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When Objectivity Works:
David Halberstam's Vietnam Reporting

Ronald Seyb
Skidmore College

Most Americans accept that Vietnam was America's first "living room war" as readily as they accept that it was America's first military defeat. Even many scholars have privileged television's coverage of the war in their analyses of the press's role in shaping public perceptions of the conflict. This article seeks to correct this imbalance by assessing David Halberstam's Vietnam reporting. It argues that while Halberstam's field reporting in Vietnam is rightly praised for giving readers an up close view of the conflict, it was the reporting that he did away from the field on the Buddhist Crisis that displayed most clearly the virtues of journalistic objectivity as a professional norm that allows reporters to, in the words of Donald McDonald, "discover and communicate the coherence of a complex, unfolding reality."

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Americans' collective memory of the Vietnam War consists principally of a pastiche of televised images: A Marine igniting with a Zippo lighter the thatch roof of a Vietnamese villager's home, a Buddhist monk immolating himself in downtown Saigon, a South Vietnamese General casually executing a suspected Vietcong death squad leader, and a seemingly endless line of grievously wounded soldiers being hustled on stretchers to waiting helicopters.¹

Most Americans accept that Vietnam was America's first "living room war" as readily as they accept that it was America's first military defeat.² The ostensible dominance of television over print in relating the story of the war to the American people has been so widely accepted that even the most prominent student of the press's coverage of Vietnam could aver, "The most logical focus for a study of Vietnam coverage is television, since its coverage has often been singled out as the factor that made Vietnam politically unique."³

Television's dominance of Vietnam coverage becomes less indisputable, however, when one generates an honor roll of Vietnam correspondents. Such important broadcast journalists as Jack Laurence, Morley Safer and perhaps Garrick Utley and Charles Kuralt would make the list, but their names would not be at the top of the roll. That distinction would go to such iconic print journalists as David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Peter Arnett. Print reporters provided the bulk of the coverage from Vietnam during the early stages of America's intervention because, as William Prochnau has noted, "television was too young," its technical and logistical requirements too daunting, to produce enough footage to shape Americans' impressions of the war.⁴ During this crucial early stage of America's involvement in Vietnam, when most Americans could not find Vietnam on a map, it was print correspondents who shaped the public's

perception of the war in ways that would have long-term consequences for their profession:

In this brief but crucial period they would . . . establish the standards for a new generation of war correspondents—and television as well. These were provocative, new, adversarial standards that broke from the old and would be used to chronicle America's disaster in Vietnam and events long after. In so doing, this small group of young men would bring down the wrath of every power structure they confronted—the White House, the Pentagon, the South Vietnamese government, the old guard of the press itself, even their own bosses. It would be the last time such a small group of journalists would wield such influence. Their extraordinary adventure would mark the beginning of the era of the modern media, and, ironically, the beginning of the end of the golden age of print.⁵

While even Halberstam and his colleagues' most captious critics concede that print coverage of the war left its imprint on journalistic practices in the late twentieth century, these critics have also upbraided the Vietnam correspondents for the inferior quality and tendentious nature of their coverage.⁶ One unlikely endorser of at least part of this critique was David Halberstam. Halberstam confessed after the war to Philip Knightly that the constraints he faced in the field often prevented him from giving his readers the historical context they needed to understand the true nature of this novel war:

The problem was trying to cover something every day as news when in fact the real key was that it was all derivative of the French Indo-China war, which is history. . . . Events have to be judged by themselves, as if the past did not really exist. This is not usually such a problem

Ronald Seyb holds the *Joseph C. Palamountain, Jr. Chair in Government* and is an associate professor in the government department at Skidmore College. He is the author of articles on American politics, especially in relation to the presidency.

for a reporter, but to an incredible degree in Vietnam I think we were haunted and indeed imprisoned by the past.⁷

It was, Halberstam went on to claim, this “rule of reporting”—that “events have to be judged by themselves, as if the past did not really exist”—that compelled him to give his readers a cramped and perhaps distorted view of the conflict. But most journalists do not embrace this rule.⁸ Even a brief review of the literature on journalistic objectivity reveals a spectrum of definitions that range from the narrow to the capacious.⁹ One of the most influential entries in this debate was offered many years ago by Donald McDonald, who maintained that the purpose of objectivity is to allow “the reporter to discover and communicate the coherence of a complex, unfolding reality.” This could be done, McDonald continued:

by contextual reporting; by plainly showing the unavoidable but significant gaps in his information; by recapitulating and reviewing the reality in print when important new facts become available; by continuous surveying of the literature which may illuminate shadowy areas; and by interviewing experts and scholars for further illumination.¹⁰

Reporters cannot provide context and practice reassessment if they rely only on their senses. “The truths of public affairs,” McDonald noted, “are not encompassed by appearances, or by what can be perceived by the senses.”¹¹ They can “only be discerned by relating the particular action to the previous, possibly contradictory actions; to the web of current and contemporary history in which the actions took place; and to known realities. . . .”¹² Resisting the impulse to attend to the present and the tangible, however, is understandably difficult for reporters working under demanding deadlines, confronting severe time and space limitations, and operating within conventions that construct news as “a highly selective account of obtruding events.”¹³

David Halberstam’s experience in Vietnam

reveals the perils of up close, event-driven, sensory reporting. Halberstam was, as the following will demonstrate, guilty, particularly during the first months of his tour in Vietnam, of allowing a narrow range of experience to prevent him from providing his readers with the context that McDonald maintains readers need to understand a conflict as multidimensional as that in Vietnam, one whose trajectory was influenced as much by the history, religion, culture, and politics of the country as it was by force levels, weaponry, and tactics. It was only when Halberstam was driven out of the field in November 1963 by the Buddhist Crisis that he began to give his readers a synthetic, nuanced account of the ways that the politics, culture, religion, and history of that country contributed to the problems the American military was experiencing on the battlefield.

This article’s purpose is not to denigrate Halberstam’s field reporting. Halberstam’s battlefield dispatches provided his readers with memorable accounts of the challenges of waging a war on inhospitable terrain that featured both mountainous regions—in which soldiers often had to scramble on their knees to reach level ground to continue their marches—and swampy areas—in which the enemy could readily disappear in rice paddies—against a capable and determined foe. Halberstam’s reporting often revealed a sympathy with the struggles of both the average ARVN soldier and the American military advisers who were working covertly to help the Diem regime preserve a democratic South Vietnam.¹⁴

But while Halberstam’s depictions of these men and the marches they endured and battles they fought are undeniably arresting, they often treated these events as if they were occurring in an arena insulated from the culture and politics of the country in which the battles were being waged. Halberstam needed to add additional brushstrokes to this portrait of the war by introducing his readers to the political, cultural, and military gestalt of the conflict. Halberstam could add these strokes only by stepping back from what the turn-of-the-century journalist and social commentator Walter Lippmann called “the

environment”¹⁵ to gain the objective distance he needed to contextualize and reassess America’s military and political strategy in Vietnam.

Halberstam, however, could not have during the Buddhist Crisis conveyed to his readers “the coherence of [the] complex, unfolding reality” of Vietnam if he had not been first in the field. It was Halberstam’s field reporting that provided him with evidence of both the futility and the human cost of America’s military strategy in Vietnam. But it was only by stepping away from the field at the end of his tour that Halberstam was able to divine how what he had seen on the battlefield was propelled by a confluence of long-developing historical, cultural, and political currents. Neither Halberstam’s field reporting nor his behind the lines reporting alone were sufficient for him to make objectivity work. Both were necessary for Halberstam to synthesize the apparently disparate elements of a complex reality in a way that made it understandable to the mass reading public.

