nhu had gained increasing control of South Vietnamese government policy come from the interpretation and analysis present in Halberstam’s reporting.

Second, themes manifested themselves in the way Halberstam constructed his stories. For example, themes that denote a breakdown in consensus among American officials in Saigon, the shifting of American policy away from the Diem regime, and that the VC were winning in the vital Mekong Delta region developed from Halberstam’s use of diverse sources and verification of those sources’ information.

Study of this topic is justified and of research significance for two reasons. First, none of the extensive literature or studies about this period has specifically analyzed news coverage of the Buddhist Crisis and attempted to specifically discover what themes appeared. Second, no study of this period has described the conventions of journalism prevalent in the early 1960s and applied them to the coverage of the Buddhist Crisis.

**Literature Review**

The literature review shows that studies of Vietnam and the media concentrate on several broad areas:
(1) the importance of Vietnam for larger American foreign policy; (2) the use of news management by the Kennedy administration and the media's reaction to news management; (3) the failure of news management and breakdown of relations between the press and officials in Vietnam; (4) how journalism evolved and how reporters practiced the conventions of reporting (i.e., the ideal of objective reporting, values in the news, framing, use of sources) by the early 1960s; and (5) the presence of a paradox in journalism: that, because of the interdependence of the government and the media, reporters not only reported the story but were part of the story as well.

Vietnam became an area of vital importance to the American policy of Communist containment in 1961. The historical literature shows that President Eisenhower and the National Security Council deemed South Vietnam and the new Ngô Đình Diệm government as "vital to American security interests" in Southeast Asia in 1952. However, Eisenhower confined American support to massive economic aid and 685 military advisers to train the new ARVN.5

By 1961, Vietnam had become a legitimate part of the global commitment by the United States to contain world Communism. Vietnam would become a test case for John F. Kennedy's more active containment policies. President Kennedy decided in November 1961 to commit 13,000 "advisers"
to help the faltering Ngo Dinh Diem regime stop the strengthening VC insurgency in South Vietnam. The prevailing belief in the Kennedy administration and informed observers of foreign policy was that Diem, though autocratic and increasingly oppressive, remained the only viable non-Communist leader for Vietnam.  

Another area of research important for my study of the Buddhist Crisis concerns "news management"—the manipulation, classification, and obfuscation of government information in the perceived interests of national security—and the media's subsequent reaction to it. Researchers George Herring, John Gaddis, John Hohenberg, and Congressional hearings in 1963 showed that news management in the Cold War began under the Eisenhower administration. However, news management became a major aspect in Kennedy's Cold War containment policy. Kennedy had personally intervened with media executives to limit what he felt was media coverage damaging to national security during the April 1961 Bay of Pigs affair and the critical October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Additionally, he called for the media to impose "self censorship" in times of crisis.

The literature shows that news management became a vital part of American policy in Vietnam as well because increased American involvement attracted increased American media coverage. President Kennedy decided that the only way
to maintain public support for his expanded policy was to manage the news that came out of Vietnam. The expanded role of the United States to halt VC gains entailed not just training, but also active and clandestine participation by advisers in combat.

Kennedy's dilemma was how to maintain public support for his expanded effort in Vietnam while keeping America's role in combat out of the headlines. He chose a cautious middle ground to maintain a low profile yet satisfy the public's right to know. Policy makers considered formal military censorship similar to World War II and Korea. However, Kennedy decided that formal American censorship would only draw the unwanted attention he sought to avoid. Instead, the policy became one of news management that emphasized it was a Vietnamese, not American war.) The policy entailed downplaying American involvement and extolling the successes of Diem and the ARVN against the VC. Official policy was to steer reporters away from potentially damaging coverage. The only news that the Kennedy administration wanted from Vietnam was positive news that favored the Diem regime.

However, the literature shows that the media grew increasingly resentful about the Kennedy administration's growing and aggressive use of news management. While the media had generally accepted presidential judgment on what
"national security" interests were, they loudly disagreed with the overt high-handedness in which the administration began to practice news management.\textsuperscript{11}

A tacit consensus between the media and the administration over national security information began to break down after the missile crisis. Assistant Defense Secretary Arthur Sylvester declared that the government had the "right to lie" and "use news as a weapon" in Cold War crises in order to protect itself. The result was a media backlash which intoned that the public's "right to know" was now in danger. There was a growing belief that the government had crossed the "thin moral line" that the media felt obliged to patrol. The belief in the media was that manipulation of information for national security (with requested media help) was one thing. Manipulation of information to dupe the Communists and the American media was something else.\textsuperscript{12}

A third area of importance for this study of the Buddhist Crisis concerns the failure of news management in Vietnam and the subsequent breakdown of relations between the press and government officials there.

The literature review points to the conclusion that news management of the American press in Vietnam had failed by 1963. From the beginning of the increased American involvement in 1961, American officials in Vietnam earnestly
followed Kennedy's policy to downplay American involvement and to defer all final judgments on information policies to the host Diem government. In the process they withheld or altered information, and sometimes lied to the resident correspondents about what was really going on.  

Over the course of 1962 and 1963, the officially uncensored reporters saw and reported what was actually happening in Vietnam. Reporters such as Homer Bigart, his replacement Halberstam, the AP's Malcom Browne, and UPI's Neil Sheehan felt that they could not deny what they experienced. They discovered that the official optimism about Diem's success against the VC was largely unfounded. The Diem regime was repressive, corrupt, and ineffective. The VC was a crafty and resourceful foe, and American soldiers were not only advising, but fighting and dying alongside their ARVN counterparts. Although Vietnam remained largely out of the headlines in the United States, the effort to manage the news of reporters in Vietnam had failed. 

The result of the failure of news management in Vietnam caused a breakdown in relations between reporters and American officials there. The Kennedy administration (and eventually the reporters themselves) termed this breakdown the "press crisis" or the "press mess." To government officials, the usually compliant press refused to accept the
"official line" of optimism. The failure of news management in Vietnam was so total that American officials lost virtually all credibility as sources for reporters. Instead, reporters cultivated sources almost exclusively from lower ranking and increasingly disgruntled advisers and embassy workers. The critical battle of Ap Bac in January 1963 publicly highlighted the breakdown among reporters and officials. The news reports (all true and supported by first-hand accounts) about the ARVN's humiliation totally contradicted the official statements of a rout of the VC.¹⁵

The breakdown eventually became personal and bitter. Reporters were not only despised, shunned, and insulted by American officials, but also physically intimidated and harassed by South Vietnamese secret police. The Diem government became apoplectic over the adverse coverage of the regime in the western media. The feelings and insults on the part of western reporters towards American and South Vietnamese officials became mutual. When the Buddhist Crisis erupted in May 1963, the reporters virtually ignored officials as sources and sought out the Buddhists.¹⁶

Another area of literature significant to my study of the Buddhist Crisis concerns the conventions of reporting as practiced by journalists in the early 1960s. The literature review found that the ideal of objectivity, use of sources, presence of values in the news, and framing of news all had
great impact on the development of the themes prevalent in David Halberstam's coverage of the Buddhist Crisis.

"Objectivity"—the journalistic ideal of news construction based on witnessed events, devoid of opinion, and without favor to any side—had evolved considerably since its origins in the 1920s. The "dead pan" objectivity of the McCarthy era relied on convention and had little analysis. The ability of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy to manipulate the media in the early 1950s generated a great deal of media criticism over objectivity.

In response to this criticism, news management, and the growing complexity of the Cold War world, journalism had by the early 1960s begun to accept interpretation, analysis, and the demand for validity (verification by research of information) in the news. Objectivity practiced by Halberstam and many of his peers gave reporters more discretion, provided background information, and investigated the accuracy of news. Media researchers such as Bernard Roschco and Michael Schudson found that news validity became an important part of the norm of objectivity. News validity relied on not only reporters' observations, but also on testing source information for accuracy. Veracity—the habitual accuracy of source information established by successful testing of that information—was another key element of news validity.
Especially for prestige papers like The New York Times, just reporting the observable no longer sufficed.17

Types and use of sources reflected this growing demand for validity in the news. The literature showed that the desire for accurate, knowledgeable sources gravitated reporters toward elites and officials who possessed the knowledge. If these sources would not provide desired information, then a reporter’s "leg work" and "digging" for other sources became expected by most news organizations. When officials in Saigon lost credibility or rebuffed reporters, the reporters went to lower echelons. Lower echelons became acceptable if they, in turn, proved their validity and their veracity.18

The literature also showed that the concept of source attribution had evolved along with objectivity. Official sources and journalists developed a working routine and mutual understanding regarding exchange of information. Not all source information was directly attributable. The system of "backgrounders," "deep backgrounders," "not for attribution," and leaked information became acceptable by sources in journalism because of their professional prestige, easily verifiable information, and the ability of reporters to, in turn, protect sources from unhappy superiors. Halberstam and his peers, once shut out by high
level sources in Saigon, adhered to these reportorial conventions by protecting their lower level sources.¹⁹

Media studies also showed that values often permeated news content. Objectivity, though diligently practiced by reporters as a professionally legitimizing norm, remained an unattainable ideal. Objective fact and value are rarely separate. Reporters are a reflection of their culture and its ideologies. The bias toward the American value system of representative democracy and individual freedom appears at least implicitly (between the lines) in news coverage. Foreign news especially reflects the bias toward the American system. The reporters in Vietnam (self-admittedly) were there in 1963 to cover Americans and voiced support for the Cold War effort against the Communist insurgency.²⁰

Media studies also showed that values, diverse source information, and ideology find their way into news content via "framing"—the organization of complex pieces of information into easily definable and understandable symbols. Framing gives readers recognition and comprehension of news. The literature showed that the dominant frame for reporters in the early 1960s was the Cold War, the struggle of an American-led free world against world Communism. Reporters, to include Halberstam, used the frame of the Cold War to give salience to the Buddhist Crisis in America. Regardless of what transpired in the
crisis, the paramount symbol remained the effect of the crisis not on Vietnamese society, but on American policy against Communism there. It was not until after the crisis was over that Halberstam and many of his peers realized the social significance of the crisis in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{21}

The final area of literature relevant to my study of the Buddhist Crisis concerns the presence of a paradox in journalism. Although both claim independence from each other, the media and government (at times) display an interdependence to perform their functions. Additionally, media and historical studies show that journalists (though claiming independence as a profession from government control) are granted and accept an institutional role in the policy-making structure by the government. They report the story, but are part of it as well.\textsuperscript{22}

The literature showed that the notion of journalistic independence from government influence in the news process remained a key element of the ideal of objectivity. A professional, independent press would remain a neutral observer that could freely interpret and transmit information to the public.\textsuperscript{23}

In practice, however, the news media, especially reporters working for influential news organizations, gradually accepted a participatory role in policy-making.
The journalistic convention of using official sources and of government officials seeking out the press became ritualized. The press became an actor in policy by claiming the roles of public representative, critic of government (the "fourth branch of government" role), and an advocate (or opponent) of policy through editorial freedom.²⁴

The government readily conceded the role and influence of the media in policy-making. The use of reporters to float "leaks" as "trial balloons" for policy initiatives by bureaucrats, the courting of publishers to support policy initiatives, the identification of the media as a key part in the public arena of policy-making, and acceptance of the need to manage the news in the first place indicated that the government accepted the institutional media as a part of the policy-making structure.²⁵ To illustrate the paradox, John Mecklin (press attaché in Saigon from 1962 to 1964) wrote that the Buddhist Crisis reporting of the resident reporters in Saigon "wrecked American policy." David Halberstam, on the other hand, later defended himself and his peers by saying, "If we had used the back-seat type of reporting and just reported the official line and not reported what we saw, this, in my opinion, would have been totally inaccurate reporting. So therefore we did have to go out and provide alternatives ... to the official line."²⁶
Research Questions

This thesis will answer the following research questions:

(1) What were the major themes that appeared in the David Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis?

(2) Why did these themes appear?

(3) What conventions of reporting were used to construct the stories?

(4) How did the conventions of reporting influence the development of these themes?

"Conventions" of reporting would consist of objectivity as practiced in the early 1960s (emphasizing the researching of and validating of reported information, analysis, and interpretation); the cultivation, use, and (if necessary) protection of sources; the presence of democratic American ideology and values in the news; and the use of the Cold War frame to order the complex information of the Buddhist Crisis into news understandable to Americans.

Methodology

This thesis will use the historical research method. It will analyze David Halberstam’s New York Times articles from May 29 to November 1, 1963 to determine what themes appeared in the news copy. I chose these dates because
May 29 was Halberstam’s first story of the crisis (which started on May 8 in the city of Hue) after his return from a brief vacation, and November 1 because the coup ousted Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, formally ending the crisis.

Themes will arise out of the textural analysis and close readings of the news stories. A particular story may contain more than one theme.

The literature review showed that certain themes became paramount in the crisis. Examples of these are the breakdown in consensus within the U.S. Saigon mission over policy, the growing influence of Diem’s brother Nhu over policy, and the evolution of the crisis from a religious to a deeper Vietnamese political issue. To illustrate a developed theme, if a story reflected seeming disagreement over policy between two or more government agencies (such as Military Assistance Command-Vietnam [MACV] and the embassy, or the Saigon CIA station), then this denoted a theme of breakdown in consensus. Another example would be if a story reflected from its sources or interpretation that Ngo Dinh Nhu made policy decisions rather than President Diem, then this denoted a theme of the rising influence of Nhu over policy in South Vietnam. The identification and explanation of the theme and why it appeared would receive support from my extensive historical study of the period.
The New York Times reporting of David Halberstam was selected for four reasons. First, some scholars and journalists found that elites and policy makers, to include President Kennedy, considered the foreign affairs coverage of the *New York Times* as the most influential on policy among what they considered the "prestige" press. Policy makers habitually used *The New York Times* as a barometer to gauge the effect of U.S. policy in affected countries and achieve a fresh assessment of policy different from their bureaucratic outlook.²⁷

Second, the literature showed that papers like the *New York Times* allowed and expected much more depth, analysis, and interpretation in news writing than wire service reporters. The wire services, under more deadline and space constraints, could not include the level of detail in their reporting that Halberstam could.²³

Third, the literature showed that Halberstam's reporting of the Buddhist Crisis had a definite impact on policy makers in Saigon and Washington. The effect of Halberstam's (and some of his peers) reporting on the crisis received the personal attention of President Kennedy (so much so that Kennedy personally requested Halberstam's publisher to remove him in October 1963).²⁹
Finally, I chose Halberstam's reporting because his efforts earned him a share of the 1963 Pulitzer Prize for foreign affairs reporting (with Malcom Browne). This recognition of Halberstam's efforts further merited study of his Buddhist Crisis coverage.

I selected the articles for analysis from The New York Times index based not only on the events they covered, but the historical repercussions of those events on later policy. Technically the Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam ended on August 21, 1963, when the Vietnamese Special Forces and police raided Buddhist pagodas in Saigon and Hue. However, the effects of that event triggered follow-up stories such as the shifting of U.S. policy away from Diem, the Saigon student uprisings that kept the protest movement going, the breakdown in consensus in the U.S. mission, and the coup plots. This justifies extending the coverage date to the fall of the Diem regime and not ending it on August 21.

Organization

The thesis is arranged in five chapters. The current chapter is introductory. It explains the topic, delineates research questions, and discusses literature surveyed.

The second chapter discusses the milieu in which the Buddhist Crisis took place. It gives a more detailed
synopsis of the failure of news management in Vietnam prior to the Buddhist Crisis and sets the stage for understanding the conditions the Saigon correspondents had to work under by May of 1963.

The third chapter analyzes David Halberstam's articles written during the Buddhist Crisis to identify, define, and discuss the major themes brought out in the reporting. This chapter will further analyze these articles and themes to show why these particular themes appeared and what conventions of reporting Halberstam used in composing his stories.

The fourth chapter identifies what effect Halberstam's coverage had on United States' policy in Vietnam and why it had an effect. Historical research will show that Halberstam's reporting had an indirect but major impact on policy.

Finally, the conclusion assesses the historical significance of Halberstam's coverage in relation to the impact it had on future American policy in Vietnam, media coverage of the Vietnam War, media-government relations, and its significance for journalism itself during this period.
NOTES


10. Military historian William Hammond found that the stated intent of the policy was to "accentuate the positive," in William Hammond, Public Affairs, 83.


15. Halberstam, Quagmire, 87-135; Hammond, Public Affairs, 25-37; Mecklin, Mission in Torment, 151-160; Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 305-361; Prochnau, Ibid., 174-244.


25. Graber, Media-Politics, 193-223; Hillsman, To Move A Nation, 541-544; Hohenberg, The Media, 98-100; Paletz and Entman, Media-Power-Politics, 54-78.


27. Cohen, Press-Foreign Policy, 137-139; Graber, Media-Politics, 245; Paletz and Entman, Media-Power-Politics, 145-147.

28. Catledge, My Life and The Times, 211; Halberstam, Quagmire, 240-241.

29. Several published accounts of this October 22, 1963 meeting between Arthur "Punch" Sulzberger and President Kennedy exist. The most detailed one I found regarding this topic is in Prochnau, Distant War, 453-454.
CHAPTER 2

THE MILIEU OF THE BUDDHIST CRISIS

Introduction

In the *Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills wrote that in order truly to understand a problem, it is necessary to fully grasp the milieu in which it exists; that it must be connected to other aspects of the structure or society in which it occurs.¹ This is very pertinent in trying to understand the complex nature of news reporting from Saigon during the Buddhist Crisis.

To fully understand what and why certain themes appeared in the reporting of David Halberstam and his peers, one must understand the situation that existed between the reporters and U.S. and South Vietnamese officials in Saigon. Then one must make a connection to the larger issue of the relationship of the government and the media in 1963.

This chapter will set the stage for analyzing the Buddhist Crisis by explaining the milieu in which it took place. It will not discuss the Buddhist Crisis itself, but will explain how the "press crisis" between the Saigon
correspondents and U.S. and South Vietnamese officials related directly to the larger goals of United States policy in Vietnam and the role played by the media in that policy.

First, this chapter discusses the reliance on, and failure of, news management in the Kennedy administration as a means of implementing policy in Vietnam in 1963. It will then show that the result of this failure was the "press crisis" that set the stage for the reporting of the Buddhist Crisis.

Second, this chapter shows that the rift between officials and reporters in Saigon exemplified the journalistic paradox of reporters telling but also being part of the story. As independent professionals, news management compelled the resident reporters (who followed journalistic convention) to go out and find the real story. However, as an accepted part of the policy-making structure, their framing of the news based on their own Cold War ideology and consensus showed that (although they became fiercely "anti-Diem") they remained advocates of U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Finally, this chapter shows that the "press crisis" between officials and reporters in Vietnam was not an isolated event. It must be understood in context of what had become by May 1963 a growing rift between the media and government. The nature of the rift was about the
government's right to protect national security and the media's right to inform the public. This chapter discusses the media's reaction to news management and shows that (following the Bay of Pigs and the heavily news-managed Cuban Missile Crisis) a growing resentment by the media, and a debate within the media, developed over Kennedy administration information policies.

Constructing the milieu in which the Buddhist Crisis took place will clarify other aspects of this thesis. It will provide a basis for understanding the reasons why the reporting of (and criticism of reporting) the Buddhist Crisis developed as it did. For example, to understand why reporters like David Halberstam disregarded official high level sources and instead cultivated Buddhist leaders and lower level South Vietnamese and American sources it is necessary to first understand the milieu in which he and his peers operated. Without this understanding, the Buddhist Crisis is an isolated event, and it would have no logical basis for historical interpretation.

The Failure of News Management in Vietnam and the "Press Crisis": 1961-1963

Even before the May 1963 Buddhist crisis, another crisis threatened to dominate America's policy in South Vietnam. Since the American buildup of November 1961,
personal and professional relations between resident American reporters and the highest officials of the American mission and South Vietnamese government had degenerated to such a degree that it preoccupied the execution of American policy.