The End of the Innocence

Halberstam was not a member of the generation that spawned the counterculture kids who waved the North Vietnam flag and accused President Johnson of waging an immoral, imperialistic war. Born in 1934, he was raised by first generation immigrant parents who shared with other immigrants of that time a reverence for America that they transmitted to their son. Halberstam came of age during the 1950s, when the Cold War was far from cold, and Joe McCarthy was only the most visible spokesman for a large segment of both the political establishment and the public that believed that America must wage a ferocious war against Communism both at home and abroad. While as Halberstam himself has pointed out in his book on this period, *The Fifties*, many of the political and social developments during this decade either adumbrated or directly fueled the social movements and upheavals of the following decade,¹⁶ the 1950s were principally a time when most Americans were content to enjoy the prosperity and international superiority that America

had earned through its sacrifices in the recently concluded war. Prochnau argues that Halberstam shared the “identity confusion” of many of his peers, unsure if he was part of the vanguard of a new world or the protector of the old. He was a man “not of any generation, but a man out of the ambivalence of the fifties whose peers struggled for generational identity of any kind.”¹⁷

If Halberstam had been asked to describe himself before stepping onto the plane to Vietnam, “a patriot” might have been his response.¹⁸ Halberstam reflected later that when he first arrived in Vietnam he

thought we were probably on the right side. The great traumatic events of the Cold War had taken place during my formative years.... The formative, important books were by Koestler, Orwell, Milosz, and the migration of refugees was always east to west. So I thought American values, or western values, were probably more valid.¹⁹

Prochnau maintains that Halberstam at the outset of his tour in Vietnam:

saw his country not only as America the Great but America the Good. Like his country, he had a strong moralistic bent—too much the self-serving sermonizer, his critics would say. But if Vietnam couldn’t defend itself against the advance of Communists, then his powerful country not only should help, but had a moral duty to do so.²⁰

If Halberstam had any predispositions at all when he disembarked in Saigon, they were to see this war as a noble enterprise designed to bring peace, stability, and democracy to a backward country. Yet when Halberstam left Vietnam in February of 1964, his editors were worried that his reporting had so antagonized the Kennedy administration that the paper’s future ability to report on both the White House and the war might be compromised.²¹ As Prochnau notes, Halberstam had not spent his last months in Vietnam on a goodwill tour:

It was Halberstam who Madame Nhu [the wife of Diem's powerful brother-in-law] said she would barbecue. It was Halberstam who kept American generals at work dismantling his stories word by word in their effort to discredit him. It was Halberstam about whom Kennedy ranted, finally asking *The Times* to remove him from the country.²²

Something about the reality of the war in Vietnam had caused Halberstam to alter his view of the American mission, replacing the optimism of his first months in country with the jaded skepticism of a disillusioned man who had seen his faith in his country evaporate in the hot Southeast Asian sun.

The war did appear to be going well for the government of Ngo Dinh Diem when Halberstam arrived in Vietnam in September 1962. The Communist insurgents or Vietcong seemed to be content with mounting hit and run ambushes, displaying an unwillingness to stand and fight that emboldened the South Vietnamese soldiers and their American advisers. Many of Halberstam's early pieces describe "daring raids" launched by the ARVN with the help of American H-1 helicopters that were designed to flush out the Communists and force them to engage. The adjective "daring" appears to be a Halberstam embellishment, a word that connotes the brand of élan that often afflicts young men when witnessing their country's soldiers in action for the first time. But even in these relatively uncritical early dispatches, one can detect an undercurrent of unease in Halberstam's reporting.²³

Halberstam brought this current closer to the surface in an October 9 piece. The article's second paragraph features a particularly vivid characterization of the fighting in the Mekong Delta, the region that would quickly become an almost impenetrable Vietcong stronghold:

The war in South Vietnam is an endlessly wet and frustrating business that involves wading shoulder-high in rice paddies in the Mekong delta, avoiding Communist

mantraps and chasing an elusive, determined enemy over terrain that favors leeches over men, pursued over pursuer.²⁴

That Halberstam equates the "war in South Vietnam" with the fighting in the Mekong Delta is perhaps the most telling detail in this paragraph. The war in South Vietnam actually consisted of three discrete theaters: the Central Highlands, where the effectiveness of both the Muong warriors and the strategic hamlet program had successfully neutralized the Vietcong; the four southern provinces on the Camau Peninsula, which were, paradoxically, given their distance from North Vietnam, controlled almost completely by the Vietcong; and the Mekong Delta, which became the principal battleground in the early years of the war, a spot where the peasants tended to support whichever side could offer them the most security and subsistence. Much of Halberstam's subsequent reporting would, understandably, come to focus on the contested Mekong Delta. His suggestion, however, that this march with a particular ARVN unit was a synecdoche for the larger war effort illustrated the danger of up close reporting based on lived experience. The unit's enervating slog through the rice paddies prompts him to use the adverb "endlessly" to describe the "frustrating business that is the war in Vietnam," an adverb that is misleading, given the progress that the ARVN, the Muong guerrillas, and their American advisers had made in the Central Highlands. In later pieces, Halberstam would be careful to note that *for the Vietnamese*, who had been fighting either the French or each other since 1954, the military conflict seemed to be endless.²⁵ But in this, his first up close piece, Halberstam uses "endlessly" to describe the American advisers' experience in Vietnam.

Halberstam's dispatches from Vietnam during the first two months of his stay focused almost exclusively on the military situation. The young correspondent quickly learned, however, that the brand of warfare being waged by the Vietcong was as much political as military.

Halberstam deserves credit for understanding the importance of the political impetus behind battlefield success and failure before the Buddhist Crisis in the summer and fall of 1963 made it clear to even the most imperceptive of observers that the Vietcong's strategy was as much political as it was military.²⁶ While Halberstam wrote often about the Vietcong's fighting effectiveness, devoting an article in October, for example, to the "three levels" of military forces in Vietnam—the "hard helmets," who were "tough, disciplined and veteran troops, uniformed and deeply indoctrinated"; the "district or the provincial force," which constituted a "sort of paramilitary outfit"; and the "village guerrillas," who were "strictly local in operation" and consisted of the "newest recruits"²⁷—the Vietcong's tactics in the field, and the respect the Vietcong fighters had won from American military advisers for their courage and discipline—spurred Halberstam to spend more and more time during his first months examining the Vietcong's propaganda campaign to win the support of the peasants in, primarily, the Mekong Delta.²⁸

Halberstam's pieces on the ARVN were, as might be expected, more textured than his articles on the Vietcong's propaganda apparatus. His close contact with ARVN units and increasingly more candid discussions with American military advisers helped him to begin to understand how the Diem regime's politicization of the ARVN command structure was impairing the fighting effectiveness of the South Vietnamese troops in the field. Halberstam began to document early on the fecklessness of the ARVN's commanders in the field, attributing to pressure from the palace their predilection to ignore intelligence about Vietcong troop movements and to insist on helicopter and artillery support before taking even the most tentative of probing actions.²⁹ Halberstam threw into even sharper relief the cravenness of the ARVN's political commanders by including in his early dispatches numerous tributes to the valor and skill of the common South Vietnamese soldier. Halberstam was most ostentatious in making the dis-

inction between political generals and noble dogfaces in a piece he wrote for the Sunday, November 4 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. This piece included Halberstam's first explicit claim that the Diem regime's policy of giving battlefield commands to political favorites was impairing the ARVN's fighting capacity:

It is one thing for, they [American military advisers] often find, to give good advice and it is quite another thing to have that advice accepted by a Vietnamese [field commanders] who may be extremely conscious of "face" and indeed may have political problems far beyond the ability of an American officer to understand. Thus there is a growing feeling among Americans that they were not given enough leverage to do a tough job.

This is not to say that the Americans and the Vietnamese do not get along well together. The opposite is closer to the truth: in general, they get on quite well. And the further you get down the ranks and the less the political involvement and the greater the human involvement, the better the relationship, until at the bottom you will find some captain living in the swamps with a company of Vietnamese.³⁰

While this piece underscores both the difficulty and the ambiguity of the American mission in Vietnam,³¹ Halberstam was not yet prepared during this early moment of his tour to concede that the prospects for eventual success were discouraging. The tone of the article is optimistic, even Kiplingesque in those places where Halberstam pays tribute to the capability of the American fighting man:

The very best we have is engaged in this private war, and meeting the G.I.'s here is as impressive as watching Alan Shepard or one of the other astronauts for the first time on TV. It is said that in earlier days, American military advisers were chosen for foreign countries almost as an afterthought. This is not true of Vietnam. This is a priority post. "The varsity is out here,"

one American Embassy official said.³²

Halberstam, however, recognized even at this early date that Americans' battlefield prowess would not be sufficient to subdue the Vietcong. The Kennedy administration had recognized from the beginning of its involvement in Vietnam that the Diem regime would need to win the hearts and minds of, in particular, the South Vietnamese peasants if it were to preserve a Communist-free South Vietnam. The strategic hamlet program, which quickly became the linchpin of the Kennedy White House's persuasion effort, sought to win peasant support by herding villagers into a small number of strongholds, where they would ostensibly receive protection from the depredations of Vietcong guerrillas.³³ But Halberstam discerned quickly that the Vietcong were much better than were the Americans at waging the propaganda battle in the countryside. On October 12, Halberstam summed up succinctly the relative success of the two sides' persuasion efforts:

In this guerrilla war the value of psychological warfare is never far from the minds of the Communists. Any gain is immediately exploited in an attempt to win the support of the peasants. According to Americans here, the Vietcong has been far more successful at this than the Government has been.³⁴

By December, Halberstam was beginning to devote more coverage to the duel between the Vietcong and the Americans to win the support of the peasants. On the 17th of that month, Halberstam described the Vietcong's burning of a small village in the central highlands to illustrate what he maintained was a pattern of Vietcong attacks in that region. Whereas in the past Vietcong guerrillas had limited themselves to "small harassing attacks on Vietnamese troops and villages," a tactic that allowed them to slip away quickly before an ARVN counterattack could be mounted, the Vietcong were now raiding villages, dividing the Montagnard villagers into two groups, one made up of the

able bodied and the second consisting of the village lepers. The Vietcong would then burn the village to the ground to demonstrate to the villagers "how strong the Communists were and how weak the South Vietnamese government was." They would, finally, march the first group to "secret Communist areas or up to Laos to work in the rice fields."³⁵

Halberstam's next dispatch, on December 21, recounted a successful effort by American Special Forces to build villages in the central highlands that were designed to provide schooling and health care to the Montagnards. Halberstam underscored in this piece how simple it was to improve the Montagnards' lives by explaining why the provision of ordinary table salt, which was the most effective treatment for the goiters that afflicted so many of the Montagnards, was the most important contribution the American military had made to improving the villagers' quality of life. While Halberstam goes to some pains to describe the sundry services the Special Forces provided to each village—plentiful buffalo meat, "two barbers, two masons, eight carpenters, one tailor, one laundryman, and one teacher," the last of whom would "teach in the Sadang language"—Halberstam uses salt as a condensation symbol to emphasize how American forces, by becoming less fixated on their technological superiority, could win more goodwill if they sought simple solutions to the peasantry's problems.³⁶ But at the end of the piece Halberstam identifies what would become the insuperable obstacle to the American effort to win the loyalty of the Vietnamese peasantry:

So far the Special Forces program has been successful beyond the expectations of even its most enthusiastic planners. Yet if there is any one problem it is perhaps that the affection of the Montagnards is primarily to the Americans and not necessarily to the South Vietnamese Government of President Ngo Dinh Diem.³⁷

The tenuous relationship between the Vietnamese people and their political leaders

would eventually precipitate a political crisis that would alter both Halberstam's reporting and American policy in Vietnam.

The Problem with Peasants

The military situation in the countryside quickly deteriorated in January 1963. On January 3, Halberstam reported that five American H-1 transport helicopters, which had heretofore been thought by American military advisers to be invulnerable to Vietcong ground fire, were shot down by the Vietcong. Even more unnerving to the Americans was that the Vietcong, in a departure from past practice, did not immediately flee the scene but instead "held their ground, apparently in an attempt to destroy the helicopters."³⁸ While the Americans later in January would start relying more on armed HU-1As to offset the effectiveness of Vietcong ground attacks on American helicopters, the new boldness of the Vietcong guerrillas signaled a disturbing turn in the war, a turn that would become even more unsettling a few weeks later at the Battle of Ap Bac.

The Battle of Ap Bac marked a hinge point in what had heretofore been a war fought primarily on the ARVN's terms.³⁹ Just as the Tet Offensive would later illuminate the folly of underestimating the Vietcong's ability to win, if not a military victory, a wounding psychological victory over its foes, the Battle of Ap Bac showed how readily the Vietcong could deliver an emotional gut punch to American confidence. Halberstam identified the importance of the battle in the lead to his January 4 story:

Communist guerrillas, *refusing to play by their own hide-and-peek rules in the face of Government troops*, stood their ground and inflicted a major defeat on a larger force of Vietnamese regulars yesterday and today.⁴⁰

Their success in shooting down American helicopters, their capture of large troves of American and ARVN weapons, and their recognition of the conspicuous incompetence of ARVN commanders had given the Vietcong the confidence they needed to engage the ARVN.

And the Vietcong quickly showed that they had both the tactical sense and the armaments necessary to give better than they got. Halberstam does not pretend in this piece to offer merely the facts of the battle as the military and the American Embassy would have liked to have seen them reported. The ARVN casualty figures, estimated by Halberstam's sources to be "well over 100," would have been sufficient to convey the decisiveness of the ARVN's defeat. But without editorializing, Halberstam in two paragraphs manages to encapsulate the significance of the defeat for the future of the American mission:

What made this defeat particularly galling to the Americans and the Vietnamese alike was that this was a battle initiated by the Government forces in a place of their own choice, with superior forces and with troops of the seventh Vietnamese Division, which is generally considered an outstanding one in the country.

Today the Government troops got the sort of battle they wanted and they lost. An estimated total of 300 Communists withstood awesome air attacks, [and] turned back several charges by the Vietnamese armored personnel carriers. The Vietcong simply refused to panic and they fired with deadly accuracy and consistency. The Vietnamese regulars, in contrast, in the eyes of one American observer, lost the initiative from the first moment and never showed much aggressive instinct and consequently suffered heavier casualties than they might have had they tried an all-out assault on the Vietcong positions.⁴¹

The ARVN's unwillingness to engage the Vietcong became even more perceptible after its defeat at Ap Bac. That ARVN commanders were going so far as to leave escape routes open to Vietcong guerrillas was well known among American military advisers, giving Halberstam ample sources to collaborate his stories describing this tactic.⁴² That the ARVN was giving the Vietcong sanctuary rather than battle also,

however, gave Halberstam the pretext he needed to question the estimates of battlefield success offered by military spokesmen in Saigon.

Halberstam and his fellow Saigon correspondents were skeptical of the operationalization of military progress offered by men like General Paul Harkins. The military's efforts to quantify battlefield success by calculating body counts, structural damage, and pacification of villages seemed suspicious to the Saigon reporters for a variety of reasons, the most important perhaps being that the number of Vietcong seemed to be growing at the same time as American forces, according to the military's figures, were achieving greater and greater success in killing and disabling their foe.⁴³ But Halberstam was not prepared to call men like Harkins liars in print. He was, however, prepared to use his and his sources' firsthand observations on the battlefield to question the accuracy of the statements delivered at the daily military briefing in Saigon, a briefing that eventually gained the moniker "The Five O'Clock Follies." In his most detailed piece on the problem of ARVN commanders' efforts to prevent their Mekong Delta nature walks from being spoiled by combat, Halberstam wrote on March 1 that the commanders' avoidance behavior "*in the view of some observers . . .* may account in part for the widely varying judgments on the progress of the war given by Americans in the field and Americans in Saigon." Halberstam is careful to qualify his allegation by attributing this view "to some observers" and by emphasizing that the passivity of ARVN commanders only accounted "in part" for the discrepancy between frontline and behind-the-lines assessments of the war. But Halberstam follows up this guarded statement with a bolder explanation for the reasons for the discrepancy:

Field observers *feel* the Saigon officials have tended to concentrate on the number of Government launched operations and the number of enemy killed. They usually *find* that enemy casualties are considerably greater than those of the Government. But the men in the field are aware not only of where

Government forces are operating but also where they are not operating and this may be the crucial difference.⁴⁴

Halberstam may have been filtering his own anger at the mendacity of Harkins and his ilk through the field officers who he interviewed, thus giving his views the imprimatur of military expertise. But Halberstam is careful to distinguish between what these observers can know and what they cannot know for certain. Halberstam describes the American officers' negative assessment of Saigon's infatuation with numbers as something they "feel" rather than as something they think, the use of the former verb suggesting a less considered and certain judgment than if Halberstam had used the latter. But the actual number of enemy casualties is something these officers "find," a verb that connotes empirical, even systematic observation.

Halberstam also uses the verb "to feel" in the concluding paragraph of this dispatch, in which he presents a sharper assessment than he had heretofore of both the present condition of and future prospects for the American mission in Vietnam:

The *feeling* on the part of American advisers is that this situation cannot be substantially improved by Americans in the field and that the responsibility now rests with American officials in Saigon. But there is also a *feeling* in both the field and in Saigon that whenever major differences of opinions like this come up, the tendency of the highest American military and diplomatic officials is to pursue a policy of "getting along" with the Vietnamese.⁴⁵

Halberstam's use of different verbs to apprise his readers of whose perspective he is describing and how much confidence a reader can have in it shows more than merely a formulaic attention to the demands of objectivity. Halberstam may have channeled his increasingly caustic views of the Saigon military authorities through his sources in the field, but he does so in a way that allows his

readers to make their own decision about how much faith to place in various sources' assessments of American troops' progress in the field.