This situation became known to both parties as the "press crisis," or "press mess." The primary reason for the development of this crisis was the failure of news management in Vietnam, a major element of John F. Kennedy's effort to keep Vietnam out of the headlines and maintain a low profile for American military advisers.²

Although Ngo Dinh Diem's government had served as America's anti-Communist bastion in Southeast Asia since 1954, his regime in South Vietnam faltered badly by 1961. Diem's regime was only marginally popular with the general South Vietnamese population and increasingly oppressive. In the end, Diem's continued and unkept promises of democratic reforms became lost in his ardent anti-Communism. The ambitious U.S. military and economic aid programs and artful propaganda campaign to sell Diem to the United States as "our man" in Asia during the 1950s had papered over rather than corrected Diem's problems.³ The inability of his army to control the growing Vietcong insurgency compelled the new Kennedy administration to drastically increase U.S. military advisory strength from 685 to 13,000 in November 1961.
However, this expanded mission also called for American covert participation in military operations. First, the United States had since the early 1950s considered Vietnam of "strategic importance" in Asia. Kennedy's National Security Council decided that drastic measures were now needed to deny the Vietcong victory. Second, the influx of men also brought new equipment (especially helicopters and jet fighters) that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (the ARVN) was not trained to use. Such participation violated the 1954 Geneva Accords that partitioned Vietnam. But John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier," the "bear any burden, pay any price" view of containment of world Communism, governed his response to the crisis in Vietnam. In order to pursue this new policy in Vietnam with as little international, public, or congressional interference as possible, the Kennedy administration made news management—the manipulation of information made available to the public by withholding, altering, delaying, or obfuscating—a centerpiece of that policy. As Daniel Hallin pointed out in the The Uncensored War, it did matter to President Kennedy whether news about Vietnam appeared above the fold on the front page, or was buried inside the newspaper.

From almost the beginning of the buildup, relations between the reporters sent to cover this developing story and officials in the American mission and Vietnamese
government turned sour. Three primary reasons accounted for this souring: (1) the repression of Western reporters by the Diem regime; (2) the official information policies of the American mission; and (3) the refusal of the reporters to deny what they could see.

As American participation progressed and reporters became critical of the ARVN's performance, the Diem regime and Western reporters clashed over the notion of "freedom of the press." The Diem regime, while accrediting reporters relatively easily, could (as host government) deny access to military engagements, impose censorship outright on reporters' dispatches, and expel reporters if it desired. As the New York Times' Homer Bigart, Newsweek stringer Francois Sully, and NBC's Jim Robinson found out in the Summer of 1962, critical or unflattering reporting of the Diem regime would most likely result in expulsion. By May 1963, the animosity between the resident Saigon reporters and the Diem regime was virulent. During the Buddhist Crisis it would grow even worse.7

More disconcerting to the resident Saigon reporters was the official information policy of the United States mission. The main goal of the information policy implemented by American officials in Saigon was to downplay the obvious American participation in combat, play up the
notion that it was "a Vietnamese war," and play up Diem's successes. Official U.S. Army doctrine of the day called on newly assigned troops (when dealing with the media) to accentuate the positive. This is where news management became crucial. In order to downplay U.S. involvement and maintain popular support for the effort in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration eschewed the official military censorship of World War II and Korea in favor of managed news instead. The belief was that censorship would actually lead to more attention and adverse American opinion over America's role in the war.

In order to achieve the desired end of downplaying American combat involvement, the U.S. mission resorted to lying, excessive classification, and withholding information. As John Mecklin recalled in Mission In Torment, his frustrating first-hand account of his time as United States Information Service chief in the Saigon embassy, "No one ever told a reporter a really big falsehood. It was the endless little ones that angered the reporters." Worse yet in the eyes of the reporters, the U.S. mission seemingly acquiesced in Diem's information policies: everything from excessive classification to the expelling of unfavorable reporters. When Sully and Robinson were actually expelled in September and November 1962 respectively, the reporters felt that Ambassador Frederick
E. Nolting and the American government (while mildly protesting) did not support them enough.¹¹

However, the main source of conflict between high officials in Vietnam and the resident reporters was that reporters were pressured to deny what they saw. What they saw were Americans fighting, taking casualties, and American officials trying to conceal the truth.¹² When pressured by the correspondents for more candor and greater access, the senior military commanders responded by calling for reporters to “get on the team,” and to support official policy like their World War II and Korean War predecessors had done under official military censorship.¹³

The battle of Ap Bac in January 1963 proved to be a turning point in the relationship between officials and reporters in Vietnam. At that battle in the critical Mekong Delta, the Vietcong stood and fought stubbornly while the ARVN fought ineptly. The Vietcong for the first time shot down American helicopters and escaped. General Harkins, the MACV commander, and the South Vietnamese government proclaimed victory. Reporters such as Neil Sheehan of the United Press International and David Halberstam (Homer Bigart’s replacement for the New York Times), used first hand accounts from military advisers such as Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann to refute the claims of victory.¹⁴
The fallout from that incident cemented the "press crisis" on a professional and sometimes bitter personal level.

On a professional level, the resident reporters found themselves cut off from official sources in the U.S. mission and Vietnamese government. As a result, the reporters stopped consulting officials in Saigon and built up their own sources and "intelligence" networks in the field to find stories. Neil Sheehan recounted, "We couldn't get anything out of official sources, and therefore they lost control of us entirely. It was a very good thing for us. Each reporter had to build his own intelligence system." 15 Halberstam's view was, "The embassy had become an adjunct of a dictatorship. In trying to protect Diem from criticism, the ambassador became Diem's agent. But we reporters didn't have to become the adjuncts of a tyranny." 16

On a personal level, relations between the resident Saigon reporters and high American and Vietnamese officials had become so poor that attacks on the ability and patriotism of reporters became common. The most common attack was that many of the resident reporters were "too young and inexperienced to report a complex story like Vietnam." More than once, senior officials in Vietnam requested "more experienced" journalists to come and view the situation in Vietnam. 17 Likewise, bitter personal
responses by reporters against officials whom they perceived as lying became increasingly common.\textsuperscript{19}

By the eve of the Buddhist Crisis, the attempt by officials in Washington and Saigon to manage the news written by the reporters in Saigon had failed. And yet, the Kennedy administration had seemingly achieved the larger goal of keeping Vietnam off the front pages of newspapers. Halberstam recalled that their reporting did not generate a lot of public outcry in America. He said, "We didn't have a very good audience because it wasn't a crisis time. These were small, quiet crises." \textsuperscript{19}

The "Press Crisis" and the Journalistic Paradox

The literature concerning the "press crisis" in Vietnam shows that the crisis was more complex than a simple breakdown in consensus between reporters and officials there. The development of the Vietnam press crisis in 1962-1963 highlighted the journalistic paradox: that as independent professionals, the reporters had to ascertain and write the story; as accepted members of the policy-making structure, they were part of the story as well.

As professional representatives of their respective news organizations, the reporters in Vietnam had to follow the conventions of reporting to get the story.
The refined definition of objectivity, that the story must also have veracity, compelled the resident Saigon reporters to seek alternative sources of information. When official sources lost credibility by mangling the news or by refusing to provide verifiable information, Halberstam and his peers exercised journalistic independence. They ventured into the field (the countryside and hamlets) with lower echelon American advisers like Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann to verify their information. Halberstam, Sheehan, Browne, and others such as Time's Charley Mohr built lasting and personal rapport with these advisers.20

Not only did reporters seek sources, but the sources sought reporters. If the highest officials in the U.S. Mission supported Diem, middle and lower level officials became disillusioned. Following a brief period of success after the November 1961 buildup, the continued poor performance of the ARVN, plus the observed corruption and ineptness of the Diem regime brought junior advisers, U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) workers, and reporters together. Stanley Karnow, who spent three reporting tours in Vietnam starting in the late 1950s said,
Correspondents ... did not seek out military men with criticism to voice. On the contrary, these responsible officers were the best available news sources. To suggest that they performed for the benefit of reporters would be to undervalue the stature of these soldiers.\textsuperscript{21}

Halberstam and Sheehan, and their peers cultivated a wealth of sources among lower echelons who were totally disaffected with the Diem regime and American support for it. In return, these sources "taught and tutored" the reporters about what was really going on in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{22}

Following journalistic convention, the reporters did not hesitate to protect their sources when necessary. When Halberstam's editors in New York (in response to criticism about the amount of unattributed information in his reporting) cabled Halberstam and requested "please take greater pains to attribute sources," Halberstam's terse reply was, "If I name my colonel, he no longer colonel [sic]."\textsuperscript{23}

It is important to note here that the convention of source protection made not only editors but readers totally dependent on journalistic integrity. When reading the published stories, the nature and number of sources is very difficult to ascertain. The reader had to trust (a "leap of faith," if you will) that journalists were accurately depicting events and had done their homework.
While following the conventions of journalistic independence, the literature indicated that the resident reporters were also very much a part of the story. Despite the "press crisis," consensus reigned among reporters and officials in Saigon about overall U.S. policy. The dominant frame used by the reporters in their stories was the "Cold War"--the American-backed Diem regime versus a Moscow-Peking-Hanoi-inspired Vietcong insurgency. The reporters admitted that they were willing advocates of U.S. policy.
Neil Sheehan said,

When the press did cause trouble it was over detail, not substance. The resident correspondents in Vietnam were also questioning detail. We thought it our duty to help win the war by reporting the truth of what was happening in order to both inform the public and to put the facts before those in power so that they could make correct decisions. (Our ignorance and ideology kept us from discerning the larger truths of Vietnam beneath the surface reality we could see. Professionally, we were fortunate for our ignorance. Had any reporter been sufficiently knowledgeable and open-minded to have questioned the justice and good sense of U.S. intervention in those years would have been fired as a "subversive" [sic].) The confrontation had occurred because of the unprecedented consistency with which we were questioning details.  

The crux of the "press crisis" was that the angle of the story began to change. The reporters became advocates of an alternative method to arrive at an agreed upon conclusion--the defeat of the Vietcong to save South Vietnam from international Communism. The major "detail" of
disagreement became the question, "could the war be won with the Diem regime?" On the eve of the Buddhist Crisis in May 1963, the U.S. government still thought it could. The reporters, though still overwhelmingly supportive of the Cold War frame, began to disagree. They supported the same policy, but voiced disagreement with the method.

By May 1963, the resident Saigon reporters (by following journalistic conventions) refused to deny what they saw for themselves. Reportorial convention demanded that they go into the field, observe what transpired, interpret, analyze, cultivate, and (if need be) protect their sources. One result of their reporting was that they had concluded almost to a person (Keyes Beech of the Chicago Tribune being an exception) that Diem "had to go" in order for the U.S. effort to succeed.25 This view was shared by the lower-level officials who worked in Saigon, in the field with the ARVN, and in the countryside with the mostly peasant South Vietnamese population.

At the same time, the resident reporters exercised the accepted journalistic role as participants in policy-making. Although the reporters in Saigon disagreed with the means (Diem), they never doubted the ends of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Their use of the Cold War frame in their stories
ensured that American ideology and values reached their readership in the United States.

The "Right to Know" vs. The "Right to Lie"

The failure of news management in Vietnam in 1963 and the development of the press crisis there was not, however, an isolated incident between the government and media over news management at that time. The conflict in Vietnam over news management represented a growing trend in the relationship between the government and the media.

The growing tendency of the executive branch to classify and manipulate information during peacetime in the name of national security had actually started under the Eisenhower administration. John F. Kennedy, himself a journalist and supporter of journalism, took news management much further. He willingly embraced news management as a tool of his "Flexible Response" national security policy.

From the beginning of his administration, Kennedy willingly intervened in the news process during national security crises as he saw fit. In April 1961, he convinced the Miami Herald and Orville Dryfoos, publisher of the New York Times, to withhold and alter news of the impending Bay of Pigs invasion. During the crucial Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962, he called Dryfoos and asked him to hold
stories in the name of national security. Highlighting the Cold War consensus between the media and government at that time, Dryfoos had encouraged the president to call him precisely because of the Bay of Pigs controversy. Concurrently, the Kennedy administration put out cover stories ("misinformation") and barred reporters from Atlantic fleet ships on the quarantine line.  

News management of the missile crisis and the aftermath of it publicly highlighted what had been a private but growing rift between journalism and government that centered on the public's right to know versus the Kennedy administration's controversial position of using news as a weapon and claiming the right to lie. In the April 1962 Nieman Reports, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Clark Mollenhoff asked, "how can the United States erect secrecy barriers to protect national security, and at the same time keep the public informed within the true meaning of democracy?"  

Historians such as Clarence Wyatt found that before the missile crisis (roughly the period 1958 to 1962) the response of journalism to Cold War news management was one of reluctant acceptance.  

However, acceptance did not mean total consensus. Influential figures in journalism at that time such as
columnists Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop, New York Times publisher Orville Dryfoos, Time publisher Henry Luce, and the powerful editor of the Sunday New York Times Lester Markle, thought that it was the prerogative of the president to define "national security" and manage the news accordingly in the best interests of the country. But a March 1963 symposium of Washington reporters on the subject of news management showed that there was disagreement between journalists on the issue. The views varied from "the Kennedy administration is hostile to the press," to "stop complaining, it's a fact of life," to "energetic reporting will overcome it."

Public statements by Kennedy administration officials after the missile crisis made the debate between the press and government public. In two published speeches, Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (and a former journalist) openly asserted the right of the government to use news as a weapon and the right of the government to lie to protect itself. At the same time, Sylvester and his State Department counterpart, former journalist Robert J. Manning, issued directives (both approved by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk) that mandated all defense and state
department employees record and report immediately any contacts or conversations with reporters.\textsuperscript{33}

The ensuing media and congressional furor resulted in the Government Information Subcommittee hearings (the Moss Committee headed by Representative John E. Moss of California) from March 19 to June 5, 1963. The hearings coincided with the unfolding Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam. In the analysis of historian Clarence Wyatt, the Moss Committee hearings revealed a government more and more willing and able to hide its activity from the American people, a press that was becoming more and more confused about what the government was doing in the name of national security and what that activity was doing to journalism, and a public that was becoming more confused and unsure about whom to believe.\textsuperscript{34}

Testimony by editors such as Herbert Brucker of the Hartford Courant, Gene Robb of the Albany Times-Union, and Charles Rowe of the Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star, and media executives such as Scotty Reston of the New York Times and Howard Bell, vice president of the National Association of Broadcasters, reflected this confusion and lack of consensus. While some called for formal military censorship as in World War II and Korea, others argued that the voluntary censorship called for by the Kennedy
administration was not possible short of a declaration of war. Many, however, agreed that an erosion of government credibility had occurred because of the heavy-handed news management during the Cuban Missile Crisis.\textsuperscript{35}

Another facet of this rift between government and the media in 1963 was the belief by many in journalism that the news management of the Kennedy administration (especially the assertion of the right to lie) had upset a tacit understanding between the two institutions.\textsuperscript{36} Michael Schudson, in Discovering the News, found that the media did not so much resent the fact that news management was used, but that the Kennedy administration made no attempt now to hide it. Officials demanded acquiescence more often than not from media that were willing to give the president the benefit of the doubt on national security issues anyway. He wrote, "For the press, to cooperate with government in keeping news from the public was one thing. For the government to keep information from the press was something else."\textsuperscript{36}

Although the majority of the Moss Committee hearings concerned Kennedy's information policies vis a vis Cuba, portions of the hearings did directly discuss Vietnam and the suppression of news. Roger Hilsman, who was to play a prominent role in policy during the climax of the Buddhist Crisis, testified that Vietnam information policies, though
ambiguous in 1962, had been remedied and that no reporter was denied access because of "negative stories." The sole determining factors would be "military security," with the South Vietnamese government having the final word. Scotty Reston, however, gave this analysis during the March portion of the hearings (echoing the confusion and frustration of the time):

We are in a war and this country hasn't the vaguest idea it's in a war. The news is being managed on a principle understandable to the Diem government, but I question it from a point of view of our government and our tradition. The Diem government wants access strictly limited to what is going on in the jungle ... But because Diem wants to control the news there, we are, I think, as a government, going along with that. Maybe we have to. I don't know.\(^\text{37}\)

A joke of the day summed up a more humorous and cynical view of this conflict: "When Arthur Sylvester says the government is lying, he's telling the truth. When Pierre Salinger (Kennedy's press secretary) is telling the truth, he's lying."\(^\text{38}\)

The debate over news management not only affected media-government relations, but also produced serious internal arguments within powerful media institutions. Some disagreements were strictly reporter and editorial in nature. One example was Henry Luce's *Time*. *Time* reporters were apt to find their dispatches not just copy-edited, but
altered in content by the powerful managing editor Otto Fuerbringer when they did not sufficiently espouse American Cold War ideology. The personal battle between Fuerbringer and Charles Mohr (a protege of Luce’s and Time’s man in South Vietnam) became so virulent that Mohr resigned in protest in September 1963 at the height of the Buddhist Crisis. In the end, Luce supported Fuerbringer over Mohr.\textsuperscript{39}

A more complex example of the internal media conflict generated by the growing news management and Vietnam is that of David Halberstam’s employer, The New York Times. Although enjoying an unmatched reputation for journalistic independence, the paper was by 1963 characterized as a mixture of liberalism with Cold War ideology and anti-Communism. The Times valued its independent reputation but was not above Cold War loyalty checks characteristic of the McCarthy era. It also still smarted from the fallout over Times reporter Herbert Matthews’ positive coverage of Fidel Castro in 1957.\textsuperscript{40}

Additionally, The Times had become a very entrenched institution unto itself. Although it embraced founder Adolph Ochs’ rule that news gathering and editorial policies should be separate, it was also replete with “fiefdoms” and factions such as Lester Markle’s Sunday edition, and John
Oakes' editorial page that wielded great influence by putting their own views and values into print.\textsuperscript{41}

The news management of the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and now Vietnam found growing divisions of opinion within the structure of the paper. Although Orvil Dryfoos and Washington bureau chief Scotty Reston had agreed with President Kennedy to downplay the Bay of Pigs stories, assistant managing editor Theodore Bernstein and news editor Lewis Jordan had bitterly dissented. Homer Bigart's, and then David Halberstam's, negative and pessimistic reporting from Vietnam in 1962-1963 intensified the internal conflict.\textsuperscript{42}

While outwardly supporting independence for its reporters, \textit{The Times} began internally to struggle with Vietnam policy by 1963. Halberstam, with his more aggressive style of reporting and ambition, exacerbated the situation even more because he did not fit the "cool, quiet" demeanor wanted by senior managing editors Clifton Daniel and Turner Catledge in New York. As Halberstam's notoriety grew within the Times, factions lined up for and against him. Disharmony within the Times over Vietnam was characterized by "hawks" and "doves." The editorial chief, John Oakes, became a noted dove. Eminent military affairs editor Hanson W. Baldwin was the chief hawk. The news
department, to include Halberstam's foreign editor, Nathaniel Gertsenzang, were hawks. Lined up behind Oakes or Baldwin, or taking neutral positions were other editors and writers whose views of the Vietnam situation fluctuated.\(^1\)

Despite these internal rifts over Vietnam, The New York Times of 1963 outwardly avoided controversy. Journalistic independence and Cold War ideology were powerful, conflicting values. It was not yet characterized as the risk taker on Vietnam it would become later by sending Harrison Salisbury to Hanoi or publishing the Pentagon Papers. As the "press crisis" intensified in Vietnam, the Kennedy White House put enormous pressure on the Times to rein in Halberstam. It was not until Kennedy's personal pressure on new publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger that the Times chose journalistic independence and gave Halberstam full support.