Halberstam is more emphatic about the disconnect between the field and Saigon in a longer analytical piece on the state of the war published on March 11. Halberstam begins the piece on an optimistic note:

How well is the war in Vietnam going? Fifteen months ago it was going badly. *Now after a year of massive American aid it is not going badly* and in some parts of the country it is going quite well, or as well as a war in jungled mountains can go.⁴⁶

While one could argue that Halberstam is here damning the American campaign with faint praise, he is also providing his readers with a broader view of the conflict than his reporting had heretofore offered. Granted, the adjective "massive" does suggest that American achievements on the field are not proportional to the U.S. government's financial investment in the war. But Halberstam moves quickly in the same clause to emphasize that this investment has yielded some return by noting that "in some parts of the country it [the war] is going quite well." Halberstam devotes the remainder of this piece to an examination of both indicators of progress and assessments of continuing problems. Halberstam does treat the problems last, leaving the reader with a feeling of unease, but he remains careful throughout to remind the reader that Vietnam is a many theatered war that cannot be readily characterized as either successful or unsuccessful.⁴⁷ What Halberstam seems to object to most strongly is the failure of the American military and civil authorities to confront the war's complexity in their public and even their private statements to reporters:

Fear of getting bogged down is still very real to Americans *in the field who have both a healthy respect for Vietcong resilience and a healthy disrespect for American understanding of the length and depth of the struggle here.* If these doubts over the outcome exist in the field, then there is little evidence of

them in both the public and private pronouncements by Americans and Vietnamese in Saigon. Americans talk of a great national movement moving irresistibly toward victory. Some of this is their own belief, some of it is done for local consumption and some, according to sources here, because of extreme pressure from the Administration demanding positive results.⁴⁸

A conflict that civilian officials suggested could be won through attriting the enemy was to many field officers a war in which politics and history were larger obstacles than the Vietcong or the NVA.⁴⁹ Halberstam used the apparent indifference to and confusion about the war harbored by many Americans as a pretext to address the opacity of the conflict in a May 5 news analysis piece. The war is only tangible, Halberstam maintained in this article, on those rare occasions when a battle causes massive casualties. One such battle was the one fought on the Camau Peninsula, a battle that Halberstam references in the second paragraph of his May 5 story. But even a loss of 200 Vietcong could not spark American interest in the war:

[But] then it [the war] suddenly becomes indistinct again, small engagements in strange places, places Americans never learned to spell or pronounce or find on a map, Vietnamese killing Vietnamese.⁵⁰

Halberstam's intermingling of American confusion about the war with the exotic setting and indistinct character of the fighting gives the reader the sense of a conflict that is unmanageable both intellectually and militarily. Halberstam goes on to argue that Vietnam is really a "peasant war," a kind of warfare that was equally foreign to Americans who had little experience with an impoverished agricultural class that was not enslaved. And Halberstam's description of the Vietnamese peasantry's fickleness certainly could not have inspired confidence in his readers:

In a country that is naturally rich he is not going to starve. His loyalty seems to

go, in limited degree, to whoever controls his village at a given time. If the control brings abuses with it, then he is known to be willing to fight.⁵¹

The Vietnamese peasants' lack of transcendent loyalties may have been jarring to many of Halberstam's readers. Americans are, as has been noted by many commentators, a political people whose sense of nationhood is grounded not in blood, religion, culture or other organic ties but in a shared commitment to a set of principles.⁵² To be confronted by a people who were divided despite organic bonds must have been puzzling enough for the average American. But the partition of the country in Geneva in 1954 into North and South at least gave Americans a geographic template for distinguishing friend from foe. In his May 5 piece, however, Halberstam suggests that even within the friendly South, Americans could not rely on the South Vietnamese to show loyalty to ideas or to commitments beyond themselves. Halberstam's characterization of the peasant mentality undercut Kennedy's rationale for sending American advisers to Vietnam. If the South Vietnamese people were not prepared to fight for the principle of freedom from communist tyranny, then how could the American mission possibly succeed?

Halberstam does not draw this dispiriting conclusion in his May 5 piece, but it is clear that the American military had become, in the aftermath of Ap Bac, more willing to assess with a jaundiced eye the possibility of winning the support of the Vietnamese peasantry:

Private sources are more cautious [than high officials]. They *feel* that it is too soon after a massive build-up that included a virtually complete changeover in aid programs to tell who is winning and who is losing. *They are less concerned with statistics—Vietcong defections up, Government weapons losses down—than with what they consider the ground rules: Are the Americans and the Vietnamese working out their mutual difficulties? Is*

the Government becoming more responsive to its people, as concerned with a high officer's ability as his loyalty?⁵³

Halberstam is careful to use the verb "to feel" when reporting the evaluation made by his "private sources," suggesting that their position is not necessarily more authoritative than that of high-level officials. But the contrast Halberstam draws between high-level officials' reliance on what are clearly misleading statistics to predict whether the Diem government will reach certain benchmarks and his private sources' focus on "ground rules" tilts the debate in the latter's favor. Halberstam gives his readers a choice between tracking progress by using flawed statistics or by evaluating the regime's compliance with basic ground rules, a term that connotes the minimum necessary conditions for any enterprise to succeed.

Halberstam's reporting to this point had been almost exclusively concerned with the ARVN's military progress, or lack of progress, in the field. But the period in which Halberstam and his colleagues could anchor the bulk of their reporting in their field experiences was rapidly drawing to a close. In May of 1963, South Vietnam was on the cusp of a cataclysmic political crisis, one that would end with the deposing of a regime in which the Kennedy administration had invested both its trust and American treasure. When covering this crisis, Halberstam would for the first time be compelled to spend most of his time operating away from the field.

Bad Regime Down

What later became known as the Buddhist Crisis began on May 8 when South Vietnamese government troops sought to end religious demonstrations in the sacred city of Hue by, in the words of Halberstam's May 29 dispatch, "firing into a demonstrating crowd [of Buddhist protesters] from armed vehicles and then driving over some of the bodies."⁵⁴ The protests had been spurred by what the Buddhists perceived as religious restrictions imposed by the Diem

government. Halberstam would note frequently in his articles on the crisis in the ensuing six months that 70% of South Vietnam's population was Buddhist, leaving the Ngos and their Catholic co-religionists in a distinct minority.⁵⁵ Some scholars have questioned Halberstam's and others' estimate of the size of the Buddhist population, pointing out that many of the South Vietnamese peasants were ancestor worshippers and not practicing Buddhists.⁵⁶ But Halberstam and American officials seemed to be aware that, regardless of the actual size of the Buddhist population, the tension between a Catholic regime and a majority non-Catholic population in the volatile environment that was South Vietnam in 1963 could eventually foment a crisis. The immediate significance of the killing of the nine Buddhist monks in Hue hence did not escape Halberstam or his sources:

The demonstrations, their cause, their aftermath, and what they mean to a country involved in a war against Communism are considered by many observers here as the most important development in South Vietnam in months, as disturbing to United States military officials here as they are to international Buddhist officials in Rangoon, Burma.⁵⁷

One suspects, however, that even the prescient Halberstam did not realize that the killings in Hue would spark a nationwide uprising against the Diem regime that would morph quickly from a religious protest into a political movement. The Buddhists were soon joined by both high school and college students who harbored their own grievances against what they saw as the illegitimate Diem regime. That the spark lit in Hue would spread into a conflagration that would eventually consume the Diem regime in a coup in November now seems to have been inevitable. But one can also see in retrospect many moments when a less feckless and ostentatiously confrontational regime could have prevented the Buddhist protests from metastasizing into a governmental crisis. Halberstam's initial reporting on the political protests, however,

focused less on the Ngos' mismanagement of the crisis and more on the day-to-day events in Hue and, eventually, other cities, including Saigon. This is understandable. The Buddhist protests spread rapidly, with new developments emerging almost daily.

Halberstam's effort to keep abreast of daily changes in the protesters' tactics did not prevent him from perceiving that what had begun as religious protests had evolved into a political crisis.⁵⁸ On June 16, the *Times* published a news analysis piece by Halberstam that starkly detailed the challenges the protests presented to the Diem government:

Five weeks ago South Vietnam had a religious dispute and today it has a full-scale political crisis, a rare affair in a country that has no Opposition party and no freedom of the press. For a Government used to taking care of any opposition, military or political, by the basic expedient of crushing it, the protest of Buddhists monks has become a particularly difficult problem: *crushing it is like crushing quicksilver.*⁵⁹

Halberstam's use of metaphor implies that the protests were too fast moving and unpredictable for the Diem's conventional repressive tactics to prevent their spread. He concedes in the next paragraph that the government had reached a "tentative agreement" with the Buddhist leaders, an agreement in which the Government acceded to two of the Buddhists' five demands. But he then tempers this good news by reinforcing the metaphor of a quicksilver crisis:

The *general feeling* here is, however, that a deep division and bitterness still exists, and that even if the agreement holds, the Government has badly hurt its image with the majority of the people.⁶⁰

Halberstam is understandably tentative when characterizing South Vietnamese public opinion. It is unclear from whence Halberstam learned of this "general feeling." He seems unsure of himself here, dealing as he is with a dimension of

the Vietnam conflict that he had previously not addressed in his reporting. Halberstam appears to be more comfortable when he is able to tie the political crisis back to the field:

The question in Vietnam today is not whether Vietnamese troops will fight. *It is known that they will*, but it is also known that on Government orders they are being used badly. The question is whether in the *all-out political-military effort* to defeat Communist guerrillas, Americans are supporting a Government that can rally popular support.⁶¹