**Summary**

To understand the reporting of the Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam in 1963, it is important to understand the milieu in which the reporting took place.

In Vietnam, the failure of news management had generated a virulent rift between reporters and officials there. The mutual animosity and avoidance by each side
directly affected the way reporters covered the Buddhist Crisis. When Thich (synonymous with priest) Quang Duc immolated himself on June 11, 1963, reporters did not go to the embassy for the story; they went to the pagodas.

The crisis there was, however, over the means of policy, not the ends. Highlighting the independent reporter-involved participant paradox present in journalism, the resident reporters felt compelled to present the truth as they discovered it. However, they also fully advocated and supported American intervention in Vietnam. They framed their stories primarily using the Cold War consensus, saying U.S. policy was good, but that Diem was bad for U.S. policy. Their angle (that Diem was not a viable ally), however, now greatly differed with the official version of the policy both they and officials fully supported. Vietnam was “a legitimate part of that global commitment” taken so seriously by the Kennedy administration, but Diem was not the means to victory.

However, the “press crisis” in Vietnam cannot be viewed in isolation. By May 1963, the growing resentment in journalism over the news management policies of the Kennedy administration highlighted a rift between the growing power of the presidency and the growing professionalization of journalism. The rift centered on the public’s right to know and the overt assertion by the Executive Branch that it had
the "right to lie" and use news as a weapon in the name of Cold War national security. What had been a tacit consensus between these two institutions became severely strained, and also highlighted a growing argument within journalism itself over how to respond.

These three factors, though on the surface separate, must be connected in the milieu in which the Buddhist Crisis took place. Without this understanding, the Buddhist Crisis is merely an isolated and peripheral event.
NOTES


3. Historian George Herring commented that "Kennedy chose a cautious middle course of expanding the American role while trying to keep it limited. It encouraged Diem to continue on his self-destructive path while leading Americans to believe they could secure a favorable outcome without paying a heavy price," in George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 72-83.


7. As early as January 1962, Diem expressed negative feelings toward American reporters: "Diem bitter about critical press coverage. Implied that it played into Communist hands; a boon to Communists.", memorandum of conversation by Arthur Gardiner, Director of United States Saigon Mission, January 16, 1962 in Foreign Relations, vol. 2, 1962, 94; Peter Arnett, one of the resident reporters in Saigon, wrote, "Any reports that we filed questioning the claims of war progress were taken personally by the Diem regime." in Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 88-89; John Mecklin noted, "the Diem regime treated the Western press like foreign matter in the bloodstream ... the Diem regime's bitterness against the American press built up imperceptibly but massively." As the Buddhist Crisis wore on, reporters became subject to physical attacks in July and October, and received assassination threats, in John Mecklin, Mission in Torment (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 123-151; for a detailed discussion of Vietnamese accreditation policies for foreign reporters during this period in Vietnam, see George Meany, "Problems In Public Information In Vietnam" (Masters thesis, University of Missouri, 1970), 10-35.

8. American information policy in Vietnam during this period was embodied in the now infamous "Cable 1006" from State to Embassy in Saigon. The cable, sent to clarify policy at Ambassador Nolting's request, actually became a lighting rod for the press-government controversy. Designed to give Nolting more flexibility, Nolting and General Harkins actually used it to classify most missions and therefore shut out all reporters. Cable 1006 played a prominent role in the Moss Hearings a year later. A quick summary follows: (1) new stories criticizing the Diem regime made U.S. mission more difficult; (2) journalists should avoid "trifling" or "thoughtless criticism of Diem that would strain relations; (3) journalists should not be transported to areas with potential "undesirable stories," summarized from Cable 1006, State to Ambassador Nolting in Foreign Relations, vol. 2, 156-160

Other documents and cables from this part of 1962 provide further insight. I will quickly summarize a few here (all from Foreign Relations, vol. 2, 1962, 316-322): a letter from CINCPAC Political Adviser to Director, Vietnam Task Force, summary of Secretary of Defense Conference, Honolulu, January 16, 1962 stated, "Ambassador Nolting cautioned that in briefing the press we should give full credit to GVN and not make it look like U.S. is running the war, making plans, or pulling strings." Another was a memorandum from Assistant Director, East Asian Pacific Affairs, USIA, to Deputy Director, USIA, January 12, 1962: "A critical press has adverse effects on our task because GVN is harder to negotiate with after each incident. On April 4, 1962, Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent Nolting Cable 1113 which said, "Alarm over 'conspicuous role' reported in press of U.S. advisers. Stress again support, not responsibility role. Minimize U.S presence and reduce public impression of U.S. going beyond announced objectives."

9. William Hammond summarized it as a choice between portraying strength to Khrushchev and Red China, or minimizing domestic discontent. Kennedy chose the latter course. He wrote that the American people, while well disposed (at this time) to Diem, seemed little interested in a foreign war. If public support for South Vietnam began to fade because of negative reporting in the press, the American effort to defeat Communist aggression in Southeast Asia would also begin to slip or might even fail for lack of support. A low profile, achieved through restraints on the press at the scene of the conflict and designed to sustain the American public's support for the war, seemed a safer course


11. Arnett wrote, "Robinson’s ouster on November 1, 1962 convinced us the American Embassy was indifferent to press freedom and unwilling to call the regime on its increased paranoia." Arnett, Live From the Battlefield, 90; Mecklin, Ibid., 135-139. The Saigon reporters had formed “The Vietnam Foreign Correspondents Association”, with Malcolm Browne as president. The Sully and Robinson incidents produced letters of protest to Diem, telegrams to President Kennedy, and lukewarm protests from Nolting. All were of no avail, in Prochnau, Once Upon A Distant War, 125-127, 179-180.

12. Arnett wrote, “We labored on with an increasing sense of isolation, dismayed by a blanket of restrictions on news coverage that was aimed at freeing us out of critical war areas in the countryside.” Arnett, Ibid. Reporter Stanley Karnow wrote that on one occasion, U.S. military spokesmen denied U.S. soldiers ever encountered Communist guerrillas. One evening, for example, a reporter learned from excellent sources that a GI had been kidnapped by Communists. Checking with the US military information officer, he received a flat denial. “Well, I’m filing the story anyway,” challenged the reporter. “In that case,” replied the officer, “I suppose we’ll have to release the news.” Stanley Karnow, “The Newsman’s War In Vietnam,” Nieman Reports 17 (December 1963): 6. Malcolm Browne recounted how he heard a sergeant friend of his had received an arm injury and was told officially that the injury happened in a “training accident” with the ARVN. He visited him in the hospital and found out that his friend had actually been on patrol with the ARVN, trigged a Vietcong mine, and had half his elbow blown off. Malcolm Browne, “Vietnam Reporting: Three Years of Crisis,” Columbia Journalism Review (Fall 1964): 6.

13. Phillip Knightley, The First Casualty (New York: Harcourt-Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), 378; Admiral Harry Felt, the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (nominally Harkin’s superior) made this now-famous remark to the AP’s Malcolm Browne. The belief by commanders like Felt and Harkin was that their predecessors had been “patriotic,” so why couldn’t the same apply in Vietnam? Prochnau, Distant War, 243-247.


17. Two examples of this are as follows: “Schism between U.S. press and GVN is more than simple lack of communication. An on-the-spot appraisal by mature and objective newsmen is greatly needed as a counter to the somewhat frustrated reporting by the resident correspondents.”, telegram from Nolting to Rusk, January 24, 1963, in Foreign Relations,
vol. 3, 93; “General Wheeler described the press situation as ‘terrible’… He suggested that there should be a special press tour from the U.S. run by Defense… he accepted my suggestion that perhaps it would be better to try to get the press to send especially experienced men out individually.” Memorandum for record by Averell Harriman, Deputy Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Embassy to State, February 9, 1963 in Foreign Relations, vol. 3, 98-102.

18. Hammond, Public Affairs: 37; Prochnau, Distant War: 323-324; Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie: 350-351. The most emotional and personalized conflict was between David Halberstam and the senior military staff led by General Paul D. Harkins. Some of Halberstam’s recorded outbursts included yelling at a Saigon restaurant, “General Paul Harkins should be court-martialed and shot!” driving by Harkins quarters, shaking his fist and shouting, “I’ll get you, Paul Harkins!”, telling Harkin’s operations officer, General Richard Stillwell, that he was “feeding bullshit” to visiting Time representative Richard Clurman, and at a July 4th celebration snubbing protocol and refusing to toast President Diem, saying, “I’ll never drink to that son of a bitch!”


20. David Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire (New York: Random House, 1964), 80-162; Halberstam remembered, “four key officers began to complain (about the war), in varying ways, in varying degrees.” The four advisers were Colonel Wilbur Wilson, III Corps (the main area around Saigon); Colonel Daniel Boone Porter, IV Corps (the rest of the Mekong Delta); Lieutenant Colonel Fred Ladd, 21st Division (southern tier of the Delta); and the now legendary Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, 7th Division (the northern tier of the Delta), summarized from David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1969), 202-205; Neil Sheehan provides a detailed discussion about the development of the relationship between these reporters (especially Halberstam) and Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann and other advisers in the Mekong Delta in A Bright Shining Lie, 320-324.

21. Karnow, “Newsmen’s War,” 6; Malcom Browne described how Earl Young, an AID worker in the Long An province in the Mekong Delta, would tell him how the Vietcong would come into the Strategic Hamlets during the night, capture weapons, and leave before daylight. The strategic hamlets were fortified villages meant to deny the Vietcong control of the rural population. After the November 1, 1963 coup that deposed Diem, the American mission found out that Diem inflated statistics of success and that the program in reality was an attempt by Diem and his brother Nhu to stifle potential opposition by centralizing the rural population. The hamlets made it easier for Nhu to monitor dissent. Malcom W. Browne, Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter’s Life (New York: Times Books, 1993), 178-181; Halberstam, Quagmire, 137-148; Hallin in Uncensored War, 39, found that many advisers became, after the flush of optimism in early to mid-1962, increasingly disaffected with the ARVN, Diem’s meddling, and the unwillingness of the American mission to pressure American officials to more vigorously follow their advice.

22. Halberstam, Ibid., 167-168; Prochnau, Distant War, 87-88; Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 317-318. Prochnau and Sheehan found that
John Paul Vann was the key "teacher" for the resident correspondents, and David Halberstam was the principle student. Prochnau's analysis was the most detached. He wrote, "Vann was hardly the first operator to learn this basic technique in intragovernmental communication. But his timing was ideal. By then the reporters had given up on official sources and were actively cultivating the men in the field. Other American officers were talking too, but Vann was the fountain. He cultivated the reporters, taught them about tactics, coached them on strategy—and slipped in his message [sic]. The reporters knew the nature of the game, and had few qualms. If he was using them... they were using him too." Neil Sheehan recalled that "Vann was a natural teacher. He enjoyed the role. The most prominent graduate of this Vann school on the War and the reporter with whom Vann formed his closest relationship in these early years was with David Halberstam."


24. Hindsight seems to have brought out regrets about not having disagreed more deeply over policy. Halberstam wrote, "The questions brought up by the reporters were small ones. They too did not challenge the given, and by accepting it, they too failed (had they challenged the very premise of the war, they would have undoubtedly been shipped out the next day)." Halberstam, Best and the Brightest, 206; Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 315.

25. Keyes Beech, an old "China Hand" who had reported in Asia since World War II, recalled, "Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam would say, 'Don't you see Diem's got to go? We'll never win with a guy like him as president.' And I said, 'I would remind you of one thing: I was writing nasty stories about Ngo Dinh Diem when you guys were still at Harvard. Secondly, I have no illusions about Diem, but if I've learned anything in these misspent years in Asia, it is that you don't go around overthrowing governments unless you're reasonably sure you have something better in the wings." Quoted in Montague Kern, Patricia Levering and Ralph Levering, The Kennedy Crises: The Press, The Presidency, and Foreign Policy (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 143


27. Flexible Response was Kennedy's containment and national security strategy. It was defined as having a full range of options at the disposal of the president to meet any crisis. The full range of options ran from non-military forms of aid all the way up to full scale nuclear war. The concept was to have an option to act with minimum or maximum capability. "Calibration", the ability to move up and down the range of options, became a key element of Flexible Response. John L. Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 213-222.

29. Clark Mollenhoff, "The Security Dilemma," Nieman Reports 16 (April 1962): 2. Mollenhoff wrote that the Kennedy administration information policies on major issues followed three themes: First, there was an almost automatic reluctance to produce information inconsistent with policy; second, the administration classified much of the matter at hand (putting it out of bounds for discussion); and third, public information officers 'froze up' when asked for potentially detrimental information because they feared for their jobs.


31. Washington foreign affairs correspondents in 1963 apparently did not share a consensus view on news management. Alan Barth said, "I think the hub of the problem is not that the press is controlled, but that it is complacent and cooperative." Richard Harwood stated that, "A diligent reporter, I believe, can compete with 'insiders' if they make the effort." Richard Dudman said, "Some of the complaints about managed news are by reporters who seem to hold the naive belief that government press officers have the job of providing information to the press. Actually, their work is to promote the good, conceal the bad and put the best possible face on the news. They are natural enemies of newspapermen, and any other assumption is a dangerous delusion." "News Management: A Symposium of Washington Reporters," Nieman Reports 17 (March 1963): 3-14; Wyatt, Ibid., 46.

32. Practically all secondary sources in this study prominently mentioned Sylvester's assertions. I cite here the primary source Moss Hearings, 19 March 1963, 13-16.

33. John Hohenberg, The Media: A Journalist Looks at His Profession (New York: Holt-Rinehart, 1968), 119-126. Hohenberg recounted that State Department restrictions ended in April 1963. The Defense Department guideline stayed in effect (despite criticism from the Moss Committee and media organizations) until 1967; Moss Hearings, Ibid., 10; In "News Management," 10, Washington reporter Donald Zylstra supported some of Mollenhoff's opinions (see note 28). He wrote, "Not only is the McNamara Pentagon determined to have its say about what news is released, it is conspicuously determined to control who dispenses it, when, and under what conditions. Military professionals and highly placed civilians in the Pentagon who would have had no qualms about talking with trusted reporters 24 months ago often consider refusal to talk the safest course—if not the best way of insuring their professional futures [sic]."

34. Aronson, Press-Cold War, 178; Wyatt, Paper Soldiers, 47.


36. Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 172-173. Schudson's analysis was that what made Sylvester's comment even more troubling was that it crossed a thin moral line the press felt obliged to patrol. It was bad enough for the government to keep information from the press by dodging; but it was worse still for the government to announce its "right to lie." There was at least this virtue to hypocrisy when the government lied while claiming to be truthful: that if the press discovered the lie, it could embarrass the government. The Sylvester
statement (in Schudson’s view) now placed the government beyond embarrassment.

37. In the Moss Hearings, 19 March 1963, 55-68 and 5 June 1963, 387-404, Roger Hillsman was intensely questioned about the origin and purpose of “Cable 1036.”

38. Wyatt, Paper Soldiers, 47.


42. Aronson, Press-Cold War, 167-168; Prochnau, Distant War, 447 and 450.

43. Talese, Kingdom and the Power, 442-445.
CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS OF DAVID HALBERSTAM’S BUDDHIST CRISIS COVERAGE

Introduction

This chapter analyzes David Halberstam’s reporting of the Buddhist Crisis from May 29 to November 1, 1963. First, it provides brief historical background information on the crisis itself. The emphasis of this chapter is on the development, identification, and explanation of the major themes and conventions of reporting prevalent in David Halberstam’s coverage of the 1963 Vietnamese Buddhist Crisis. The themes and conventions of reporting used will emerge from a close reading of his dispatches, combined with historical research on the period.

This chapter also discusses the importance of news framing in Halberstam’s coverage. It explains how Halberstam’s culture and ideology, embodied in the Cold War environment of his time, influenced the themes present in his reporting.

Finally, this chapter shows that Halberstam’s reporting manifested “news slant” that favored certain events and
opinions over others. This influenced what information appeared in stories and what did not.

Background on the Buddhist Crisis

By 1963, roughly 70 percent of South Vietnam’s population were Buddhists (of varying denominations). Most of South Vietnam’s cultural elite and ruling apparatus were higher educated Catholics (roughly 10 percent of the population). Although the South Vietnamese Constitution promised religious freedom and equality, Catholics dominated the higher offices of government and the secret police. Though popular resentment against the ruling Catholic Ngo Dinh family grew during the early 1960s, Diem had effectively controlled any organized opposition.¹

The Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam lasted from May to November 1963. It started on May 8, 1963 in the ancient Vietnamese capital of Hue over a dispute about flying the Buddhist religious flag as part of Buddha’s 2,587th birthday celebration. After the Buddhists refused to obey an obscure law that forbade the flying of non-national flags, troops loyal to Ngo Dinh Can (Diem’s brother and overlord of central Vietnam) fired into a Buddhist crowd, killing eight. The incident touched off several weeks of rioting and protests by Buddhist religious leaders (the bonzes). They demanded religious freedom as guaranteed by the
constitution. Instead of quickly settling the dispute (as urged by American diplomats in private), the Diem regime ignored the protests and Buddhist demands, allowed the crisis to fester, and let it spread to the larger, urban-centered Buddhist pagodas in Saigon. The protests, primarily by bonzes and Buddhist nuns, gained the attention of the Western correspondents by late May, but little front page space in the Western media.

The simmering conflict between reporters and officials in Saigon had a direct effect on how the resident reporters covered the Buddhist Crisis. With the Buddhist Crisis developing into a major story, the reporters attempted to elicit information from the American embassy. Its response was virtual silence. This happened for two reasons: first, American officials (like the reporters) had no real understanding of what was going on; second, the embassy was under instructions from the State Department to pursue a "behind the scenes" and quiet, but firm, strategy of friendly persuasion on Diem to end the crisis. Publicly, the embassy maintained its usual positive, all-out support for Diem. With press-official relations already bad, the reporters felt stonewalled again and turned exclusively (at this point) to the bonzes. The bonzes had also attempted to contact the American embassy for help. They received the same rebuff as the reporters had.
The resident reporters and the bonzes developed close relations. Employing the same techniques they had used to discover the truth about Ap Bac, the correspondents established what Neil Sheehan called a "first rate" intelligence network. Their primary sources were the bonzes in the pagodas and (as the crisis intensified) increasingly disaffected lower level Vietnamese officials. The intensification of the crisis occurred on June 11, 1963. On that day, 73-year-old Thich Quang Duc immolated himself on a Saigon street in front of AP correspondent Malcom Browne’s camera. Duc’s act of religious protest galvanized Buddhist laity in South Vietnam and shocked the Western correspondents, American officials, and the world into taking more notice of the growing crisis. The suicide started a wave of unrest that finally ended with a military coup and the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, on November 1, 1963.4

The Buddhist Crisis became the focal point of a growing maelstrom around America’s policy in Vietnam in 1963. Although John Mecklin, the embassy’s public affairs chief, thought that the resident reporters’ coverage of the crisis helped wreck that policy, he also wrote, “this was not a malicious achievement...the reporting of the Buddhist Crisis for the most part was straight. There was little sensationalism. None was necessary.” Neil Sheehan
remembered, "Halberstam and I and the other reporters seized upon the Buddhist Crisis as we had Ap Bac. We had been holding it up as proof that the regime was bankrupt politically as it was militarily." Halberstam wrote that the Buddhist Crisis became the "peg" they needed for stories about political discontent in Vietnam. "At that time, few of us knew much about Buddhism in general, other than that it was the major religion in Vietnam. Unrest was there, palpable, but had no one element to characterize it."

Major Themes Present in Halberstam's *New York Times* Articles

David Halberstam's reporting of the Buddhist Crisis evolved into a large, complex story containing several themes. To identify and define the major themes present in his reporting, I closely read his stories in *The New York Times* from May 29 to November 1, 1963, and attempted to take the viewpoint of a news reader that had a basic understanding of American foreign policy at that time. Halberstam's stories appeared in several categories: straight news, news analyses, "Man In The News" profiles, and Sunday "Week In Review" interpretive pieces.