The Buddhist protests had, for Halberstam, given shape to what had been only a dim specter in his earlier articles: that the taproot of both the political and the military problems in Vietnam was the Ngos. His June 16 piece marks Halberstam's first serious effort to characterize the Diem regime:

[The Government's] problems in handling the dispute with the Buddhists, *according to observers here*, are essentially products of its own inherent limitations, for it is not, *as some claim*, a cruel dictatorship but rather an inept one, not a right-wing government but rather a mandarin-wing one. Its ideology is an intensely personal one—mandarin in its origins—which sees the Government as representing God to the people and therefore deems the people responsible for doing what the Government wants—*a sort of Asian divine right*.⁶²

This paragraph is oddly contradictory, perhaps revealing how ill at ease Halberstam was with political reporting. A mandarin government features a well-articulated bureaucratic structure in which the functions of government are discharged by a cadre of trained experts or bureaucrats. Such rule had historically both co-existed with and buttressed the divine rule of Asian rulers, but it certainly was not a defining property of such rule.⁶³ Halberstam appears in this piece to be conflating these distinct modes of govern-

ance. There was little evidence that the Diem government subscribed to any of the central tenets of mandarin governance. The Ngos' method of rule was more personalistic than bureaucratic. Halberstam seems to be struggling here to tease out from a still alien political culture some properties, other than steadfast American support, that would explain the Diem government's rule. What Halberstam fails to consider at this early moment in his career as a political reporter is the possibility that the Diem regime lacked any basis of Weberian legitimacy, that its rule was more akin to that of an urban political machine that used patronage and intimidation to maintain support than that of a legitimate regime that could coax obedience from its citizens or subjects by merely invoking its traditional, charismatic, or bureaucratic legitimacy. Halberstam's misunderstanding of the nature of the Ngos' precarious rule suggests that he was, at this point, more comfortable discussing military tactics than political concepts.

Halberstam's confidence in his ability to untangle the political threads of the Buddhist Crisis would grow over time. Most of his stories during the crisis's early stages, however, were devoted primarily to giving his readers unadorned accounts of events, only a handful of which he was able to observe firsthand. It was not until June 22, almost one month after the beginning of the demonstrations, that Halberstam first mentions the possibility of a coup:

Some *well-informed observers* believe that there will be an attempt to oust the Government. The question appears to be when?

It is significant that this has become the key question in the country, and not whether South Vietnam is winning or losing the war against the Communist guerrillas, or whether it can win the population to an all-out effort in that war.

The *general feeling* is that the last six weeks *have damaged the war effort irreparably*. It is *widely believed* that military action against the Communists can be successful only in a *favorable political climate*.⁶⁴

Halberstam's "well-informed observers" had, we know now, misestimated the beginning of the coup by several months. But the article is significant because it marks the first time that Halberstam suggests a link between the Diem regime's authoritarian rule and the ARVN's failures in the field. It is unclear whether Halberstam is describing the views of his sources or that of the Vietnamese man on the street when he argues that it was "widely believed" that the political climate's ill winds have spread to the battlefield. The language here is tentative; the passive voice of the phrases "widely believed" and "a general feeling" drawing a sharp contrast with the "well-informed observers" who were predicting a coup. Halberstam still appears to be working his way toward an understanding of the political context that, as it was becoming clear to him, was shaping both the nature and the fortunes of the war in the field. But Halberstam was beginning to turn a critical eye on the Diem regime's complicity in the ARVN's military failures. His dispatches from the field would become more rare as the political crisis moved apace. The war in the field remained for Halberstam an important part of a Vietnamese story that was already adopting a tragic narrative line. But it was no longer the most important part.

Halberstam's appreciation of the connection between the Diem regime's misgovernance and ARVN commanders' willful incompetence was driven by events. The Buddhist Crisis caused Halberstam to reduce his forays into the field, a step that coincided with Halberstam producing pieces on the Buddhist Crisis that placed the event within the larger political and historical context of the Vietnam conflict. The paradox of Halberstam's reporting was that the farther he moved back from the field, where the war's action was ostensibly occurring, the more he saw. Halberstam's close up reporting of the war in the field did contribute to his far seeing. Just as when viewing a tapestry one should look closely at its various parts before stepping back to see how those parts are woven together to create a larger image, Halberstam needed to get an up close view of the duplicity and temporizing of the ARVN commanders

before he could see how the Diem regime's strategy was undermining the prosecution of its war against the Vietcong.

Halberstam's temperament would not allow him to step too far back from the action. He sought to get as close to the Buddhist and student demonstrations as he could.⁶⁵ Still, most of Halberstam's reporting was now less close up. As he tried to unravel the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the Kennedy administration and the Diem regime, Halberstam was obliged to rely increasingly on observers who presumably understood better than he both the Diem government's palace politics and the Kennedy White House's internal deliberations.

The emerging split between the American embassy in Saigon and the American military over whether the Ngos deserved continued American support gave Halberstam access to dissidents within what had heretofore been a unified and disciplined American mission in Saigon. The tensions between these partners had existed for some time, but the replacement of pro-Diem U.S. Ambassador Frederick Nolting by Henry Cabot Lodge in August seemed to liberate disgruntled Embassy officials to speak to reporters about what they viewed as both the American military's miscalculations and the Diem regime's failures.⁶⁶ But even before Lodge set up housekeeping in Saigon on August 23, 1963, Embassy officials had been speaking to Halberstam about the erosion of the Kennedy administration's confidence in the Diem regime. Here, for example, is how Halberstam characterized the U.S.-South Vietnam relationship in a news analysis piece published on July 7:

Relations between Ngo Dinh Diem's Government and its main ally are not really bad; they are, *in the view of some observers*, more nearly impossible. It is not a case of one side having insulted the other or one's having sent the wrong Ambassador. It is more a case of each being horribly miscast for each other.⁶⁷

Prior to July and August of 1963, Halberstam's reporting from the field had been

predicated on the understandable premise that the Diem regime saw victory over the Vietcong as its primary objective. While the ARVN commanders' reluctance to engage the enemy was clearly in response to instructions from the Diem regime, Halberstam had often characterized the ARVN's apparent reluctance to fight as more due to a disagreement with their American military advisers over tactics than to political pressure from Saigon. Halberstam had reported in many of his dispatches from the field that American advisers had urged ARVN commanders to employ more night raids and guerrilla tactics to puncture the myth that the Vietcong controlled the night.⁶⁸ The commanders had invariably countered that massed assaults were the most effective approach to disabling the Vietcong. Now it was clear to Halberstam that "for Ngo Diem and his family the survival of the government is first, winning second."⁶⁹

Halberstam did not return to reporting on the fighting again until July 22, when he described a rare ARVN victory in the Mekong Delta. But Halberstam could not neglect the Buddhist Crisis in the cities for long, particularly as protests grew increasingly militant and political. On July 25, Halberstam again stepped back from events to analyze what he viewed as important changes in the leadership of the Buddhist movement:

An 11-week struggle over religion has produced no solutions and no new hope for South Vietnam. If it has produced anything, it is a new political force in Vietnamese politics, a determined Buddhist movement headed by young, militant, highly political leaders.

Whether the Buddhists leaders win or lose their immediate struggle with President Ngo Dinh Diem, it is widely believed that one result of the current crisis is that the nation's Buddhists are now deeply involved in Vietnamese politics.⁷⁰

This lead marked one of the rare moments when Halberstam offered an interpretation of

events unfiltered through sources or observers. Halberstam's new interest in the political warfare on the streets did not, however, cause him to neglect the connection between the turmoil in the cities and the war in the countryside. On July 27, Halberstam reported that "private informants say that growing concern over political developments has led palace officials to withdraw troops to where they can be used in any conflict in the capital."⁷¹ And the Diem regime, even in the midst of the Buddhist Crisis, continued to order ARVN commanders to make tactical decisions that undercut the American military's efforts to pacify the Vietcong. Halberstam was now, however, careful not to frame the ARVN-American conflict as principally animated by tactical disagreements. He concludes a July 28 dispatch, for example, with a litany of American complaints about Vietnamese commanders, all of which were sparked by the Diem government's machiavellian management of the war:

Americans also say troops are too often allocated to provinces not in response to the Vietcong threat but because of political connections. Too many regular troops, they complain, are tied up on static security such as guarding bridges and airstrips. Finally, the Americans find, *Government commanders* rely too much on air and artillery attacks rather than close combat.⁷²

Halberstam here for the first time uses the phrase "Government commanders" to describe the ARVN's field leaders, suggesting that the Diem regime is using its proxies to frustrate the American mission in Vietnam. But he also implies here a division within the ARVN command structure: If there are Government commanders, then there are presumably non-Government commanders. Halberstam would in later pieces expose this cleavage more clearly, a cleavage that would eventually give impetus to the effort to depose the Ngos.