Through careful and repeated readings of the text, I found seven major themes--concepts and ideas most frequently and consistently present in his reporting. Several of these
major themes represent a synthesis of related themes that appeared less frequently in the coverage. An example is the theme of the "war going badly in the Mekong Delta." This theme developed from my synthesis of the smaller themes of "war statistics over-optimistic," "Vietcong winning battles in the Delta," and "government control weakening in Delta area." While each of the themes was discrete and had unique characteristics, many overlapped chronologically. Also, some themes appeared simultaneously in the same articles. Although several other themes appeared in Halberstam's stories, these seven themes figured most prominently.

The first theme present in Halberstam's reporting was that the Buddhist Crisis produced a "negative effect on the war effort." Analytic or interpretive reporting that characterized the crisis as an opportunity for gains by the Vietcong, eroding the will of the South Vietnamese people to resist the Vietcong, or the wasting of American resources denoted this theme. By "analytic" or "interpretive" reporting, I mean news writing in which Halberstam (either on his own or when asked by The New York Times foreign desk) presented the reader with his synthesis of the essential meaning and understanding of events he covered.
A second major theme was a religious dispute that evolved into a “deepening political crisis.” Analytic or interpretive reporting that portrayed the crisis as an increasingly political protest against the Diem government denoted this theme. This theme emphasized that the crisis, though starting in Hue as a local religious dispute, widened into a general political protest that involved more and more segments of the Vietnamese populace. Another emphasis of this theme was that the Buddhist leaders in the crisis became increasingly militant and provided a focal point for popular discontent that spread to other elements in South Vietnam (especially student groups and the South Vietnamese Army).

The third major theme present in Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis was that the crisis highlighted the “ineffectiveness of the Diem regime.” Analytic or interpretive reporting that characterized the Diem regime as unable to end the Buddhist Crisis denoted this theme. The focus of this theme was that the regime became increasingly isolated from the South Vietnamese populace and unable to rally the people of South Vietnam successfully to fight the Vietcong. This theme also emphasized that the Diem regime showed itself unwilling to come to terms with the Buddhists or Americans on the crisis.
The next major theme present in Halberstam's reporting was that of "dissension in the South Vietnamese Army." Analysis, interpretation, and sources that depicted a widespread rift within the Army and between the Army and the Diem government denoted this theme. By "sources," I mean attributions in news stories of quotes or analysis to identified or unidentified persons. This theme focused on the development of dissension between competing elements of the ARVN, between junior and senior officers, and between senior officers and the senior levels of the Diem government.

A fifth major theme produced by Halberstam's reporting of the crisis was that of the "war going badly in the Mekong Delta." Sources indicating that the Vietcong gained strength while the government position weakened in the vital Mekong Delta region denoted this theme. This theme focused on the counter-argument that official statistics pointed to progress there and that the official view was over-optimistic. It also emphasized that the Vietcong had grown stronger there since 1962 and were a competent and resourceful foe.

The sixth major theme present in the coverage concerned the "growing negative influence of the Nhu family." Analysis, interpretation, and sources that depicted Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife Madame Nhu as having greatly increased
their control over policy to the detriment of American policy goals denoted this theme. This theme emphasized that (as the crisis unfolded) the Nhus became more powerful while Diem’s influence weakened. Another focus of this theme was that the growing influence of the Nhu family negatively impacted Vietnamese-American relations. This was exemplified by the belief of the American mission, led by new Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., that the Nhus were a pernicious influence on Vietnamese policy in regard to the war effort.

The final major theme present in Halberstam’s coverage was that the Buddhist Crisis highlighted a significant “breakdown in American consensus” over Vietnam policy. Sources that indicated disagreement between two or more agencies in the American mission or disagreement between junior and senior officers within the same agency denoted this theme. One emphasis of this theme was on open policy disagreements between any combination of the Saigon CIA station, MACV headquarters, and the diplomatic section of the American Embassy. Another emphasis was on disagreement that occurred over policy goals among lower-echelon mission operatives and senior policy-making levels. An example of this was Halberstam’s reporting of disagreements between junior CIA officers and the Saigon CIA station chief.
"Negative Effect on the War Effort" Theme

The first major theme to appear in Halberstam's coverage was that the Buddhist Crisis produced a negative effect on the war against the Communist Vietcong insurgency. This theme appeared in 28 stories from June 5 to September 29, 1963. The first example of this theme comes from Halberstam's June 5 story, "67 Buddhists Hurt In Vietnam Clash." Interpreting the effects of the now month-old Buddhist Crisis, he wrote that observers felt the crisis was not abating, but intensifying in its negative effects on American policy and Vietnamese will. "American diplomats," he wrote, "fear the situation will affect the war effort and damage morale."

The next example of this theme comes from Halberstam's June 10 article, "Americans Vexed By Inability to Act In Vietnam Dispute." In this article (written the day before Thich Quang Duc's suicide), Halberstam analyzed the negative effects of the crisis on the American-backed war effort in Vietnam and wrote that it had brought to the surface growing American frustration that the United States had "limited influence here despite its heavy investment in troops, economic aid, and prestige to help the South Vietnamese block Communism." There was now a danger that America's investment could wind up wasted. The negative effect on the commitment of the Vietnamese appeared again in this article.
Halberstam felt that the crisis had caused deep damage to the war effort and popular will and that even if the Ngo Dinh Diem government were able to end the Buddhist demonstrations, the Vietnamese population would "quietly disengage itself from the war effort." This article also interpreted disengagement as aiding the enemy. He wrote, "In a political war like this one, a disengaged population would help the rebel Vietcong."

Halberstam again interpreted American frustration that its resources were being wasted because of the Buddhist Crisis in his July 7 Sunday "Week In Review" piece, "Diem Regime Under Fire." His analysis was that as the crisis festered and remained unresolved, there was "a growing feeling that the United States is at a crossroads in Vietnam. It has staked out vast amounts of prestige, money, and manpower in an effort to turn back the Communist tide" but had seen it dissipated by the continuing Buddhist Crisis."

As the crisis worsened and continued into August, Halberstam's analysis was that the chance for Vietnamese disengagement and Vietcong exploitation of the situation grew because the effects of the crisis began to spread into the countryside. On August 4 he wrote that Washington's principal worry was that dissension caused by the crisis "will cost Saigon the public backing it needs to defeat the
Vietcong guerrillas in the countryside." On August 12, Halberstam assessed the growing opportunities the crisis presented to the Vietcong. He wrote that even small communities in the countryside "were now aware of the Buddhist question" and that "they are worried that the Communists will be able to exploit the issue."

My final example of this theme of the Buddhist Crisis producing a negative effect on the war effort comes from Halberstam's September 8 Sunday "Week In Review" article, "Setback In Vietnam." In the aftermath of the August 21 pagoda raids that removed the bonzes as protest leaders and allowed the Nhu family to gain prominence, America debated cutting aid to the Saigon government. Halberstam's analysis and interpretation of recent events in this article reemphasized the "crossroads" position of United States policy since July and the negative possibilities the Buddhist Crisis had produced on the war effort. He found that the only potential winners were the Vietcong and that the crisis had wasted American resources by forcing the United States into a no-win situation. The situation was that, despite the wasted resources (men, prestige, money) and the unpopularity of the now Nhu-dominated government, there was a worse alternative—that the Vietcong would win. Emphasizing the reality of wasted American effort but the opportunity the crisis gave the Vietcong, he wrote, "The
fact is that there is a real war here, a real enemy, and that if America cuts its support of this Government, then the Asian Communists may take over. This is what it comes down to.”

"Deepening Political Crisis" Theme

This major theme present in Halberstam’s coverage of the crisis appeared in 29 stories from June 5 to September 8, 1963. The first example appears in Halberstam’s June 5 story, “67 Buddhists Hurt In Clash.” Even at this early stage in the crisis, Halberstam’s observations and interpretations led him to write that even though the protests started out as strictly religious in nature, they had become “predominantly political” and increased discontent in other elements of the population. He wrote that “the Buddhists are providing a spearhead for other discontented elements.”

By June 22, Halberstam’s interpretation of events led him to conclude that the political nature of the crisis was now so serious that it threatened the power of the Diem regime. “The government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his family,” he wrote, “is engaged in an all-out struggle for survival.” Halberstam’s analysis also included his assessment that the Buddhist leadership now displayed differences between younger and older bonzes over the nature and goals of the
protest. He wrote, "the younger Buddhist priests now give
the impression of wanting to keep the dispute simmering so
that eventually someone else will capitalize on the
protest."  

As the crisis picked up popular momentum into July,
Halberstam's analysis was that the protest movement had now
expanded and involved other important segments of Vietnamese
society. His July 16 article, "Buddhists Renew Vietnam
Protest," said that the struggle was at first religious in
nature between the Buddhists and the Diem regime, but it had
now "widened into general political unrest," and that many
now felt that "unrest and uncertainty have even spread into
the army."  

At the end of July, Halberstam's assessment of the
protest movement was that the younger bonzes had prevailed
over the older bonzes and had taken over direction of the
struggle. The goals of the uprising now had become openly
political. An example of this analysis appeared in his July
25 article, "Militant Young Buddhists Gain Stronger
Political Role in Vietnam." Halberstam wrote that although
the 11-week-old crisis had not resolved its original
religious grievances, it had produced "a new force in
Vietnamese politics, a determined Buddhist movement headed
by young, militant, and highly political leaders."
When Ngo Dinh Nhu's pagoda raids drove the bonzes underground, the latent discontent and political unrest brought out by the Buddhists was picked up by disaffected students in Saigon. In his August 25 "Week In Review" article, Halberstam wrote that few Americans in Saigon could understand the political force of the Buddhist Crisis because they had not seen "the bitter faces of many students" or had not watched "the growing popularity of the Buddhist cause." This popularity grew, he wrote, "not so much on religious grounds, but because in this closed society it provided at least an outlet for feelings about this Government."\(^{17}\)

A final example of this theme comes from Halberstam's August 25 article, "Vietnam Orders Schools Closed In Rising Unrest." Illustrating how the crisis had widened to more and more diverse groups in Vietnamese society, he wrote that the usually passive students were increasingly militant and had taken over the leadership of the protest movement from the bonzes. Halberstam's interpretation of this development was that "it is clear that the Government has lost the youth of the country" in the aftermath of the pagoda raids.\(^{18}\)

"Ineffectiveness of Diem Regime" Theme

This theme appeared in 17 stories from June 10 to October 13, 1963. The first example of this theme appeared
in Halberstam’s June 10 article, “Americans Vexed By Inability to Act In Crisis.” While this article highlighted the negative effect on the war effort, it also assessed the Diem regime’s ability to eventually resolve the growing crisis. Halberstam wrote that the feeling in Vietnam was that the Government’s overall handling of the month-long crisis “has made a casualty of Washington’s attempt to portray the Government as leading a broad national movement to which the population is rallying.” Analyzing the government’s intransigent performance in the crisis since May, he assessed the government as becoming more isolated. “The picture of the Government,” he wrote, “even among most recent supporters here, is one of a regime aloof and inflexible.”

Halberstam’s very next article on June 11 echoed the interpretation of the growing aloofness and inability of the regime to deal with the crisis. He wrote that the dispute between the Buddhists and the Government was “extremely dangerous” and “is daily costing the Government effectiveness in its attempt to gain public support.”

As American and Buddhist pressure mounted on the Diem regime to resolve the crisis in July, Halberstam’s analysis found that displeasure and dismay over the Government’s effectiveness in handling the crisis increased in the Vietnamese Army and in the American mission. Halberstam
wrote (also touching on the negative effect on the war theme) that the stubbornness and inability of the Diem regime to resolve the crisis had "dampened successful prosecution of the war," and that since the Buddhist incident "this feeling has mounted in the army, just as it has mounted with the Americans, who have been stunned by the Government's mishandling of the crisis."\textsuperscript{21}

After the August 21, 1963 pagoda raids instigated by Ngo Dinh Nhu, Halberstam's analysis of events indicated that the Diem regime had now insulated itself from the people and had very little popular support because of its handling of the Buddhist Crisis. He wrote in his August 27 "Week In Review" piece, "Repressions Are Seen As Creating Sharp Divisions in Vietnam," that "South Vietnam is fighting a sensitive political war," and that it is now ruled by "a strikingly unpopular Government that seems to have a cool indifference towards the people when they are in conflict with the prerogatives and the survival of the Ngo family."\textsuperscript{22}

In his September 11 interpretive article, "The Buddhist Crisis In Vietnam: A Collision of Religion and World Politics," Halberstam's analysis was that the crisis had come to the point where Ngo Dinh Diem was unable to resolve the crisis, had no contact with his population, and relied exclusively on only his closest advisers. "The Ngo Dinh Diem of earlier years," he wrote, "would have been able to
move toward a quick settlement.” Whereas the earlier Diem was known for his “toughness, courage, and strong anti-Communism,” Diem was now considered “an isolated man, removed further and further from the population, hearing only finely sifted reports about his people.”23

The final example of this theme came from Halberstam’s October 6 “Week In Review” piece, “Saigon: Failure To Solve Political Problems May Erode Will of People To Press War.” His analysis and interpretation of the effects of the crisis by October on the regime was that it was now completely isolated, unable, and unwilling to solve the crisis. Survival of the regime at the expense of the people was now paramount. Writing that the regime would not settle the crisis out of pride in its position, he wrote, “There is around the palace today a cocoon of intrigue, suspicion, and distrust separating the family from what it needs to be told and the people who are willing to tell it.”24

“Dissension in the South Vietnamese Army” Theme

This particular theme appeared in 14 stories from June 22 to October 24, 1963. At first, Halberstam’s sources in the ARVN and his analysis of events led him to emphasize that the crisis had caused disgruntlement and raised political awareness in the junior ranks. In his June 22 article, “Discontent Rises In Vietnam,” he wrote that “the
sense of anger and frustration is being taken seriously by army officers ... it is the young officers the regime knows it must worry about."$^{25}$

Discontent in the junior ranks continued to dominate the "dissension" theme into July. On July 7, Halberstam reported that sources had "bitterly" informed their American friends that "Ngo Dinh Diem is not the only anti-Communist in Vietnam," and that his army is "filled with junior officers who are aware of the social needs of the country." His sources told him that "indeed, one reason for the growing unrest within the Vietnamese Army today is the dissatisfaction of many young officers with the way the war is going.... They feel that the political climate is not suitable for a successful prosecution of the war."$^{26}$

By August, however, dissension had spread in two directions: to lower ranks (enlisted soldiers and cadets) and to senior levels (ARVN general officers).

On August 12, in "Buddhist Impact Grows In Vietnam," Halberstam reported that, according to one source, "the dispute between the Buddhist leaders and the regime is deep and smoldering in the Army," and that the effect of the crisis is growing because (echoing the "deepening political crisis theme") of "all out Buddhist efforts in that direction." Sources told Halberstam that "Catholic and Buddhist officers began to eat apart," and at a training
school "Buddhist cadets suddenly asked for a Buddhist chapel just like the Catholic's chapel."\(^{27}\)

At senior levels, Ngo Dinh Nhu's attempt to implicate the army in the August 21 pagoda raids brought out the dissension between senior ARVN generals loyal to the army and those loyal personally to the Diem regime. On August 25, Halberstam wrote that "it is reliably reported that Major General Tran Van Don (the military aide to President Diem) had no knowledge of the attacks and was a virtual prisoner when they took place."\(^{28}\)

On August 29, Halberstam reported that "reliable sources" said there was a "split among the army generals and that it was widening." These sources also stated that "in particular Major General Tran Van Don was bitter against Brigadier General Ton That Dinh." Dinh was Diem's loyal military governor of Saigon and the commander of the Saigon-based ARVN III Corps. The generals loyal to the army, Halberstam wrote, felt that they personally, and the army in general, "had suffered a loss of prestige in the international view because of the way they were exploited" by the Diem regime's actions.\(^{29}\)

Although reports of dissension among the generals and in the ARVN continued to appear in Halberstam's reporting up until the end of October, the last example of this theme comes from his Sunday, September 1 "Week In Review" article.
entitled "Vietnam: Army's Role". It represents Halberstam's analysis of the dissent caused by the crisis in the ARVN:

The atmosphere in the army is one of unparalleled distrust. Generals walk side by side, wear the same uniform, but they are worlds apart. Emotionally, they are in separate but warring armies...Though Mr. Nhu has promoted the idea that it was the army that forced the government's hand on the Buddhist question, no one knows the inaccuracy of this better than the army and no one is angrier about it. Jealousies and frailties have been played on by the (Ngo) family. Troop commands have gone only to the most loyal officers."

"War Going Badly in the Mekong Delta" Theme

This major theme appeared in 26 stories from July 22 to October 31, 1963. The first example of this theme really only hinted that the Vietcong were gaining strength and expertise in the area. In his July 22 story, "Saigon Army routs Strong Red Force," Halberstam hinted more that really nothing had changed in the delta since the battle at Ap Bac the previous January. Halberstam's sources portrayed the Vietcong as "well armed, well emplaced," and that "Americans and Vietnamese both were impressed with the toughness of Vietcong defense fortifications." In reality, this assessment of the Vietcong (based on Halberstam's own observations and source information) differed very little from his Ap Bac reporting seven months prior. The story of this battle (on July 22) had parallels to Ap Bac.

Halberstam reported that the ARVN engaged the very same
Vietcong unit (the 514th Battalion), and like Ap Bac, they skillfully "slipped away" from ARVN troops.31

However, Halberstam's very next story concerning the delta characterized the situation there as having grown much worse. Halberstam's August 15 story, "Vietnamese Reds Gain In Key Area," used a myriad of sources to paint a growingly pessimistic picture in the delta area. Halberstam wrote that "the military situation in the vital Mekong Delta has deteriorated, and informed officials are warning of ominous signs," and that the VC were now making a sizable military offensive "in the most populous regions of the delta."

One of the "ominous signs" Halberstam's sources reported was that the optimistic statistics of progress senior American and Vietnamese officials had been reporting concerning the Mekong Delta were suspect. "Though statistics are often deceptive and are not taken seriously in this kind of war," he wrote, "they show alarming trends." Letting his sources speak for him, Halberstam reported that statistics were in fact much different than the ever-present optimistic line. He wrote that South Vietnamese casualties, heavy weapons losses, and all-type weapons losses increased sharply while VC losses in the same categories decreased.

This particular story also reported that the Vietcong had pressed their growing military advantage in the delta into a political one as well. Using sources from the area,
Halberstam reported that government political influence in
the area was declining as well and that "American and other
advisers were extremely worried about the (strategic) hamlet
program in the delta." He wrote, quoting an unidentified
American hamlet official, "Frankly, we don't have the answer
yet, and the military doesn't either.... I'm not sure what
the answer is." 32

The third example of this theme appeared in
Halberstam's September 12 story, "Vietnamese Reds Attack 2
Towns." This story emphasized the growing skill, boldness,
and control by the Vietcong in the delta region. In this
action, the VC simultaneously attacked the district capitals
of Caineuoc and Damdoi in the An Xuyen Province (located on
the Camau Peninsula at the very southern tip of the delta).
Halberstam wrote, "Military sources said this was one of the
largest Vietcong attacks in months," and that the Vietcong
were growing especially bolder because "this was the first
time the Communists hit two district capitals." Emphasizing
the growth of VC control and weakening of the Diem
government's influence there, he quoted one American source
as saying, "Communist forces in the district are much
stronger than the government's.... Government outposts and
districts have existed with Vietcong forbearance." 33

As the Buddhist Crisis wore on into October, the
political and military situation in the delta did not
improve. In his October 6 "Week In Review" piece, "Failure to Solve Political Problems May Erode Will of People to Press War," Halberstam offered his analysis of the situation in the Mekong Delta by writing that the small government outposts in the Mekong Delta were actually "Viet cong weapons supply points," and that "it is a blunt fact of this war that most of the fighting is now in the Mekong Delta region, where the Viet cong are becoming increasingly aggressive and well armed." As part of this analysis, he added that (echoing the "dissension in the ARVN theme") that the ARVN commander there was an unpopular political general.34

The next example of this theme of the deterioration in the delta came in an October 23 article, "U.S. Aides Critical of Vietnam Hamlet Program." In this article, Halberstam reported on a new assessment of the Strategic Hamlet Program by American officials. Halberstam quoted the official report as finding the program "overextended and vulnerable" in the delta (but not in other areas of the country). His interpretation of the report was that the "net effect was to pinpoint the situation in the delta as serious and call for a reevaluation of the program's achievements and future."