Halberstam addressed the divisions in the military in a dispatch published on August 12. The "deep and smoldering" antagonism between

Buddhists and Catholics at the command level had seeped down into the lower ranks, with officers in at least one mess eating at separate tables.⁷³ This prescient analysis of what would turn out to be a primary contributor to the November coup was, however, eclipsed quickly by the contretemps that followed the publication of Halberstam's controversial August 15 piece on Vietcong gains in the Mekong Delta. Halberstam's claim that the ARVN was losing the battle for the Mekong Delta, a claim that contradicted the American military's position that the ARVN was slowly gaining control of this vital region, was damaging enough to U.S. credibility. But even more lancing to the American military and to the Kennedy administration was Halberstam's assertion that the strategic hamlet program, which had often been praised by American officialdom for its effectiveness in cultivating goodwill in the countryside, was actually abetting the Vietcong's effort to control the Delta:

Some military officials are worried because hamlets have not stopped Vietcong movement in the delta and in some areas have made it even easier.

Drawing people out of the outlying areas and into more crowded ones, the hamlets have given hard-core Vietcong units freedom of movement in the outskirts.

Americans and other advisers are extremely worried about the hamlet program.⁷⁴

The American military sought to parry Halberstam's charge that the Vietcong were in the midst of a troop build-up in the Delta that would allow the Vietcong guerrillas to change tactics. Whereas in the past the Vietcong had "hesitated to tangle with the Vietnamese regulars," Halberstam said, "they [were] now picking fights with the regulars."⁷⁵ The vigorous and caustic denials by the American military and the Kennedy administration of Halberstam's claim that the Vietcong had changed tactics and were, as a consequence, winning the battle for the Delta perhaps provoked Halberstam on August

24 to state baldly in a piece on the Diem regime's recent attacks on Buddhist pagodas what he had implied for some time: Nhu's secret police force's attack on Buddhist pagodas, followed by Diem's declaration of martial law, had:

underlined what *some sources* here consider to be one of the gravest sicknesses of the vast and *talented* American mission here—a vast divergence between what the people in the field are seeing and reporting and what the highest American authorities are reporting. *Some observers* see the heads of the mission so tied to the Ngo family that, as one source said, "their world is completely different from ours. It is like we're in different countries."⁷⁶

Halberstam continued to pile on in an August 25 news analysis piece in which he asserted that the Vietnamese people were equally skeptical of official American statements about progress on the battlefield:

One of the saddest aspects of present day Vietnam is the sense of hopelessness, particularly among young people. For them the war and this Government seem to go on forever.

They know a good deal about the war and what is happening *and they do not accept the optimism of many American officials*. What is happening is the slow decay of the fiber of these people.⁷⁷

This statement marks a change in Halberstam's perspective on the war. Whereas earlier Halberstam had depicted the war as endless for American soldiers, he is now empathizing with the Vietnamese people, for whom, understandably, the "war and this Government seem to go on forever." Halberstam had by this time been in Vietnam for almost a year, enough time, for him to get some purchase on street sentiment. His increasing attention to the South Vietnamese citizenry also allowed Halberstam to perceive a generational divide that saw younger Vietnamese gird themselves to challenge the legitimacy of both the interminable war and Diem's rule while

their parents and grandparents preferred to remain passive. The massive student protests against the regime on August 24, to which the government responded by closing Saigon University and all public and private secondary schools, prompted Halberstam to underscore how Vietnamese youth were turning against both the Diem government and the American mission:

Informed Vietnamese sources are bluntly warning Americans that the future of the anti-Communist cause is threatened because the Vietnamese public is losing confidence in the United States and is turning against the Americans.

Public bitterness toward the Saigon Government, it is said, is rapidly reaching out to the Americans. The Vietnamese say the bitterness has grown so strong that the anti-Communist cause is rapidly receding in the eyes of the public.⁷⁸

The divisions within the public were also apparent in the ARVN, though in the latter's case the generational conflict was layered on top of long-standing sectarian hostilities. The ARVN's poor performance in the field was, for Halberstam, primarily a product of a politicized command structure and a fighting force rent by irreconcilable differences. In a news analysis piece published on September 1, Halberstam addressed the ARVN's internal problems, including in his analysis the following depiction of the complicated dynamics of an organization in which the Kennedy administration had originally placed such faith:

the South Vietnamese Army has long suffered from a lack of cohesion, extreme personal jealousies and terrible frustration of being under tight political control. It is riddled with palace political operatives and there is an aura of total distrust at its highest levels. . . .

There are deep divisions between some younger and older officers and there is growing bitterness on the part of many young Buddhist officers who feel that promotions only go to Catholics.

Even if older officers were not ready to make a strike, some Americans say that feeling among younger officers is so high that they might try it alone.⁷⁹

The November coup would be led by disaffected elements in the military, though not all of the participants were Buddhists or victims of Diem's political favoritism. While Kennedy neither desired nor condoned the killing of the Nhu brothers, he had indisputably set events in motion when he had replaced Nolting with Lodge.⁸⁰ But rarely has an American operation been undertaken with such ambivalence by so many of its principals.⁸¹ Although the Saigon correspondents were certainly not principals, they were complicit in exposing anti-Diem feeling in the American Embassy and in the American military. It would be odd if these reporters, who, as noted earlier, were as strongly committed to the rollback of Communism as any *New Frontiersman*, did not share the anguish that was so apparent among those who were part of the American mission in Vietnam. These men and women were now trying to negotiate the tension between their commitment to fight Communism and their realization that those they depended on to lead this fight in Southeast Asia were cavalierly putting under foot the democratic principles they held sacred. As Halberstam reported on September 3:

Many of these civilians and military men are highly idealistic, and the confrontation with Communism is their reason for being here.

This struggle against Communist penetration of South Vietnam strikes many of the Americans as one of the most decisive and most important struggles of decades, one that may set a pattern for other countries and other wars.

Yet for all this, many Americans are deeply troubled. Some say the survival of President Ngo Dinh Diem would send them, quietly, to other jobs.

Essentially they see themselves now

as adjuncts of a government that is violating many precepts and personal liberties that Americans value. . . .⁸²

Halberstam had come to Vietnam to observe America's effort to prevent the expansion of Communism in Asia. He had witnessed instead a bare display of power politics that had generated both social turmoil and military impotence. The man who wrote on September 3 was fundamentally different from the man who had arrived a year earlier. It was not just his experiences in the field, however, that had altered Halberstam's view of the American mission in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Halberstam in the months since the May 28 onset of the Buddhist Crisis had been compelled to step away from the battlefield. He had used this time to begin to weave the apparently discrete threads of the Vietnam conflict into a

web that extended from the sealed palace in Saigon, to the Buddhist pagodas in Hue, to the schools and universities in various cities, to the "brave and talented"⁸³ Vietnamese soldiers in the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta and the Montagnard tribesman in the hills of the Central Highlands. What had begun for Halberstam as a story of America's providential mission to spread democracy and freedom to benighted peoples had ended as a tale of false promise, self-delusion, dumbfounding rigidity, and serial fecklessness. Halberstam was a different man when he finally left Vietnam in early December 1963. He was also a different reporter. By stepping away from the field, Halberstam had learned to see further than many of his colleagues. He had become a quintessential synthetic reporter, capable of divining the pattern in the apparently disconnected dots of events. Halberstam had learned to make objectivity work.

Endnotes

¹ The role that televised images played in shaping Americans' views of the war both during and after the conflict has spawned a number of scholarly studies, the most famous of which is Daniel Hallin's *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). A study that takes issue with Hallin's conclusion that television coverage of the war merely reflected rather than changed the "debate in Washington" about the war is David Culbert's "Television's Visual Impact on Decision-Making in the USA, 1968: The Tet Offensive and Chicago's Democratic Convention," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33(3) (July 1998), 419-49. Culbert notes that while "most television coverage of the war was visually uninteresting," there were certain images that did influence both American opinion and policy. He focuses in particular on how the filming and photographing of the execution of Nguyen Van Lem by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan on February 1, 1968 amplified Americans' growing "doubt and uncertainty" about American policy in Vietnam, doubt and uncertainty that eventually turned tepid support for into outright opposition to the war. Cognitive psychologists' work on the mechanisms of human memory support Culbert's claim that such vivid, synoptic images are treated by humans as more valid than pallid data presentations precisely because they are more available in memory. See Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 18-23 and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

² The phrase "living room war" has become so closely coupled with Vietnam that a LexisNexis search of English language press articles published between 1980 and 2012 using "Vietnam" and "living room war" as its key words generated 288 results. Typical is this statement from a February 7, 2009 *Washington Post* account of President Obama's flirtation with lifting the Bush administration's ban on the photographing or filming of military coffins at Dover Air Force Base: "Pictures of casualties have long played into the politics of a war—most notably in Vietnam, dubbed the 'living-room war' for its extensive television coverage, including footage of coffins rolling off planes at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii as if off a conveyor belt." Ann Scott Tyson and Mark Berman, "Pentagon Rethinks Photo Ban on Coffins Bearing War Dead," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2009.

³ Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, 11.

⁴ William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Random House, 1995), 9. Prochnau provides a vivid description of the challenges that television correspondents confronted when they tried to enter the field: "In the field, an early television crew was a sight to behold, three men bound together by snaking cables, prisoners of their revolutionary but awkward technology.... They were the future. But they lumbered through the brush like caravans of old pack elephants linked trunk to tail."

⁵ Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 31.

⁶ Legendary war correspondent Marguerite Higgins of the *New York Herald Tribune* referred to Halberstam and his colleagues at the time as "typewriter strategists" who were "seldom at the scenes of battles." Her coda was even more unforgiving: "Reporters here would like to see us lose the war to prove they're right." As quoted in Michelle Ferrari (ed.), *Reporting America at War: An Oral History* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 121. Robert Elegant in 1981 echoed Higgins' contemporaneous assessment when he maintained that, in particular, television correspondents used "the millions of images available...in Saigon alone—and hundreds of millions throughout Indochina" to magnify the

“allies’ deficiencies...and display almost saintly tolerance of those misdeeds of Hanoi [they] could neither disregard nor deny.” See Robert Elegant, “How to Lose a War: The Press and Viet Nam,” *Encounter* 57(2), 73-90.

⁷ As quoted in Phillip Knightly, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker From the Crimea to Iraq* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 465-66.

⁸ The investigative reporter Jack Newfield is purported to have said that this is a rule that, if obeyed reflexively, would turn reporters into “stenographers with amnesia.” See Todd Gitlin, “Media: It Was a Very Bad Year,” *The American Prospect* (June 18, 2004).

⁹ See, for example, Brent Cunningham, “Re-Thinking Objectivity,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 42(2) (July/August 2003), 24. Cunningham succinctly characterizes the diversity of definitions of objectivity thusly: “Ask ten different journalists what objectivity means and you’ll get ten different answers.” One source of the dispute over the meaning of objectivity is that objectivity is both a process and a goal. One can hence define objectivity either as an effort to adhere to journalistic conventions that ostensibly ensure that the final story will be fair and accurate or one can choose to define it as “The Commission on the Freedom of the Press” (aka, “The Hutchins Commission”) defined it in its 1947 report as “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning.” As quoted in Donald McDonald, “Is Objectivity Possible?” in John C. Merrill and Ralph D. Barney (eds.), *Ethics and the Press: Readings in Mass Media Morality* (New York: Hastings House, 1975), 69. The literature on journalistic objectivity is vast. The following is merely a selection of efforts to define, critique, and describe the implications of journalistic objectivity: W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33-39 and *passim*; Jack Fuller, *What is Happening to the News: The Information Explosion and the Crisis of Journalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15-16, 121-22, and *passim*; Tom Goldstein, *Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 67-76; Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81-100; Richard H. Reeb, Jr., *Taking Journalism Seriously: Objectivity as a Partisan Cause* (New York: University Press of America, 1999); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 121-94; and Stephen J.A. Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), especially 288-316.

¹⁰ McDonald, “Is Objectivity Possible?” 75.

¹¹ McDonald, “Is Objectivity Possible?” 81.

¹² McDonald, “Is Objectivity Possible?” 81.

¹³ Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order: How the Decline of the Political Parties and the Growing Power of the News Media Undermine the American Way of Electing Presidents* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 191.

¹⁴ “At the beginning, correspondents such as Neil Sheehan, Malcolm Browne, and David Halberstam displayed a strong sense of solidarity with the Americans in the field, especially the advisers to the South Vietnamese armed forces.” William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996), 617.

¹⁵ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 10. Lippmann maintained that what we think is the environment or reality is really a pseudo-environment that is a product of both our physical and temporal separation from events and our stereotypes, blind spots, and moral codes. Journalists who rely on their senses to describe the environment were, according to Lippmann, guilty of trafficking in fictions (though Lippmann was quick to note that fictions were

not lies but “a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself.”).

¹⁶ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

¹⁷ Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 142.

¹⁸ Halberstam recalled later that one of his most dispiriting moments in Vietnam occurred after he took Dick Tregaskis, a World War II veteran and the author of *Guadalcanal Diary*, to My Tho to spend the day with Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann. On the way back to Saigon, Tregaskis turned to Halberstam and said, “If I were doing what you were doing, I’d be ashamed of myself.” Halberstam remembers that he was crestfallen because “My father had been a medic in World War I, and he’d been a combat surgeon in World War II. So we take patriotism very seriously in my family. One of the things that sustained me all the time when I was taking heat on this was that I knew that my father would have approved of what I was doing.” Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 120.

¹⁹ Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 113. Halberstam admitted later that he and his colleagues had to go “against our own grain” to report the truth about the war. “We were finding out stuff that we didn’t want to find out.... One of the interesting things was our own difficult reeducation process, because we wanted it to work. And then it didn’t work, so we started saying it didn’t work.” Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 117.

²⁰ Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 140.

²¹ Halberstam’s account of the conversation between his publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, and President Kennedy in which the latter broached the possibility that the nettlesome Halberstam might be moved to “Paris or London or Rome” can be found in Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 124.

²² Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 172.

²³ Halberstam on both September 24 and September 25 reported on “daring raids against a numerically superior enemy deep in its own territory” (September 24) and “daring hit-and-run raids on headquarters deep in Communist territory” (September 25) in the area around Da Nang. Both pieces boast an optimistic tone (e.g., “the consensus of Americans and Vietnamese is that the South Vietnamese regulars have also improved considerably in the last year, both in training techniques and in the new mobile striking power afforded by American helicopters”), but they also both sound notes of caution (e.g., “The optimism is not universally shared by the American pilots, who feel that bad weather in the mountainous terrain will severely handicap air mobility”). This cautious view becomes more prominent in Halberstam’s dispatches on September 27 and 29. Halberstam notes in the former that “the Vietnamese are reluctant to leave the helicopters when they have landed and may be beginning to depend on them too much.” The last article in this cycle on American tactics in the Mekong Delta is the most circumspect, quoting General David Shoup’s statement that “there is no panacea that overnight will eliminate the Vietcong enemy.” Halberstam concludes the piece with some observations about the countermeasures the Vietcong were taking to disable American helicopters. See David Halberstam, “Vietnam Strikes at Reds’ Bastions,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1962, 7; David Halberstam, “Vietnam Rebels Enlarge Forces,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1962, 2; David Halberstam, “Fast Copters Sent to Vietnam Hills,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1962, 2; and David Halberstam, “Vietnam’s Troops Gain in Two Sectors,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1962. Halberstam later described his initial sense of uneasiness about both the military situation and his future relations with the American military and civilian authorities in Vietnam thusly: “There was an embryonic sense [when I arrived in Saigon] that things were not working out well, and that there would be an ever greater division between the American mission, military and political, and the American journalists.” Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 113.

²⁴ David Halberstam, "Vietnam War: A Frustrating Hunt for an Elusive Foe," *New York Times*, October 9, 1962, 2.

²⁵ Perhaps the best example of Halberstam's shift in focus is a passage from a November 24, 1963 piece in which Halberstam states clearly how the Vietnamese people's weariness with a protracted conflict could hamper the efforts of the new post-coup junta government of Major General Duong Van Minh to gain control of the countryside: "...what the junta will be doing is testing how much more will there is to fight this war on the part of the people. For after 20 years of war the Vietnamese people are tired." David Halberstam, "Vietnam's New Leaders Face a Tough Challenge," *New York Times*, November 24, 1963, 96. See also David Halberstam, "Picture is Cloudy in Vietnam's War," *New York Times*, July 27, 1963 for a reference to low morale among ARVN troops who, in the wake of the Buddhist crisis, appeared to be fighting "an endless war."

²⁶ A secret CIA memo sent to Secretary of State Dean Rusk on November 29, 1963 described how the Vietcong "seek to win the voluntary support of the population by various activities of welfare or civic-action nature." This memo was, according to Michael H. Hunt, discounted by policymakers who "clung to sweeping Cold War propositions and simple images of villagers rendered inert by communist terror." "Secret Memo on NLF Methods for Winning Peasant Support," November 29, 1963, in Michael H. Hunt (ed.), *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 49-50.

²⁷ David Halberstam, "Vietcong Maintaining Strength Despite Setbacks," *New York Times*, October 11, 1962, 2.