Furthermore, Halberstam found the report significant because he saw senior officials beginning to break away from
their traditional optimistic statistics of progress. "For the first time," he wrote, "American military officials were to have committed to the view that the situation in the delta region was serious."35

The final example of this theme comes from Halberstam's article that ran the day before the coup against Diem and Nhu. In his October 31 story, "3 Americans Lost in Vietcong Raid," Halberstam's final analysis of the delta situation was that "the Saigon government has little influence in the area 10 miles north of the city of Camau ... the area is surrounded by areas under Vietcong control."36

"Growing Negative Influence of the Nhu Family" Theme

This major theme in Halberstam's coverage of the Buddhist Crisis appeared in 22 stories from August 3 to October 1, 1963. Since the intensification of the crisis in June, Madame Nhu had made public and derogatory comments about the Buddhist uprising and the bonzes, charging them to be "Communist dupes" and urging her brother-in-law, President Diem, to take "a harder line" with the bonzes. The general public assessment was that she was speaking for herself, but American officials were privately worried about her and her husband's influence on President Diem. However, after Diem indicated he might conciliate in the crisis,
Madame Nhu’s rhetoric and her husband’s actions became more aggressive and anti-American.  

The first example of the theme that the Nhus began to exert a negative influence comes from Halberstam’s August 8 article that reported his exclusive interview with Madame Nhu. In “Mrs. Nhu Denounces U.S. For ‘Blackmail’ in Vietnam,” Halberstam quoted Madame Nhu as accusing the Americans of trying to “muzzle me” because she thought a harsher line was needed to deal with the bonzes. “I would beat the bonzes 10 times more,” she told Halberstam. Halberstam’s interview also included sources’ assessments of the Nhus’ potential strength and the perception of a weaker Diem. He wrote that “Many observers feel that the increased influence of Mrs. Nhu and her husband has been the most striking political change in South Vietnam in the last two years,” and that “she is probably the most feared person in Vietnam.... Many sources feel hers is now the most forceful personality in the Ngo family.”

Four days later, Halberstam’s analysis of events indicated that the Nhus were increasing their influence on policy and that the crisis remained at an impasse. On August 12, Halberstam, in “Buddhist Impact Grows in Vietnam,” wrote that the seeming conciliatory stance of the Diem Government since mid-July had been “marred by the statements of Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu, the politically powerful
sister-in-law of President Ngo Dinh Diem." Halberstam's interpretation of recent developments was that "the dispute has brought the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu and Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu into the forefront of Vietnamese politics." 39

After Ngo Dinh Nhu showed his political hand in the August 21 pagoda raids, Halberstam's reporting focused on the growing control of the Nhus over policy and the unhappy American reaction. Halberstam's August 23 story, "Plan Said To Be Nhu's," emphasized that Nhu now began to make major policy decisions along with Diem. He wrote that "highly reliable sources" said that the pagoda raids and the subsequent declaration of marital law "were planned and executed by Ngo Dinh Nhu ... without the knowledge of the army." Halberstam's sources also felt that although Diem remained as president, "the Nhus have gained so much power that they may be more important than the president." 40

The next example of this theme emphasized increasing American displeasure over the rise of the Nhu family as the major influence on Vietnamese policy. This more negative American view (led by newly arrived Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.) quickly manifested itself in Halberstam's August 31 article, "U.S. Policy Clash With Diem Hinted."

Halberstam wrote that "highly informed diplomatic sources" said that Americans had decided that "no government that includes Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife can win against Communism
and that the Nhus cannot be separated from the government.” The American view of the detrimental effects of a Nhu-influenced government and a waning Diem influence was further reported by Halberstam when he wrote that Americans there saw President Diem “as a more sympathetic figure.” He also wrote, “They believe he is better intentioned than the Nhus, but that he and his government (echoing the theme of the Diem regime’s ineffectiveness) have lost all popularity,” and also (emphasizing the now public power of the Nhus) that “he is no longer a serious political figure.”

American displeasure over the Nhus became discouragement in Halberstam’s September 6 article, “U.S. Doubts Nhus Can Be Removed.” After trying to convince Diem to remove the Nhus’ influence in the name of the war effort, American diplomatic sources told Halberstam that they believed “Ngo Dinh Nhu, the powerful brother of President Ngo Dinh Diem, has been successful in his ‘palace coup.’”

The final example of this theme comes from Halberstam’s September 8 “Week In Review” piece, “Setback In Vietnam.” Halberstam’s analysis of the failure of Ambassador Lodge’s attempt to separate the Nhus from the Diem government “heralded the rise of Ngo Dinh Nhu more clearly than ever.” However, Halberstam’s analysis was almost sympathetic in tone to Lodge because (even though he felt the Nhus had
"outmaneuvered the Americans in the pagoda raids") "Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife had a head start.... They had taken the initiative, they knew what they wanted to do, and they were doing it." 

"Breakdown In American Consensus" Theme

This final major theme present in Halberstam's coverage of the Buddhist Crisis appeared in 12 stories from August 24 to October 30, 1963. The first example comes from Halberstam's August 24 news analysis article, "U.S. Problem in Saigon." This story focused on the growing disagreement between higher and lower levels in the Saigon CIA station over the relationship they should have to the Diem regime in the aftermath of the August 21 pagoda raids. Unhappy lower echelon agents told Halberstam that "leading American officials surprised by the pagoda raids" had actually received warnings about the raids from them, but they were ignored by higher echelons. "Some Americans," Halberstam wrote, "who have long been unhappy about the tendency to believe Vietnamese officials are now very angry over the latest events."

Another aspect of this theme, that agencies in the American mission began to disagree over the progress of United States' policy, appeared in Halberstam's September 1 article, "Red Gains Feared in Martial Law." As the new
diplomatic team under Lodge began to assess the situation, they found that the military situation reported by General Harkins and MACV was not as optimistic as Harkins thought. Halberstam reported that "one source" on the team of Henry Cabot Lodge noted that while the Ambassador was concentrating on politics for the moment, "his staff had found a good deal less optimism here about the military situation than formerly."\textsuperscript{45}

The next example of this theme of consensus breakdown in the American mission reiterated the growing disagreement between the embassy and MACV. Halberstam’s September 15 article, "U.S. Civilian Aides Press For Decision on Diem," indicated that the split had become acute. Embassy sources were now "offering direct criticism of the military estimates, something they have not done before...though they have considered them faulty for some time." Not only had the disagreement become more direct, but it was now becoming personal. "One general," he wrote, "is reported to have said he would 'get a high embassy official if it was the last thing he did.'"\textsuperscript{46}

Halberstam had learned enough from sources by this time to offer his interpretation of the situation. In this same article he laid out the positions of the chief agencies of the American mission: MACV, the embassy, and the CIA station. He wrote that within MACV, "there are powerful
military figures who still favor continued all out support even with a government headed by Ngo Dinh Nhu.” Halberstam wrote that in the embassy, “officials feel that the political situation is critical ... and that a government dominated by Ngo Dinh Nhu cannot win.” He found the CIA still had “something of a division ... the chief is reported to favor continued all-out support ... almost all other members of the C.I.A. are embittered by the pagoda raids.... They also feel that their chief’s close relationship with Ngo Dinh Nhu, while necessary, has damaged intelligence gathering.”

By October, the internal rift between the embassy and the CIA had reached a senior and very public level. Halberstam’s October 4 article, “Lodge and C.I.A. Differ on Policy,” highlighted this rift. It reported up front in the lead that Ambassador Lodge and the CIA station chief in Saigon “do not agree on policy in Vietnam.” Although sources in the embassy told Halberstam that “it was not a personality clash” but one of “seeing the war in a different light,” sources also acknowledged to Halberstam that the station chief (though commended for doing a “superior job”) had also raised questions in the embassy because of his “close working relationship with Ngo Dinh Nhu.” Reporting the CIA side, sources there told Halberstam that
the agency's critics in the mission were making the CIA "a scapegoat for the last six weeks of unhappy events."46

Other sources indicated to Halberstam in this article that the consensus rift pitted MACV and the CIA against the embassy. He wrote that it was believed in many circles that part of the struggle with the ambassador and the CIA "had a parallel struggle between Ambassador Lodge...and General Paul D. Harkins to establish himself (Harkins) as the real as well as nominal head of the American mission here."49

The final example of this theme of breakdown in consensus comes from Halberstam's October 23 article, "U.S. Aides Critical of Hamlet Program." This article, which also highlighted the situation in the Mekong Delta, emphasized that the consensus rift continued (especially between the embassy and MACV) even at a personal level over progress of American policy. Reporting the results of a joint military-civilian commission report on the status of the Strategic Hamlets (led by the American charge d'affairs William Truehart) Halberstam wrote that when the report was read to an audience including "several high Americans." One "leading general" was reported to have "questioned it sharply ... this general is reported to have called it 'exaggerated.'"50
Conventions of Reporting Present in Halberstam’s Coverage

The major themes present in David Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis were the product of several conventions of reporting (routines in composing news stories) in use in the early 1960s. My research found that the convention of news validity had the greatest impact on Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis. By the early 1960s, the effects of McCarthyism and Cold War news management had produced an evolution in the concept of objectivity in reporting. “Validity” had become an almost coequal value along with “neutrality” and “independence.” An enlarged definition of objectivity resulted. It now included assessment of information that addressed the accuracy of what was reported.51

The quest for accuracy now influenced other conventions of reporting. Source selection and cultivation became contingent not only on the rank or proximity of the source, but on how well source information checked out with other sources. Reliability and leg work (research) became increasingly important. Once the validity of news became established, journalists and news organizations increasingly felt the need to analyze and interpret the meaning of the news for readers. Whereas sources and observations had constructed reality in 1950, reality in 1963 began to
consist of a reporter's testing, evaluation, and assessment of what was said and observed.\textsuperscript{52}

Halberstam and his peers reflected the rise of this new convention of news validity. They were the first generation of reporters to exit journalism programs after the McCarthy era. They had no ties to the journalism of that era and began their careers as the controversy between the government and media over news management began to intensify.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{The Convention of News Validity}

Halberstam's construction of his stories about the deterioration in the Mekong Delta illustrated the growing influence of validity in reporting and how it influenced other conventions of reporting. The story started out in July with a tip by Vietnamese Colonel Pham Van Dong, the most respected field commander in the ARVN, about his observations on the deterioration of the situation there. This totally countered the months of optimistic statistics briefed by MACV and Halberstam's own observations. He wrote that "the story we were after entailed vast amounts of leg work, and all the knowledge and contacts we had developed in our many months in country." This required so much leg work that he found it necessary to collaborate with the UPI's
Neil Sheehan and Time's Mert Perry to research and verify all the information. Halberstam eschewed the official sources who, by this time, had no credibility because of the "press crisis." Instead, he relied on proven sources and his educated assessments to compose his stories.\textsuperscript{54}

Halberstam broke the situation on August 15 with his "Reds Gain in Key Area" article. This article, one of the most controversial of the Buddhist Crisis period, produced a firestorm of criticism from senior officials in Saigon and Washington. The article upset President Kennedy so much that he ordered the CIA to study not just this article, but all the articles Halberstam wrote since June. Their analysis, given to CIA Director John McConne on September 26, 1963, stated that "a review of the articles written by Mr. Halberstam since June indicates that he is by and large accurate in terms of the facts that he includes in his articles." However, the CIA's opinion was also that "the conclusions he draws from his facts ... plus the invariably pessimistic emphasis of his reporting, tend to call his objectivity into question."\textsuperscript{55}

Robert Manning, the State Department's Public Affairs chief, went to Vietnam in July 1963 to assess press-official relations. He also raised the question of objectivity:

The correspondents reflect unanimous bitterness toward, and contempt for, the Diem government. They unanimously maintain that the
Vietnamese program cannot succeed unless the Diem regime (cum family) is replaced; this conviction, though it does not always appear in their copy, underlies all the reports and analyses of the correspondents.... From all this, it is obvious that the correspondents place much faith in their own abilities to report and assess a situation that is as complex and tricky as any in the world today. Is such self-confidence, coupled as it is with considerable disdain for the official assessments, justified?56

What was considered overly pessimistic or subjective by officials, however, did not concern Halberstam or his peers. The goal of their reporting was accuracy. Halberstam’s belief that “back seat reporting” was inaccurate was shared by his colleagues. Horst Faas, AP photographer in Vietnam, said that “the first thing was accuracy.... We wouldn’t just take some rumor from some little monk out in the street who happened to speak English. You listen to it and check it out.” Steve Stibbens, who had a unique perspective as the resident Stars and Stripes reporter in Vietnam in 1961-1963, said that the reporters wished they could talk to officials, but they felt that they just weren’t being honest and candid with them.57

When Marguerite Higgins visited Vietnam in July 1963, her assessment was that the reporters in Saigon would “rather see us lose this war to prove they are right.”58 Her comment seems to reflect the increasing influence of news validity on the professional values of objectivity.
If reality in the Mekong Delta (based on verified source information and educated analysis) was pessimistic, then that was reality. Halberstam said:

'It was not fun to be pessimistic.... On my trips around the countryside I simply couldn’t reconcile. We just saw all these things which weren’t being done.... We kept going out in the field and kept finding that statistics really don’t mean much in a guerrilla war.'

In the end, Halberstam’s construction of reality in the Mekong Delta proved true. After the November 1 coup, the American mission found out that his stories, interpretation, and analyses going back to August had been correct all along.

Convention of Analysis and Interpretation

Several of the themes present in Halberstam’s reporting of the Buddhist Crisis relied on the convention of analysis and interpretation. Once reporters established the validity of news, they could (if allowed by their respective news organizations) provide readers with explanation and relevance to them. By the early 1960s, the growing complexity of Cold War foreign affairs and the growing recognition in the media of government news management led to a growing adoption of analysis and interpretation by news organizations. News analysis and interpretation was an honest judgment (a conclusion) by reporters of the meaning
of events that was suitably documented by whatever evidence of fact or opinion that could support it. News validity was, therefore, and integral part of this convention.⁶¹

Halberstam's analysis that the Buddhist Crisis was a deepening political conflict illustrated the presence of this new convention of reporting. His conclusion required a judgment based on his own assessment of information provided by the bonzes and what he himself saw in the pagodas.

Critics charged that Halberstam and his peers were "duped" by the bonzes and used as propaganda tools. For the reporters, the bonzes became a boon and somewhat of a curse. They became adept at Western-style press conferences, handed out press releases, and tipped reporters to major demonstrations (and even to possible suicides). They gave reporters what they wanted (but had not gotten from their own officials): access, candid information, and trust.⁶²

The key to analysis and interpretation became the validity of source information and then the assessment of the information by the reporter. Halberstam said, "I know the Buddhists wanted to use us—they had the mimeograph machine (in the Xa Loi Pagoda) red hot!"⁶³

Peter Arnett of the AP, who sat beside Halberstam in the pagodas, remembered that they were usually briefed by Thich Duc Nghiep, a slim and dapper monk who spoke fluent
English and "gave us Chinese red tea as he fed us snacks of philosophy and propaganda."

Halberstam and other reporters' analysis about the political nature of the crisis and the growing influence of the younger, more militant bonzes actually angered the bonzes. It was a portrayal that they did not want in the Western media, but that was the assessment of reporters like Halberstam. It was based on their interpretation of their construction of reality.

Halberstam’s analysis, again emphasizing the importance of news validity, received corroboration from the CIA. When reading their assessments of the crisis from June through September, one finds that they reached essentially the same conclusions as Halberstam did.

Conventions of Reporting Regarding Sources

Halberstam’s reporting of the Buddhist Crisis highlighted conventions of reporting regarding the identification, cultivation, and protection of sources. Although these conventions reflected established and widely practiced routines of reporting, the literature suggests that the growing influence of news validity did have an impact on source-reporter relations.

In terms of source protection, the literature showed that Halberstam’s reporting followed widely accepted
routines of his day. For example (especially when reading the stories concerning the dissension within the ARVN, the situation in the delta, the breakdown in American consensus, and the growing negative influence of the Nhu family), his reporting is replete with "informants," "observers," "Buddhists," varying "American," "Vietnamese," or plain "government" officials, and even generic "sources."

This practice followed established routines dating back to the Linley Rule and allowed the varying degrees of information such as the "deep back grounder" and the "leak" to make it into print. As the crisis deepened into September 1963, Halberstam found himself under attack in such quarters as the conservative Hearst papers for his seeming over-reliance on such sourcing to write his controversial reports. As already cited, his editors back in New York were also under enormous pressure from the Kennedy administration because of the effect of publicly leaked information. 67

Despite the increasing media criticism over this convention of reporting, the protection of sources for the sake of their professional survival (as with American advisers after Ap Bac) became especially critical during the Buddhist Crisis. For his Vietnamese sources reporting on the growing influence of the Nhus and the intrigues at the palace, it was a matter of physical safety. The chance for
arrest and execution by Diem's secret police was a strong possibility.\textsuperscript{68}

American officials became not so much concerned with the negative effect of stories, but more so with finding and plugging leaks within the Kennedy Administration. The danger here was that sources cultivated out of trust would be compromised and lose their careers.\textsuperscript{69} Horst Faas remembered:

There were a lot of leaks coming right from embassy personnel. They did not agree with what was going on. Basically it was a sometimes attributable, sometimes not attributable good source. You don't give your sources away. We at the time didn't give our sources away.\textsuperscript{70}

News validity had a great impact on source identification and cultivation. Who Halberstam talked to and what made it into print depended to a great extent on Halberstam's judgment about the accuracy of the information. Although he characterized the Buddhist Crisis as "Journalism 101—you get, you give," he also wrote that the challenge in this period was separating reliable sources "from the whiners and the gripers."\textsuperscript{71} Steve Stibben's opinion was that the press was used to a certain extent by the Buddhists, but no more so than by official sources such as MACV with its organized visits to the strategic hamlets. He said:
'Twas nothing new for anyone who has studied journalism or worked a beat at city hall. Everybody has an agenda and wants to use the press. You just have to keep it in perspective and always verify the facts via other sources.\(^2\)

Although validity had a great impact on source identification and cultivation in regards to lower echelon sources within the American mission and Diem government, the literature suggests that it had a lesser impact in regard to higher level sources. Halberstam (when he could) adhered to the more pervasive routine of relying on official sources. The themes of the rising negative influence of the Nhu family and the breakdown in American consensus signaled a return to use of higher official sources. After the disillusionment of the August 21, 1963 pagoda raids, American embassy officials who had been silent now provided much more candid information. This included, most conspicuously, the new ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. Lodge's arrival in Vietnam after the pagoda raids re-opened a long closed door for the reporters: the habitual reporter/official relationship. Finally, high-ranking American officials willingly offered candor and authoritative information more easily accepted as valid. Halberstam remembered that the stories that characterized the breakdown of consensus in the American mission were only possible because of the broad range (not just their
cultivated lower-level contacts) of sources who suddenly began to talk to them.

We had the ambassador and the hand-picked people below him, on a personal basis.... We had the people who had been our sources for a year. And then, as events began to build up and the regime began to flaunt itself against American will and begin to go down—i mean quite clearly coming apart.... You had guys who were once critical of Halberstam and Sheehan cut away and become sources. The moment one of these things collapses, everyone becomes a source, they all begin to talk, and they all change sides.⁷³

The shift back to official sources from August to the end of the crisis was noted in other studies. In The Kennedy Crises, Kern, Levering and Levering found (through content analysis) that use of official American and Vietnamese sources rose after August 1 while Buddhist sources correspondingly declined.⁷⁴

They attributed this shift in sources to the refocusing of press attention to different aspects of the crisis. From May to July, the focus was on the Buddhist conflict with the Diem regime. From August until November the focus of the press was on the deteriorating relationship between the American government and the Diem regime plus the dissension within the American mission and Washington.⁷⁵

On a more qualitative level, Lodge arrived in Vietnam with orders to improve press relations. He did so very quickly in regards to press-embassy relationships. He
granted access, candidly provided the occasional leak, and strictly controlled press contacts. "The 'leak'," he said, "is the prerogative of the ambassador." However, the consensus split among agencies in the American mission was so acute that the lower-level leaks never stopped.\textsuperscript{76}

**Convention of Journalistic Competition**

The diversity and complexity of the themes constructed by Halberstam in the Buddhist Crisis also reflected a competitive, marketplace convention of journalism that media researchers of this period have largely ignored. News organizations expected their reporters to cover a story important to Americans, and cover it first.

Much of the criticism leveled at the resident reporters in Saigon insinuated that they were all overtly working together to overthrow the Diem regime. Although they were a small and tightly-knit group, the Buddhist Crisis was a major foreign affairs story that they were expected to cover fully. Scoops were just as important as comradeship. Malcom Browne remembered:

Sheehan, Halberstam, and I ... were friends at heart, but we were also determined adversaries in a tough competitive game.... We were friends and colleagues in the same spirit that a prosecutor and defense lawyer may sit down for a beer together after hours.\textsuperscript{77}
Neil Sheehan said (remembering the reaction of his UPI bureau chief to Malcom Browne’s scoop of the Thich Quang Duc suicide) that “I was in trouble with my boss in Tokyo for months. He was going wild because I didn’t have that photograph.”

The complexity and breadth of Halberstam’s reporting (political, military, and social) also reflected an aspect of competition conventions inherent in foreign affairs reporting— that the foreign correspondent had to be an “omnibus” reporter. Media researcher Bernard Cohen found that foreign correspondents of his day (1950s and early 1960s) had to cover all aspects of an assigned country, not just narrow fields like their domestic beat reporter peers. Additionally, foreign correspondents had to overcome adversities of language and geography to get the story. The reporters in Vietnam found themselves under criticism by American officials for their perceived emphasis on “spot” reporting. News judgment was left largely up to them. The result, Cohen found, was:

> a moving picture of the world that shifts from crisis to crisis…. Correspondents hover around major foreign policy stories like moths around the brightest light; and like moths, they drift away when the light fades or is surpassed by another.

This coverage might be charted not as a series of discrete jagged peaks, but as a series of overlapping arcs; each one representing the rise and decline of a particular foreign policy story. As one story begins to wane, the arc of the next crisis begins to rise, and the lines cross.
Using Cohen's model, Figure 3.1 illustrates the complexity of the Buddhist Crisis by showing how Halberstam's major themes overlapped as the crisis unfolded during the Summer and Autumn of 1963:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Consensus</td>
<td>24 Aug, 30 Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhu Influence</td>
<td>3 Aug, 1 Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>22 Jul, 31 Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARVN Dissension</td>
<td>22 Jun, 24 Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diem Ineffective</td>
<td>10 Jun, 13 Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Crisis</td>
<td>5 Jun, 8 Sep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Effort</td>
<td>5 Jun, 29 Sep</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
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1963

Figure 3.1: Overlap of Halberstam's Major Themes

Halberstam, in order to stay on top of the diverse and overlapping stories, did combine with Neil Sheehan and Mert Perry at times. The reason was more to cover the whole crisis than a "pack" effort to overthrow the Diem regime. After Thich Quang Duc's June 11 suicide, the Buddhist
activities in Saigon and Hue became the major focus of the story. Even with collaborations such as this, Halberstam and many of his competitors and friends found themselves working seven days a week to stay on top of the stories generated by the Buddhist Crisis.

The Cold War Frame in Halberstam’s Coverage

The themes and conventions of reporting present in David Halberstam’s Buddhist Crisis stories (though dominated by the professional convention of news validity) were couched in the cultural ideology and values of his time—the Cold War. The themes and conventions of reporting he used to construct his stories directly related to the negative effects of the Buddhist Crisis on American goals in Vietnam. Despite the pessimism inherent in Halberstam’s reporting, he and his peers never wavered in their support for American goals in Vietnam or their hope in American success. Halberstam’s reporting called for a change in tactics, not goals. He said in 1964:

I’m as good an American, I think, as most men. The other reporters out there are good Americans.... I think they would all desperately love to see us win this war. At the same time, our commitment is to relate what we see.... I think if you go back and read the copy step by step, you will find the reporters were dealing with serious things: Were the outposts coming down? Were the troops getting off static security? What was the situation in the Delta? Was Diem able to reach out to his people?.... The
one thing I think that would frighten a reporter would be to go along with all the official optimism until the day the Vietcong rolled into Saigon.⁸¹

Despite the "press crisis" between reporters and officials and the public attacks on the patriotism of the correspondents, internal government assessments such as the July 1963 Manning Report recognized the fact that reporters supported American policy:

Amid these many unpleasant facts about the correspondents' state of mind sits a most important and encouraging fact: They seem to agree to a man that the United States involvement in Vietnam is a necessary free world policy and that the programs, military and political, are basically necessary and feasible. Without this, the situation would be discouraging to the extreme.⁸²

Halberstam's framing of the crisis as a valid Cold War policy in need of change highlighted two aspects of American foreign affairs reporting: first, American values and ideology permeated his reporting; second, the relation of the crisis to Vietnamese society was fragmentary and superficial at best.

The professional norms of reporting compelled Halberstam and his peers to seek out valid information and test it for accuracy. However, their cultural and institutional norms compelled them to portray the Buddhist Crisis in light of American values and ideology.
Media researchers such as Bernard Cohen, Robert Entman, Daniel Hallin, William Gamson and A. Modigliani, Herbert Gans, and Gaye Tuchman found that when consensus reigns, journalists (though claiming objectivity) rely as heavily as anyone on the symbolic tools that make up the dominant ideology and values in their society. Foreign affairs reporting, especially in areas with heavy commitments of American treasure, people, and prestige, make correspondents even more dependent on ideological symbols that increase the chances of finding American values in the news. Reporters' perceptions of reality are imposed as the central organizing themes for readers to construct their own themes for understanding social and political events.83

Framing the Buddhist Crisis in terms of Cold War ideology—that continuation of current policy with the Diem government was a threat to American values because the Vietcong could win—gave Halberstam a simple symbol to order the complex nature of the crisis. The themes and construction of his stories made the crisis relevant and understandable to Americans and to himself. His pessimistic framing of the Buddhist Crisis presented not an adversarial, but a reluctantly critical depiction of the crisis. Additionally, Nicholas Berry's analysis of New York Times's coverage of American foreign policy failures found that
cultural bias was a key aspect in not only media support but
criticism of foreign policy as well:

A journalist's cultural bias is not "my
country right or wrong." It is instead, a natural
bias to have the United States succeed, so that it
is secure, prosperous, prestigious, and
contributing to world progress. Reporters, like
everyone else, rally around the president ... when
confronting hostile forces.... However, at the
outcome stage, when policy appears to be failing,
reporters' cultural bias drives them to critical
analyses. They do not want their country to
continue down a dead end path. Flagging
ineffective or costly foreign policy is
patriotic.84

Halberstam's coverage of the crisis in terms of the
Cold War frame also produced superficial coverage about
Vietnamese society. The Cold War frame reduced the Buddhist
Crisis to bonzes and (later) the American mission against
the Diem regime in order to deny South Vietnam to the
Vietcong. A conspicuous aspect of Halberstam's coverage was
not only what appeared in print, but also what did not
appear.

What does not appear is discussion or details about how
depth Vietnamese Buddhism was tied to the fabric of
Vietnamese society, how Vietnamese Buddhism had undergone
significant evolution as a social movement even before the
French defeat in 1954. You don't find in the coverage how
Buddhists ran schools, orphanages, and hospitals in
Vietnam.85 Although Halberstam correctly interpreted the
crisis as a deepening political struggle and not just religious, it was judged on its implications for American policy, not Vietnamese society. In The Making of a Quagmire, written the year after he left Vietnam, Halberstam summed up the professional-ideological dialectic of his reporting:

Though we knew more about Vietnam and the aspirations of the Vietnamese than most official Americans, we were to some degree limited by our nationality. We were there, after all, to cover the war; this was our primary focus and inevitably we judged events through the war’s progress or lack of it. We entered the pagodas only after the Buddhist Crisis had broken out; we wrote of Nguyen Tuong Tam, the country’s most distinguished writer and novelist, only after he had committed suicide and then only because his death had political overtones. We were aware of the aspirations of the peasants because they were the barometer of the Diem government’s failure and the war’s progress, not because we were on the side of the population and against their rulers.\(^6\)

Years later, Neil Sheehan lamented America’s unappreciation for the Vietnamese perspective. In 1988, he was asked at a seminar at Berkeley if we would ever be able to look at the war from the consciousness of the Vietnamese people. His response was that it was too much to ask of us as a people. “First of all,” he said, “we didn’t understand the Vietnamese when we went there; we didn’t understand the Vietnamese we were allegedly helping; we didn’t understand the Vietnamese we were fighting.”\(^7\)
"News Slant" In Halberstam's Coverage

This analysis of the major themes and conventions of reporting used by Halberstam found examples of slanted news in his Buddhist Crisis coverage. Media researcher Robert Entman defined slanted news as the treatment of events based on selected and evaluated news that results in partial news accounts. These accounts assist some causes while damaging others. Journalists decide how to tell the story and thus ultimately convey politically influential information by their choices. News slant and framing, though connected by cultural values and ideology, differ in perspective. As described previously, news frames are based primarily on cultural symbols that simplify and order complex situations into a larger world-view (such as America's Cold War struggle against Communism). Slanted news deals with a particular situation and how a journalist reports it based on their own judgments and perceptions (in this study, how Halberstam accepted some sources as trustworthy during the Buddhist Crisis while others were not).

The conventions of reporting used by Halberstam constructed his version of reality. His quest for validity caused him to accept what supported his views on the situation. Themes such as the deterioration in the Mekong Delta, the dissension in the ARVN, the rising negative influence of the Nhus, and the breakdown in American
consensus, tended to reflect or cite in a positive manner those sources that shared Halberstam's pessimistic version of reality.

Halberstam's themes of the breakdown in American consensus and the negative influence of the Nhu family provide two examples of slanted news. Halberstam's newfound relationship with official sources at the embassy produced a shared perception of reality. Ambassador Lodge's treatment in stories was quite favorable. Halberstam depicted Lodge in a positive light; working hard to convince Diem and the CIA to disassociate the Nhues from the government and bringing General Harkins to the realization that the military situation was not as optimistic as MACV said. Lodge's view matched Halberstam's and the other resident reporters. Like the lower-level sources before his arrival, Lodge and his direct subordinates had now become authoritative sources. General Harkins' position was mentioned, but only in an adversarial light in relation to Ambassador Lodge. Harkins remained an unreliable source and unquoted.

The theme of deterioration in the Mekong Delta provided another example of slanted news. Halberstam's views on the delta and his disbelief in the validity of official statistics were already ingrained in him before the Buddhist Crisis. Field-level advisers like John Paul Vann and his
many contacts in the ARVN had molded Halberstam’s view of the situation there. When the Vietcong again threatened the delta starting in July 1963, Halberstam consciously sought information from his cultivated lower-echelon sources. He cited official statistics and briefing summaries, but only as a negative juxtaposition to his sources’ assertions and his own assessment that the Vietcong were gaining. Aside from the occasional mention that the war was not going so badly in other areas, Halberstam’s view comes across as that the war was the Mekong Delta and other areas were peripheral (which was entirely not the case).

News slant raises the question of personal bias and its effects on objectivity. Critics of Halberstam and the other Saigon reporters accused them of everything from having an extreme anti-Diem bias to overtly helping in the overthrow of the Diem government. However, studies of this question suggest that, while there was sometimes deep personal dislike by the resident reporters for Diem, it was largely rooted in the persistent lying to reporters and for the repressive tactics used by his regime against the press. David Halberstam’s answer to this criticism was as follows:

Now, I think when I use the expression “too involved,” I use it in the sense that they (the critics) thought we were, you know, emotional and sort of slanting and so forth [sic].
Well I don’t think we were. I think if you go back and read the copy—and I have done it pretty carefully since then ... I think you will
find the copy to be extremely analytical. Now, we may have had feelings of our own, I’m sure we did, because it is a passionate place and people care deeply about a war in a place like Vietnam.... Sure there was an emotional feeling; I’d be a liar if I didn’t tell you that [sic].

But I think to a remarkable degree it was kept out of the stories. I think Mr. (Richard) Clurman (senior editor at Time in the early 1960s) once told me this himself because he once went through the copy when he was out there (in Vietnam) the second time around. I think the stories really were analytical, because I think we were charged with a very great responsibility out there. And I think we kept to that. We were dealing with serious things. They were not our emotions. Sure we had them, but I think we kept them out of the copy quite well. 90

Summary

The Buddhist Crisis became a complex foreign policy story that resulted in over five months of intense news coverage by the resident reporters in Saigon. Analysis of David Halberstam’s published stories about the Buddhist Crisis showed that his coverage of the crisis revolved around seven major themes. These themes (negative effect on the war, the ineffectiveness of the Diem regime, that the crisis was deepening politically, dissension in the ARVN, the war going badly in the Mekong Delta, the growing negative influence of the Nhu family, and the breakdown in American consensus) were all negative towards current American policy and pessimistic in tone.
Conventions of reporting—the routines of news writing—had a great impact on how Halberstam constructed these themes. The developing convention of news validity had the greatest impact on how Halberstam constructed his stories. Information now had to be tested for reliability. Validity, in the wake of the McCarthy era, had become an integral part of the journalistic practice of objectivity. Reporters, not just sources, now had a greater role in constructing what was reality.

Analysis and interpretation, another newer convention of reporting born of the complex, news-managed Cold War environment, became influenced by validity. How Halberstam interpreted the events depended a great deal on how he constructed reality.

News validity also influenced older, established conventions of reporting regarding sources. Halberstam, though heavily criticized, strictly adhered to the convention of source protection. In the case of the Buddhist Crisis, it became even more important because of the physical danger for his Vietnamese contacts and the professional danger to his American sources.

The validity of news influenced the conventions of source identification and cultivation. Who Halberstam talked to on a regular basis and what made it into print depended a great deal on the validity of the information.
they provided. Lower echelon sources were acceptable, but the information had to check out. What was said by whom no longer served as the main criteria for news.

However, the literature showed that when the opportunity arose, Halberstam depended on official sources for more easily verifiable authoritative information. The arrival of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., after the August 21 pagoda raids re-opened reporter-official channels. Halberstam and his peers, acting on convention, jumped at the chance.

Overall, Halberstam framed the Buddhist Crisis as a valid Cold War policy gone astray. His reporting, though pessimistic, served as a reluctant critical voice and not a declared adversary. He and the resident reporters in Saigon believed in the war and wanted it to succeed. Halberstam's reporting called for a change in tactics, not policy goals.

His framing of the story highlighted an American cultural and ideological bias common (especially) in foreign affairs reporting. Halberstam's reporting of the crisis in terms of the Cold War made it relevant for readers in America in terms of the threat to American values of containing Communism and denying South Vietnam to the Vietcong. At the same time, it provided no depth or view into the implications of the crisis for Vietnamese society.
Finally, this analysis of Halberstam’s coverage found themes that contained slanted news. The choices made by Halberstam based on his perception of valid news, reliable sources, and his analysis and interpretation of events, presented at times a slanted view of the situation. The slant can be conscious or unconscious. In the case of the Buddhist Crisis, his choices were conscious. His reports, though written by the code of objectivity of his day, tended to present his view and those who shared his view. They did not often include all sides to all arguments.

The major themes present in Halberstam’s reporting (based as they were on his use of the conventions of reporting, the Cold War frame, and his own slant on the news) had varying effects on American policy makers, media institutions, and the journalists who later followed him to Vietnam.
NOTES


2. Peter Arnett, Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 100-102; Herring, Ibid., 105-106; Senator Mike Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press), 202-203 and 732-735. National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-63, 10 July 1963, found that the Diem regime was "dilatory, inept, and insincere" in handling the Buddhist affair, and that discontent would persist even if Diem managed to end the crisis.


6. My analysis of Halberstam's reporting encompassed 96 stories covering five months, two days of coverage. Of 96 stories, 82 were straight news, two were new analysis, two were "Man in the News" profiles, and 10 were Sunday "Week In Review" pieces. Halberstam had 41 of the 96 stories on the front page.


40. David Halberstam, "Plan Said to be Nhu's," New York Times, 23 August 1963, sec. 1, p. 1; Halberstam, Quagmire, 263-267. This is the article that The New York Times ran in tandem with Tad Szulc's article, "Kennedy Weighs Policy," which gave Washington's version of the August 21 pagoda raids. The official view was that the ARVN had insisted on the raids to end the crisis. Halberstam and Szulc's stories were so contradictory, that The Times finally decided to run them both together.


49. Ibid.


52. Ibid.

53. David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1969), 205-206; David Halberstam, The Powers That Be (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 450-453. Halberstam's view by the 1970s was that because he and his peers had no ties to the McCarthy journalism of the 1950s, President Kennedy found "here was a group of reporters he couldn't con" and that he and his peers were journalists with no "emotional baggage" from the 1950s.

54. Halberstam, Quagmire, 189-195; Prochnau, Distant War, 332-345.


56. Ibid., vol. 3, 544.


58. Marguerite Higgins quoted in Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 347.


60. Pentagon Papers, 770-792. By October, State Department estimates of the military and political situation in Vietnam generally conformed to Halberstam's reporting and countered MACV's estimates of the same situation. The abstract of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research Memorandum 90, dated 22 October 1963, read as follows:

"Statistics on the insurgency in South Vietnam, although neither thoroughly trustworthy nor entirely satisfactory as criteria, indicate an unfavorable shift in the military balance. Since July 1963, the trend in Vietcong casualties, weapons losses, and defections has been downward while the number of Vietcong armed attacks and other incidents has been upward. Comparison with earlier periods suggests that the military position of the government of Vietnam may have been set back to the point it occupied six months to a year ago. These trends coincide with the sharp deterioration of the political situation. At the same time, even without the Buddhist issue and the attending government crisis, it is possible that the Diem regime would have been unable to maintain the favorable trends of previous periods in the face of the accelerated Vietcong effort."


63. Goodman, "Our Man In Saigon," 144.

64. Arnett, *Live From the Battlefield*, 192.


66. Central Intelligence Agency, *Vietnam Situation Report*, 28 June 1963. Declassified documents collection, The Ohio State University, 1988. Text-fiche 00003845. The CIA found that "there seems little doubt that the intensity of the Buddhists' protests reflected general discontent over the entrenched, autocratic rule of the Diem as well as specific grievances against religious biasse." Central Intelligence Agency, *Situation Report: Nature of the Conflict in South Vietnam*, 16 September 1963. Declassified documents collection, The Ohio State University, 1992. Text-fiche 000629. In this report, the CIA received word from South Vietnamese sources that "stressed the serious situation in the delta," which the sources considered to be the key to control South Vietnam. The sources pessimistically reported that "the government has made very little progress in the delta, and that it was unlikely that it ever could."

67. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 77-72; Hohenberg, *The Media*, 94-96. The "Lindley Rule", named after its author, journalist and news executive Ernest K. Lindley, came about during World War II so censored reporters could still produce timely news in return for preserving security and anonymity of sources. It established the protocol for "backgrounders," "non-attribution," "off the record," etc. However, the advent of the Cold War saw the protocol remain and proliferate into "deep background" coined by none other than Kennedy Secretary of State Dean Rusk) and the ubiquitous "leak." Hohenberg saw the system evolve from an occasional private "talk" into a weekly event, at least in Washington.


69. *Foreign Relations*, vol. 3, 169-173. In a memorandum to Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman, Political Affairs Undersecretary William Jorden had this to say back in March 1963, "In Saigon and in Washington, news stories from Vietnam should be read more as a source of information than of possible embarrassment. Time and energy correcting weaknesses or mistakes would be better spent than devoted to stopping leaks or criticizing reporters." Examples of President Kennedy’s preoccupation with press leaks during the crisis appear in *Foreign Relations*, vol. 4, 25-26 and 174. On 29 August and 5 September, Roger Hilsman had to convince the president that Vietnam
policy articles by New York Times' Washington reporter Tad Szulc were based more on leg work and reportorial deduction than on leaked information. Hillsman remembered that "Eisenhower was accused of reading the newspaper too little. Kennedy may have read it too much." Roger Hillsman, To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy (New York: Garden City Press, 1967), 411.


71. Halberstam, Powers That Be, 451-452; Halberstam quoted in Prochnau, Distant War, 315.


74. Ibid., 158-178.

75. Ibid., 172.


78. Sheehan quoted in Kern, Levering, and Levering, The Kennedy Crises, 144.


80. James Reston, Deadline (New York: Random House, 1991), 315; Gay Talese, The Kingdom and the Power (New York: World Press, 1969), 466. Reston, the biggest patron of Halberstam and the man who hired him in 1960, remembered that "Halberstam's stormy talent was that he was not only close to the story but on top of it ... he was a human lie detector." Gay Talese characterized him as one of those reporters who, in the words of Harrison Salisbury, had "rats in the belly."


86. Halberstam, Quagmire, 275.


89. Hammond, Public Affairs, 24-29; Mecklin, Mission In Torment, 129-140.

CHAPTER 4

THE EFFECTS OF HALBERSTAM'S COVERAGE ON VIETNAM POLICY

Introduction

Given the findings of the previous chapter and the general opinion of researchers that media coverage of the Vietnam War affected American policy, it is historically important to specifically discuss the effects David Halberstam's Buddhist Crisis coverage had on Vietnam policy in 1963. A key aspect of this discussion concerns the relationship between the government and the media.

Media researchers have disagreed on the role and relationship of the media and government in foreign affairs. Some, such as Nicholas Berry, found that the media were neither major participants nor heavily manipulated by the government. As a result, Berry held that the media have had little effect on foreign policy-making and the government has had little effect on the media. Both media and government have operated as largely independent institutions.1

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Others such as Bernard Cohen, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, David Paletz and Robert Entman found that the media (either intentionally or unintentionally) can have major effects on the foreign policy-making system of the United States given the right circumstances. Further, these researchers found that media can influence foreign policy because the media and government are not independent, but interdependent.

Even though the media and government profess independence from each other, both institutions rely heavily on each other to perform their respective functions. Each can have major effects on the other. Paletz and Entman, and Herman and Chomsky found that media effects on foreign policy were primarily confined to elite levels of policy-making or special interests concerned with foreign policy.²

This analysis found that David Halberstam's reporting of the Buddhist Crisis supported the major findings of the "interdependence" researchers. The major themes and conventions of reporting Halberstam used to portray the Buddhist Crisis had an indirect but major effect on American policy towards Vietnam in 1963. His reporting further highlighted the independence/interdependence paradox of journalism—that reporters claim independence when reporting the story, but in reality are part of the story as well.
First, this chapter discusses the indirect yet major effect of Halberstam’s coverage. It shows that Halberstam’s coverage helped to force the Kennedy administration to confront its internal dissension over current Vietnam policy, reevaluate it, and choose a new direction. The change in policy, however, was debated not by the public at large, but by elite elements of the policy-making structure of the United States.

Second, this chapter shows that the effect Halberstam’s reporting had on policy was made possible because of the journalistic paradox. Just as reporters like Halberstam relied on sources at all levels of government to report on the Buddhist Crisis, policy-makers came to rely on him to help define the issue at stake and educate them on the situation in Vietnam. More directly, policy-makers relied on reporters such as Halberstam to get their views across in public through leaks and more overt manipulation of the media by contending factions in the Kennedy administration.

**Halberstam’s Coverage and Its Effect on Policy**

Studies suggest that Halberstam’s coverage did not have a direct effect on American foreign policy. The effect was indirect, but had major consequences. It made the situation in Vietnam a matter of public debate that eventually forced the Kennedy administration to initiate a fundamental change
in policy. The fundamental change was that by October 1963, President Kennedy had decided that American policy in Vietnam no longer expressly depended on the survival of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. The primary focus would be the war against the Vietcong regardless of what government ruled South Vietnam. This represented a major shift in the policy of all-out support for the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, a policy that had been in place since Diem’s ascendancy in 1954–1955.³

It was not Halberstam’s reporting, but the debate generated by his reporting that produced the change in policy. The growingly pessimistic, negative themes reported by Halberstam helped to force the president to confront the issue and seek a change in course. Since May, Kennedy had overseen a private effort to pressure Diem to end the crisis favorably for all concerned. He was visibly absent and silent in news coverage on the crisis. Congress did not publicly debate the issue in the press either. This low-key approach from May until the pagoda raids on August 21, 1963, ceded the initiative on policy debate to the press. Until the pagoda raids, the debate on Vietnam was between news organizations who shared the view of the resident reporters and those who supported the Diem regime. Reporters, especially Halberstam because of the prominence of The New
York Times among policy-makers and the prominent play given to Halberstam's stories on the front page, were able to exert great influence on public debate in the absence of public executive action.⁴

In the aftermath of the pagoda raids and the growing public dissension it generated within his administration, Kennedy could no longer control the situation privately as he wished. Senior policy-makers in the State Department had by the end of August accepted the view of the resident reporters. Henry Cabot Lodge, armed with increasingly negative State Department assessments and the news reports of Halberstam and his peers, went to Vietnam and found that the resident reporters were essentially correct in the assessments they had been making since June. He found that the Nhus were a destructive influence and had to go, that the military situation in the Mekong Delta was very serious, and that Diem had become increasingly ineffective and isolated. When Neil Sheehan asked him what his view was, he said, "About the same as yours."⁵

Lodge, in turn, influenced the view of his superiors in Washington that unless the Nhus were removed, then Diem could not continue as a viable leader. The Pentagon, led by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Maxwell Taylor, vigorously resisted this
view. The director of the CIA, John McCone, concurred with
the Pentagon that the whole war effort might become unhinged
if Diem were cast aside. 6

The breakdown in consensus had become so open, that
Congress became publicly involved in the dispute for the
first time. Senior Senators received official briefings
from the executive branch while reading the contradictory
accounts (fueled by highly publicized leaks in Washington
and Saigon) of the situation in Vietnam in The New York
Times and other papers. Senate leaders such as Frank Church
of Idaho became involved and threatened to sharply curtail
aid to Vietnam unless Diem relieved the situation. On
September 21, 1963, The New York Times ran an article,
"Mansfield Assails U.S. Rift on Saigon," in which then
Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield openly castigated the
White House and American mission in Saigon for failing to
come together and form a coherent policy in the aftermath of
the pagoda raids. "Any policy" he said, "was better than no
policy or a dozen policies operating at cross-purposes."7

The consensus rift reported by Halberstam between the
embassy, MACV and the CIA station in Saigon reflected the
split in Washington between the State Department, the
Pentagon, and the CIA. Just as Halberstam’s and the other
reporters’ stories armed Henry Cabot Lodge and the State
Department to strengthen their growing anti-Diem stance, they also hardened the official positions of General Harkins at MACV, and the Pentagon and CIA in Washington to defend current policy. Halberstam’s stories about the Mekong Delta, for example, would generate Presidential queries (still known today as “rockets”). This in turn generated involved and technical rebuttal memorandums from MACV and the Pentagon that sometimes dissected Halberstam’s assertions line by line and provided page upon page of counter-statistics. By September, however, Halberstam’s stories generated counter-briefings from the intelligence branch of the State Department to show that the military and political situation was, in fact, not going well.8

Halberstam’s influence was not lost on the President. Kennedy, while railing at his senior advisers for failing to come together, often vented frustration on Halberstam himself. No other reporter was singled out for more presidential invective during this period. The debate he had wanted kept private had now become very public. He was recorded as saying that Halberstam was “actually running a political campaign,” that he was “totally unobjective.” Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, remembered Kennedy saying, “‘Halberstam was a 28 year-old kid’ [sic], and he wanted assurances we were not giving him serious consideration in our decision.”9
Kennedy, though finally demanding agreement on policy, never really resolved the public debate by the contending factions in his administration. After more bitter internal argument and two high-level fact-finding trips to Vietnam in September, Kennedy chose a cautious middle course (partly driven by an aborted ARVN general staff coup at the end of August). He accepted the State Department view of Averell Harriman and Ambassador Lodge that the Diem government was not the answer in Vietnam. Diem avowedly refused to detach his brother and sister-in-law from his cabinet. However, Kennedy also accepted the Pentagon and CIA opinion that Diem was a known quantity and staunchly anti-Communist. If he were forced out even by the ARVN, the Vietcong might win anyway.  

Facing aid cuts by Congress because of the crisis, Kennedy's new policy emphasized the war effort and for the first time minimized the Diem regime in Vietnam. He unilaterally cut aid to Vietnam. On October 7, 1963, Halberstam reported from Vietnam that the American mission had slashed aid to Diem's important commercial import program with the United States. On October 21 (as an unsubtle muzzling of Nhu's Vietnamese Special Forces), Halberstam reported that the American mission had terminated direct military aid for "those units not directly involved in the war in the field against the Vietcong."
Additionally, Kennedy directed that Lodge avoid all but the most necessary dealings with the Diem government. At the very least, Kennedy hoped to preserve the effort against the Vietcong, with or without the Diem government. In the end, the American dilemma was (amid much historical and political controversy) solved by the successful ARVN coup of November 1, 1963.\textsuperscript{11}

By putting the Buddhist Crisis in the public arena, reporters like David Halberstam forced the foreign policy-making structures in American government to take action to alleviate the crisis in Vietnam. One can argue that the effect of his reporting, though indirect, had major consequences. Had he not reported with vigor and consistency on the inconsistencies he found, the policy-making elements within the Kennedy administration and in Congress would have accepted the official story from Vietnam. They would never have found out or come to accept (like Lodge) that American policy was really in peril. Lodge came to believe that the Diem government was ineffective and lying about success, that MACV statistics were overoptimistic, that the situation in the Mekong Delta was very serious, and that the whole war effort against the Vietcong was in jeopardy.
However, I also found that Halberstam’s reporting supported the findings of researchers like Paletz and Entman and Herman and Chomsky, that “public” debate for the Buddhist Crisis meant a debate among policy-making elites and special interests. Halberstam’s reporting markedly influenced the thinking and behavior of some of the Americans who possessed the power to influence foreign policy, most notably in diplomatic and military circles. The Buddhist Crisis and particular aspects of Vietnam policy seem not to have been a matter of popular debate among average Americans in the summer of 1963. The Louis Harris poll of September 30, 1963, found (though the majority supported continued American involvement against the Vietcong) that 35 percent of those polled declined to state an opinion on what American policy on Diem should be, partly because “Vietnam was too remote.”

The debate over the Buddhist Crisis was confined largely to dissident elements of the Kennedy administration, the foreign policy committees in Congress, respective media coverage of contending positions, and some special interests. Kern, Levering, and Levering’s newspaper study of this period found that (because of competing events like the nuclear test ban treaty) only a few extra-governmental interest groups publicly entered the dispute over the
Buddhist Crisis. They were the Ministers' Vietnam Committee, the California Federation of Young Democrats, and the American Legion. Vietnam had competition for headlines that summer and early fall. The summer of 1963 was the summer of Martin Luther King's march on Washington, the death of Pope John XXIII, the scandalous Porfumo affair in Great Britain, and the debate on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union.

The Effects of Halberstam's Reporting and the Paradox of Journalism

The key concept in visualizing how Halberstam's reporting helped produce a major shift in American policy toward Vietnam is that of the interdependence between the government and the media. Halberstam's themes and conventions of reporting (pursued under the banner of journalistic independence) also underscored the interdependence of the media and government to fulfill their roles. Halberstam's coverage was able to have the effect it had because of the mutual dependence he and officials in government had on each other. Whereas Halberstam's dependence on sources for information opened himself to manipulation, he was also capable of mobilizing special interests in government even though claiming independence.
Paradoxically, Halberstam was not only telling the story, but part of the story as well.

Halberstam's reporting of the Buddhist Crisis would not have been possible without the cooperation of sources (regardless of their position). The conventions of reporting dealing with sources had evolved in the first place to preserve the reporter-source relationship and reporters' access to the information necessary to do their jobs. In this sense, sources made the news. Using the professional conventions of journalism, Halberstam then constructed his major themes based on his evaluation and interpretation of what he observed. As the Buddhist Crisis unfolded and American policy began to unravel, the official level of Halberstam's sources rose.

While the dependence of reporters on the policy-making structure may be somewhat self-evident, the literature suggests that the dependence of foreign policy-makers on the media was a much more complex concept. The positive use of Halberstam's reports by policy-makers and corresponding negative reaction to Halberstam's reporting by others illustrated their dependence on (and influence of) reporters like him in policy-making. It also illustrated the acceptance by policy-makers of the media as part of the policy-making structure.
Halberstam’s reporting of the crisis served several functions that researchers like Bernard Cohen, Hamid Mowlana, Paletz and Entman found linked journalists and policy-makers together. First, Halberstam’s reporting became a debate platform that relayed vital information to and from the public. He did not act as a key player, but influenced the shift in policy by helping to create or shape the outlines of the central issue as perceived by groups and officials hitherto remote or removed from Vietnam. He communicated alternative viewpoints and provided interpretation and analysis apart from the normal bureaucracy.14

By following the accepted routines of journalism, Halberstam was able in this particular situation to have great influence on policy-makers. Even President Kennedy, who disliked what he read by Halberstam, found Halberstam’s reporting provided him with a fresh perspective apart from what his daily briefers told him.15

Second, Halberstam’s reporting educated and mobilized several policy-makers who otherwise would have remained silent. The policy-makers in the State Department relied on Halberstam’s version of events in Vietnam the most. Just as Halberstam tested his information, policy-makers tested Halberstam’s as well. Ambassador Lodge in Vietnam, and
Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman at the State Department used Halberstam's reports as an important part of their case for changing policy. They checked Halberstam's information, and found the situation in Vietnam merited deeper investigation.

Members of Congress also relied heavily on the news accounts by reporters such as Halberstam because they served an educational role on policy often hidden from them. What policy-makers such as Senators Mike Mansfield and Frank Church read in the papers heightened their awareness on the issue of Vietnam and caused them to start pressuring the Kennedy administration to take firm action to end the crisis. Until August, when the situation in the delta, the negative influence of the Nhus, and the breakdown in American consensus became apparent, Congress began to question the official version of reality given to them by the executive branch. Exposure to alternative views was only possible through the ongoing media debate caused by the Buddhist Crisis.

By initiating a public debate and educating the principals involved, one can argue that Halberstam's reporting of the Buddhist Crisis helped actually to define the central issue over Vietnam in 1963: could current policy, tied so heavily to the Diem regime, succeed?
Without Halberstam helping to initiate the debate, it may have never taken place.

A second, more overt, and in some aspects more traditional, way policy-makers illustrated their dependence on reporters like Halberstam was their attempt to manipulate media coverage to get their own views across. The widely accepted leaking of information to "sympathetic" journalists was one example. At junior levels it was from someone such as Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann. After he returned from Vietnam in April, he tried to convince senior Pentagon officials about his version of reality in Vietnam. He and David Halberstam corresponded throughout the summer of the Buddhist Crisis. Vann, though gone from Vietnam, continued to provide information to Halberstam and influenced his views on the delta.¹⁶

More senior policy-makers resorted to the same tactics (especially after the pagoda raids). In To Move A Nation, Roger Hilsman remembered:

The battle lines were drawn between the State Department and the Defense Department, but alliances also cut straight across institutional boundaries. Individual members of the embassy and CIA shared the views of a segment of the press represented by Halberstam and Sheehan, while other members of the embassy and CIA were allied with the opposing segment of the press, represented by (Joseph) Alsop and (Marguerite) Higgins. Some members of Congress, such as Senator Church, shared the view of a group in the State Department opposed by other members of Congress allied with others in the Executive. And inevitably the activities of a group in one
institution supported the activities of its allies in another--with or without any attempt at connivance. In Saigon, one group leaked to Halberstam and the other to Higgins. In Washington, Senator Church put in his resolution in the hopes of strengthening the hands of those he agreed with in the State Department.17

In Vietnam itself, Lodge freely used the press to convey warnings to Diem and Nhu through leaks and even the occasional opportunity event to get his anti-Nhu feelings across. When Halberstam, along with TV reporters Grant Wolfkill and John Sharkey were physically assaulted by Nhu’s secret police on October 5, 1963, Lodge seized on the opportunity and paraded Sharkey, with heavily bandaged head, in front of the news cameras and reporters to show how the Diem regime was mistreating American reporters.18

A third illustration of the dependence of policy-makers on the media was "debate by proxy." This was another way in which contending policy factions attempted to manipulate sympathetic factions within the media to their advantage in the crisis. The Buddhist Crisis reporting of Halberstam and his peers unleashed a firestorm of criticism against them from pro-Administration, pro-Diem media supporters. Henry Luce's Time, Columnist Joe Alsop and New York Herald-Tribune reporter Marguerite Higgins--all personal friends of the president and many government officials--willingly led the attack on the reporters in Saigon in the media.19

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Summary

The themes and conventions of reporting used by David Halberstam to present the Buddhist Crisis support the "interdependence" school of thought on media-government effects and relationships. Halberstam's effect on the foreign policy process was indirect but of major significance.

Halberstam's reporting served several functions for policy-makers in the absence of public action by the Kennedy administration. His reporting brought the issue of the Buddhist Crisis into public debate, educated and mobilized policy-makers in the State Department and Congress that would otherwise have remained silent, and forced policy-makers to define and confront the central issue over Vietnam in 1963: could current policy succeed with the Diem regime? In the end, Kennedy did shift away from all-out support for the Diem regime, but could not reconcile the contending factions in his administration. The November 1, 1963 ARVN coup finally solved the issue.

Although Halberstam's reporting forced public debate on Vietnam, it was "public" in the sense that it became a debate at elite levels of policy-making. On the whole, the debate over Vietnam was confined to senior foreign policy making circles. Very few extra-governmental organizations
became involved over the debate caused by the Buddhist Crisis.

Yet Halberstam's reporting of the crisis could not have had the major effect it did without the paradox in journalism produced by the interdependence of the media and the government. He independently pursued the story using conventions of reporting, but became part of the story as well. Halberstam's reliance on sources at all levels for information is self-evident. Without them, he could not have produced the themes he presented in his reporting. Although he further analyzed and interpreted the information he received, sources drove his stories.

However, the more complex nature of this interdependent relationship was how officials at all levels relied on reporters like Halberstam to advance their own policy goals and viewpoints. The dependence of policy-makers on the media further illustrated the acceptance of the media by the government in the policy-making structure. Once policy makers accepted the version of events in Vietnam presented by Halberstam, his viewpoint became an integral part in the policy-making process.

For lower level sources such as John Paul Vann and embassy or CIA officials in Saigon, it was a matter of advancing their view in public when their superiors would
not listen. For higher level sources such as Ambassador Lodge, the dependence on the press was necessary to leverage his position against contending factions within the Kennedy administration. As studies have shown, the split in consensus between the CIA, state, and defense departments drove these contending factions to resort to more overt manipulation of the media to get their views across. They did this by increasing the leaks to reporters and media organizations sympathetic to their views and by enlisting the help of supportive media groups to debate the issue for them in the public arena.

On a final note, one must remember the presence of cultural ideology and the Cold War frame in reporting during this period. While some media researchers found that the effect of the media on foreign policy was intentional or unintentional, Halberstam’s reporting of the Buddhist Crisis represented an intentional effort. When asked in 1964 about his thoughts on the subject of reporters injecting themselves into the story and becoming part of the outcome, Halberstam responded that he thought reporters best traveled on anonymity. He further stated:

"If doing your job brings you into that situation, then you have to keep going. We were involved only because there was a vacuum there. If we didn’t operate as we did, there would have been, I think, simply inaccurate reporting coming out of there."
Whether intentional or unintentional, the quest for accurate stories by Halberstam (combined with their interpretation and analysis of events they observed) had a lasting impact on future Vietnam reporting. This impact transcended Vietnam and had larger implications for press-government relations, and for journalism itself after 1963.
NOTES


6. John M. Newman, JFK and Vietnam (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 380-383. Pentagon Papers, 738-740 and 746-748. Lodge's cables to Washington flatly state that the situation was irretrievable as long as the Nhus remained in the Diem government. Director of the CIA John McCone and JCS Chairman General Maxwell Taylor countered that without Diem, the war could be lost in three months.


8. Pentagon Papers, 770-792. See note 60, chapter 3 for further discussion; Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 359. Sheehan wrote, "Halberstam and I and the other correspondents would have felt less beleaguered had we been privy to the secret debate in Washington.
We did not realize our dispatches had been arming Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman...and still more encouraged had we known our view (and Vann's view) had shaped Lodge's attitude."

9. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990, 638-639 and vol. 4, 350-352; Herring, Longest War, 109; Documents and historical research of this period reveals an enormously frustrated President Kennedy. He finally demanded agreement to policy by his advisers on 2 October 1963. In the interim, the internal policy clash was so intense among his advisers that he exclaimed, "My God! This administration is coming apart," and "This shit has got to stop!" Newman, JFK and Vietnam, 370-375.

10. Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, 10 September 1963; Foreign Relations, vol. 4, 169-171; Herring, Longest War, 110-113; Newman, JFK and Vietnam, 369-73 and 388-397. The first fact-finding trip was the September 8, 1963 visit to Vietnam by the Pentagon's Counterinsurgency Chief Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak and State Department Vietnam Political Affairs Adviser John Mendenhall. Their reports split along factional lines and generated even more controversy. As a result, an angry and disheartened President Kennedy dispatched JCS Chairman Maxwell Taylor and Secretary of Defense McNamara to Vietnam on September 24, 1963.


19. Several of my sources discuss this aspect of the "press crisis" in Vietnam. The most detailed account appears in Prochnau, Distant War, 400-459. David Halberstam characterized the journalistic forces arrayed against the Saigon reporters as the "armada." The pro-administration detractors of Halberstam and his peers included influential columnist and Kennedy confidante Joe Alsop, Marguerite Higgins, and World War II Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Tregaskis (Guadalcanal Diary).

CONCLUSION

Having analyzed David Halberstam’s reporting of the 1963 Vietnamese Buddhist Crisis, I found that the major themes and conventions of reporting he used to construct his stories supported the contention of several media and secular historians about the impact media coverage can have on government policy. Halberstam’s coverage had an indirect yet major impact on American policy in Vietnam in 1963. This analysis has also led me to conclude that Halberstam’s reporting not only had major implications for future reporting of the Vietnam War, but also for the larger issues of press-government relations and the nature of journalism at that time.

A major finding of this thesis is that Halberstam’s seven major themes--the negative effect on the war, the deepening political nature of the crisis, the ineffectiveness of the Diem regime, the dissension the crisis caused in the ARVN, the deterioration in the Mekong Delta, the rising negative influence of the Nhu family, and the breakdown in American consensus over Vietnam policy--affected American policy by placing the issue in a forum for
public policy debate. His reporting also educated other policy makers to alternative versions of reality contrary to the official views of the Kennedy administration. The public debate platform, issue definer, and educational roles Halberstam's reporting performed forced the Kennedy administration to take action on Vietnam when it did not want to. His reporting forced the administration to confront and change what had become a failed policy to positively manage the images of Ngo Dinh Diem and of the war itself.

A major element of my findings on the effects of Halberstam's coverage is that it supported media researchers who contended that media coverage of foreign news is often not debated by the public at large, but more so by the elite policy making structure and policy interest groups.

Another major finding of this thesis is that the conventions of reporting Halberstam employed to construct these seven major themes reflected a change in the journalistic definition of objectivity.

The rise of news validity, which also resulted in analysis and interpretation, had become an integral part of the professional norm of objectivity by the early 1960s. While the traditional conventions of cultivation, protection, and reliance on official sources remained vital
conventions of reporting (as illustrated by Halberstam's relationship with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.), the requirement to go out and test source information had become important as well (as illustrated by his relationship with John Paul Vann). Once tested for accuracy, news organizations such as The New York Times required their journalists to analyze and interpret the meaning of what they observed. If validity came from lower level sources versus official sources, then that was acceptable. Whereas reality in the 1950s was largely composed of what people said and what reporters saw, it had become by 1963 more based on what a reporter could prove and what it meant to readers in the United States. Joe McCarthy could say almost anything in 1951 and the newspapers would report it. General Harkins could say something in Vietnam in 1963, but it would either undergo testing by reporters in Saigon for accuracy or be dismissed by them because of his perceived unreliability and untruthfulness as a news source.

Further analysis found that this study supports several aspects of the literature review. First, Halberstam's coverage illustrated that the media and government do have an interdependent, paradoxical relationship. Though each claimed independence from the other, the press and government relied heavily on each other in the Buddhist
Crisis to perform their functions. Halberstam and his peers were dependent on sources at all levels to create the news, while contending factions in the White House, State Department, CIA, and Pentagon used contending factions of the media in various ways to further their own views.

Additionally, this study found that Halberstam’s coverage had journalism marketplace aspects as well. Vietnam was an important foreign policy story that pitted the resident Saigon reporters against each other in a competition to report developments first. Scoops did matter.

Furthermore, this thesis found that reporters such as Halberstam acknowledged that they felt their role was to try to educate and show policy makers the “truth” about what they saw in Vietnam. I found this produced two results. One, the reporters not only reported the story, but were part of the story. Two, the conventions of reporting (especially news validity and use of sources deemed “reliable” by consonance with Halberstam’s views) produced “news slant” that favored some views over others. Views counter to Halberstam’s perception of reality (such as MACV’s contention of success against the Vietcong) were unlikely to appear in a positive light.

Finally, this thesis supported media research that found that values and cultural ideology permeate foreign
news coverage. Although claiming professional objectivity, Halberstam and his peers framed the Buddhist Crisis exclusively in simple, understandable Cold War symbols. They supported American involvement and policy goals in Vietnam. They disagreed with the method (Diem), not the mission (defeating Communism in Southeast Asia). The result was an American-centered view of the crisis at the expense of any real understanding of the impact of the crisis on Vietnamese society.

Although I found that Halberstam’s reporting of the Buddhist Crisis historically correlated with many aspects of the literature review, my research has led me to further conclude that his reporting of the Buddhist Crisis had major implications for future reporting of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, these implications went beyond the war itself and affected press-government relations and journalism as a whole in the 1960s.

My analysis of Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis and the extensive historical analysis of this period leads me to conclude that journalism and press-government relations had entered a transition period from one form of journalism to the next. Specifically, Halberstam’s coverage and the controversy it generated implied a shift from the “deadpan” objectivity of the McCarthy era in the 1950s to
the more adversarial "new journalism" of the late 1960s. Several aspects of my research led me to this conclusion.

First, the aforementioned evolution in the definition of objectivity and the conventions of reporting Halberstam used to construct his themes suggests this transition. The rise of news validity, analysis, and interpretation led him and his peers to a questioning of the validity of official reports that had not occurred previously. The questioning of "detail" by Halbertam and his peers was a far cry from the straight reporting of the McCarthy era.

Second, the continued belief in news validity by reporters who followed Halberstam to Vietnam further suggested a transition in journalism. The questioning of official sources had a direct impact on future reporting from Vietnam. Reporters who followed Halberstam inherited a legacy of embedded skepticism of official sources that ensured the convention of news validity--doing leg work and testing of information--would grow in importance. Official sources remained distrusted. The questioning of official pronouncements (embodied in the "Five O’clock Follies" daily MACV brief to reporters) became institutionalized among reporters in Southeast Asia. Thomas R. Hagley’s 1969 survey of reporters who had previously served in Vietnam found that the majority echoed what Malcom Browne had been saying since
early 1962, and what AP Photographer Horst Faas and UPI reporter Joe Galloway told me in 1997: that the best sources were farthest in the field, while MACV sources were the considered the worst and most unreliable.¹

Third, the presence and growth of the newer conventions of reporting outside Vietnam also implied a larger transition in journalism. Some studies of foreign affairs correspondents during this period showed that reporters abroad could not agree on what objectivity meant or what they thought their roles and limitations should be. In one 1964 study, “The Foreign Correspondent and His Work,” Fred Yu and John Luter found that some reporters felt they should stick to “facts” while others thought their duty was to the “truth.” Others thought their analysis had to keep American policy and interests in mind because “we’re Americans, after all.” Still others thought advocacy of a position was acceptable because they had the better view of policy than “befuddled State Department aides.”²

Fourth, the reaction of the media and the government to the Buddhist Crisis and the controversy it generated also suggests a transition in their relationship. My research (see Chapter 2) found that the controversy generated by the Buddhist Crisis was not an isolated event, but the latest example of the growing controversy between the government and the media over Cold War news management.
The questioning of, and skepticism by, reporters in the field over managed news began to manifest itself more tangibly in influential news organizations of the time. *The New York Times* offers a prime example of this transition. Before the early 1960s, the *Times* gave the government the benefit of the doubt over foreign policy and security matters. In the 1950s, the *Times* agreed to curtail reporter Sydney Gruson’s investigation of CIA activities in Guatemala at the behest of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and internally exiled reporter Herbert Matthews for his championing of the “nationalist” Fidel Castro. However, the *Times* of October 1963 (after the 1961 Bay of Pigs and 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis controversies) refused President Kennedy’s overt demand to have Halberstam removed in October 1963. For the first time in the Cold War news management controversy, a news organization had sided with a lone reporter against a presidential administration.³ When a clearer picture of the truth emerged from Vietnam after the fall of Diem in November 1963, even some of the Saigon reporters’ harshest critics began to admit that they had underestimated the hard work and professionalism of their coverage in Vietnam.⁴

This study found other examples that suggested transition in the media and government relationship from the
1950s to the 1960s. Within *The New York Times* itself, divisions between the "hawks" and the "doves" grew sharper after 1963. By 1966, the paper defied the Johnson administration and allowed Harrison Salisbury to journey to Hanoi to report on the effect of American bombing there. Media executives also began to journey to South Vietnam themselves to find out what was really happening. In 1966, after his first-hand assessment of Vietnam, Associated Press chief Wes Gallagher said that an examination of the journalistic record over the past five years compared with the United States government's official account of the same period left no doubt the reporting has been more accurate than official statements.⁵

From the government's standpoint, the new Johnson administration's even more concerted efforts to manage the images coming from Vietnam after the Buddhist Crisis further pointed to a transition in their attitude toward the media as a result of the "press crisis" and the larger failure of news management in Vietnam in 1963.

When the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident made the sending of American ground troops inevitable, public support to stay in Vietnam became even more critical. The Johnson administration also decided (after much argument immediately following the fall of Diem) that official censorship was now
out of the question. Taking their failure to manage the news in 1962-1963 in stride, government public affairs policy makers switched methods. The new press policy became "maximum candor, minimum delay." A "press czar," Barry Zorthian, was sent to Vietnam. The Defense Department also underwrote press tours and provided rest facilities for reporters in an attempt to include, rather than exclude, them from operations. Public Information Officers were assigned down to the lowest combat unit levels as possible. ⁶

This is not to say, however, that the transition was immediate and all encompassing within the media or between the media and government. As Daniel Hallin, Herbert Gans, and others have pointed out, the cultural ideology of the Cold War and the values of American democracy abroad remained strong within the media. Both Congress and the media at large supported the introduction of ground troops into Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. When the combat troops arrived in early 1965 and began to engage the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, American media coverage became even more ethnocentric and more important to larger segments of the American public. Neither Congress nor the media would seriously question itself about Vietnam or the very notion of being in Vietnam until the 1968 Tet Offensive. ⁷
What Halberstam’s coverage suggests to me is a growing transition within the media from 1963 to 1968. It started with the growing questioning of the official government line in the face of uncensored, observed reality. The questioning of "detail" and "method", and the construction of reality based on tested information in 1963 had become something else by 1968. As Harrison Salisbury remembered, "this was in the days before the Vietnam protest. There was no Students for a Democratic Society, there was no Tom Hayden."\(^a\) David Halberstam’s coverage of the Buddhist Crisis had an immediate effect on American foreign policy, but also, I believe, a latent, more far reaching consequence on the future coverage of the war and the relationship between the institutions of government and media. To me, his reporting represents journalism in a historic transitional period, a period that merits further study.

This thesis has shown that the themes and conventions of reporting David Halberstam used to report the 1963 Vietnamese Buddhist Crisis had a major effect on American policy at that time. The conventions of reporting he used showed that the journalistic norm of objectivity had evolved considerably since the straight, much criticized objectivity of the 1950s. The results of this study also implied that Halberstam’s reporting had effects that
transcended just the future coverage of Vietnam. I conclude that journalism and press-government relations had entered a transitional phase between the straight objectivity of the McCarthy era and the "new journalism" of the late 1960s. After 1963, the media began less readily to accept the official version of events and more readily tested the information for validity.

I believe my findings merit further study. One could study other events from 1963 to 1968 to see if the media coverage was more or less liable to accept official sources, or more or less liable to apply the conventions of news validity, analysis, and interpretation to test the accuracy of information. Similarly (since this study dealt primarily with foreign affairs reporting), one could investigate whether my findings and conclusions apply to foreign versus domestic news events. For example, what conventions of reporting were used to cover the Watts, California race riots in 1964 versus the conventions of reporting used to report other foreign events like the Six Day War in 1967? Also, one could compare events from different time periods to measure the intensity of the transition. Were journalists more likely to question official views in 1967 than in 1963?

Given the major impact media coverage had on such events as the Vietnam War, the anti-war and student protest
movement, and the civil rights movement in the 1960s, I believe this thesis provides future researchers with a useful historical entry point for further investigation.
NOTES

1. Malcom Browne, Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter’s Life (New York: Times Books, 1993), 180-181; Interview with Horst Faas, Vietnam AP Photographer, 25 October 1997, Columbus, Ohio, tape recording; Joe Galloway, Vietnam UPI Reporter, to author, 29 September, 1997; Thomas R. Hagiely, "An Evaluation of Information Sources in South Vietnam by United States Correspondents" (Thesis, Ohio University, 1968), 18-22 and 26-37. Hagley found that military commanders in the field were rated highest for accuracy, while Public Information Officers were rated the lowest. He also found that 38 of 62 correspondents surveyed felt that the common fault of most official sources was that they were "willfully propagandizing—distorting, lying, omitting information." Joe Galloway recalled, "The farther a reporter went into the field, the farther down the chain of command he went, the more honest and decent and trustworthy were his sources.... The White House game was played by the rear echelon commandos, both in MACV and in the U.S. Embassy as well as by those journalists who chose to cover the war from the 5 p.m. daily briefings. There was, among those types, the usual lying, cheating, backstabbing and doublecrossing."

2. Frederick T.C. Yu and John Luter, "The Foreign Correspondent and His Work," Columbia Journalism Review (Spring 1964), 9-10. A similar study by Leo Bogart in 1967 found that foreign correspondents still disagreed about sources and how reporters should assess information to construct the news. Bogart found (out of 206 survey respondents), that 24% felt their observations were the best source, while 25% said interviews with officials and informants were the best, in Leo Bogart, "The Overseas Newsmen: A 1967 Profile Study," Journalism Quarterly 45 (Summer 1968): 303-304.

3. David Halberstam, David Halberstam’s ‘The Fifties’ (The History Channel, November 1997), television documentary. In this televised segment Halberstam said, "The act of ‘icing’ Sydney Gruson off the Guatemala story had the effect of inoculating The New York Times. When President Kennedy tried to ‘ice’ me off the story in Vietnam in October 1963, the government found it wouldn’t work.”


8. Salisbury, Ibid., 42.
Map 1: Vietnam, Highlighting Numbered Tactical Zones

APPENDIX B

Map 2: The Mekong Delta Region


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APPENDIX C

CHRONOLOGY OF SELECTED EVENTS

(All dates 1963)

May 8

Incident in Hue ignites Buddhist Crisis; 8 die in protests.

May 18--June 5

U.S. back-channel diplomacy efforts and half-hearted conciliation by Diem government fail to end crisis.

May 29

Halberstam publishes first article on crisis.

June 11

Thich Quang Duc immolates himself, bringing the Buddhist Crisis to world attention. It is the first of five Buddhist suicides during the crisis.

June 12--July

Diem, under U.S. pressure, continues negotiations with Buddhists to end crisis.

June 27

President Kennedy announces Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., will replace the pro-Diem Frederick Nolting as ambassador.
July 19

Diem makes radio address, but makes only minor concessions, deeply disappointing Nolting and State Department.

August 8

Halberstam interviews Madame Nhu; she attacks Buddhists and privately worries U.S. officials about growing influence over Diem.

August 15

Halberstam publishes controversial first story challenging optimistic picture in Mekong Delta. It heightens attacks on resident reporters and is vigorously refuted by MACV and the Pentagon.

August 21

Ngo Dinh Nhu instigates Pagoda Raids in Saigon that crush Buddhists but alienate ARVN and populace.

August 23

Halberstam's version of Pagoda Raids published. It states Nhu was behind raids. Tad Szulc's version, based on Washington's view that the ARVN carried out raids, causes deep divergence of opinion at New York Times. In a controversial move, the stories are "twinned" side-by-side on page 1. Hours later, Lodge arrives in Vietnam as new ambassador.
August 24--November 1
Lodge decides Nhus' influence over Diem will destroy effort in Vietnam. He and State Department support ARVN initiatives to oust Diem to preserve war effort; American consensus between State, Pentagon, and CIA breaks down over policy. President Kennedy seeks policy change.

September-October
Halberstam reports extensively on breakdown of consensus in Saigon.

September 6-9
Krulak-Mendenhall trip to Vietnam

September 3-October 2
McNamara-Taylor trip to Vietnam

October 5
Halberstam, NBC reporters John Sharkey and Grant Wolfkill are assaulted by South Vietnamese secret police while covering a student protest.

October 7 and 22
U.S. aid reduced to South Vietnam; signals new policy of primary support to war instead of Diem government.

November 1
Diem government falls in ARVN coup. Diem and Nhu are assassinated, and crisis ends.
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