²⁸ Halberstam first reported on October 11, 1962 on the Vietcong's efforts to use sundry propaganda techniques to recruit rural youth. This article was followed by a more detailed October 12 piece in which Halberstam observed that "in this war the value of psychological warfare is never far from the minds of the Communists. Any gain is immediately exploited in an attempt to win the support of the peasants." On October 28, Halberstam recounted an ineffectual raid on a Vietcong stronghold in the Delta in which Vietnamese forces and American Army Rangers did succeed in retrieving some artifacts of the Vietcong propaganda campaign in the countryside: "Vietcong flags, Vietcong handkerchiefs, a mimeograph machine, song books, guitars, Vietcong helmets, and even, according to Lieutenant Thi, Vietcong girls." David Halberstam, "3 Vietcong Girls Captured in Raid," *New York Times*, October 28, 1962. See also David Halberstam, "Vietcong Maintaining Strength Despite Setbacks," *New York Times* October 11, 1962, 2; and David Halberstam, "Vietcong Serves Tea and Weapons," *New York Times*, October 12, 1962.

²⁹ See, David Halberstam, "Red Guerrillas Elude Big Drive in South Vietnam," *New York Times*, November 29, 1962, 2; David Halberstam, "Harkins Praises Vietnam Troops," *New York Times*, January 11, 1963, 3; David Halberstam, "Vietnam Adopts a New War Method," *New York Times* January 9, 1963, 3; David Halberstam, "Saigon Reported Avoiding Clashes," *New York Times*, May 1, 1963, 1; David Halberstam, "Saigon Criticized on 'Cautious' War," *New York Times*, April 13, 1963, 4; and David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Dispute U.S. Advisers on Strategy," *New York Times*, May 14, 1963, 10.

³⁰ David Halberstam, "Our G.I.'s Fight a 'Private War' in Vietnam," *New York Times Magazine*, November 4, 1962, 111.

³¹ The following statement captures the tone and sentiment of the piece: "There will probably never be a Hollywood spectacular on this war. Each day it continues its grinding, unrewarding way." Halberstam, "Our G.I.'s Fight a 'Private War' in Vietnam," 108.

³² Halberstam, "Our G.I.'s Fight a 'Private War' in Vietnam," 108.

³³ The program was controversial from its outset. Stanley Karnow writes that “Diem and Nhu saw the strategic hamlet program as essentially a means to spread their influence rather than a device to infuse peasants with the will to resist the Vietcong.” Karnow goes on to note that American military officials found the program to be both frustrating and ineffectual because it locked down ARVN troops in the hamlets who could be engaging with the Vietcong on the field. This objection, however, did not prevent Kennedy officials from praising the program. See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 255-58.

³⁴ David Halberstam, “Vietcong Serves Tea and Weapons.”

³⁵ All of the quotations in this paragraph are from David Halberstam, “Vietnam Reds Push New Tactic,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1962, 3.

³⁶ David Halberstam, “Salt Helps U.S. Win Vietnamese,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1962.

³⁷ David Halberstam, “Salt Helps U.S. Win Vietnamese.”

³⁸ David Halberstam, “Vietcong Downs Five U.S. Copters, Hits Nine Others,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1963, 1.

³⁹ Neil Sheehan provides a vivid account of the Battle of Ap Bac in *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 201-65.

⁴⁰ Halberstam, “Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1963, 2, (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Halberstam, “Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash.” Halberstam later characterized the ARVN’s commanders appalling behavior at Ap Bac—“They had the helicopters, they had the technology, they had armored personnel carriers, and they deliberately let the VC get away”—and the American Mission’s angry response to Halberstam’s and others’ accounts of the battle as the point when his intuition that he and his colleagues were being deceived by men like General Paul Harkins became a conviction. See Ferrari, *Reporting America at War*, 115-16.

⁴² See, for example, David Halberstam, “Saigon Criticized on ‘Cautious’ War.”

⁴³ Halberstam once said, “There were 30,000 Viet Cong when I arrived. There were 30,000 killed while I was there and there were 30,000 Viet Cong when I left.” As quoted in Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 69.

⁴⁴ David Halberstam, “Saigon Reported Avoiding Clashes,” (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Halberstam, “Saigon Reported Avoiding Clashes,” (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ David Halberstam, “In Vietnam: ‘Not Bad,’” *New York Times*, March 11, 1963, 14, (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ “It is still in the view of many observers far too early to tell just how successful many parts of the broad program will be. Some observers traditionally cautious about events in Asia note that it may be a year before one can get a successful reading on the war.” Halberstam, “In Vietnam: ‘Not Bad.’”

⁴⁸ David Halberstam, “In Vietnam: ‘Not Bad,’” (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Joseph Buttinger maintains that as early as 1960 American military advisers recognized that “the main reason for the failure to contain the Vietcong were political conditions that thwarted the reforms which might have made the Army effective and which prevented it from becoming a determined fighting force against the Vietcong.” Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 462.

⁵⁰ David Halberstam, “Complexities Cloud Battle in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1963, 195.

⁵¹ Halberstam, “Complexities Cloud Battle in Vietnam.”

⁵² This is one of the critical properties of what political scientists and historians refer to as “American exceptionalism.” In perhaps the most famous book on this subject, Seymour Martin

Lipset quotes the historian Richard Hofstadter's observation that "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one." Lipset goes on to note that "Americanism," which is the bedrock upon which the American sense of nationhood is built, consists of five principles: "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire." Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 18-19.

⁵³ Halberstam, "Complexities Cloud Battle in Vietnam," (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ David Halberstam, "Buddhists Mourn Vietnam Victims," *New York Times*, May 29, 1963, 5.

⁵⁵ Halberstam cites the 70% estimate in a number of his pieces. See David Halberstam, "Buddhists Mourn Vietnam Victims"; David Halberstam, "Buddhists Hurt in Vietnam Clash," *New York Times*, June 4, 1963, 1; David Halberstam, "U.S. Avoids Part in Saigon Dispute," *New York Times*, June 11, 1963, 6; David Halberstam, "Buddhists Defy Regime in Saigon," *New York Times*, June 13, 1963; and David Halberstam, "Buddhists in Saigon Clash with Police," *New York Times*, June 16, 1963.

⁵⁶ See, for example, A. Terry Rambo, *Searching for Vietnam: Selected Writings on Vietnamese Culture and Society* (Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2005), 83-85. Rambo notes that while there was much "overt religiosity" in Vietnam during the war, "most Vietnamese appeared to lack any deep personal religious concern or involvement." Rambo attributes the Buddhists' success in winning recruits to the belief of a majority of Vietnamese that the Diems were intent on stripping away the rights of all non-Catholics. See also Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 215.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, "Buddhists Mourn Vietnam Victims."

⁵⁸ These protests were mounted against what the Buddhists claimed was a decree issued by Bao Dai, the former emperor, that contradicted "the Constitutional policy of religious equality and [gave] Christianity a favored position in the country." David Halberstam, "Buddhist Women Protest," *New York Times*, June 14, 1963, 10.

⁵⁹ David Halberstam, "Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam," *New York Times*, June 16, 1963, 144, (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ Halberstam, "Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam," (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Halberstam, "Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam," (emphasis added).

⁶² Halberstam, "Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam," (emphasis added).

⁶³ Max Weber, for example, argued that the Chinese approach to governance was characterized by an uneasy relationship among patrimonial authority, mandarin administration, and localized kinship groups. See Richard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 98-141.

⁶⁴ Halberstam, "Discontent Rises in Vietnam Crisis," *New York Times*, June 22, 1963, 6, (emphasis added).

⁶⁵ In one famous incident, Halberstam was beaten by members of the South Vietnamese Special Forces, who were under the direction of Diem's notoriously unscrupulous brother, Nhu, as he and other correspondents sought to cover a street demonstration in Saigon.

⁶⁶ Relations between Lodge and General Paul Harkins were particularly tempestuous. Karnow notes that Robert McNamara reported to Lyndon Johnson upon returning from his December 1963 visit to Vietnam that "the official American team in Saigon . . . lacks leadership, has been poorly informed and is not working to a common plan." Lodge was still squabbling with General Paul Harkins, the American military commander, even to the point of excluding him from the embassy's communications with Washington, and their subordinates were also wrangling." Karnow, *Vietnam*, 325.

- ⁶⁷ David Halberstam, “Diem Regime Under Fire,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1963, E5, (emphasis added).
- ⁶⁸ See, for example, Halberstam, “Vietnamese Rebels Enlarge Forces,” 2.
- ⁶⁹ Halberstam, “Diem Regime Under Fire.” See also David Halberstam, “Repressions Are Seen Creating Sharp Divisions in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1963, E3.
- ⁷⁰ David Halberstam, “Militant Young Buddhists Gain Strong Political Role in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1963, 3.
- ⁷¹ David Halberstam, “Vietnamese Give Up Base in Reds’ Area,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1963, 1.
- ⁷² David Halberstam, “Vietnamese Give Up Base in Reds’ Area,” (emphasis added).
- ⁷³ David Halberstam, “Buddhist Impact Grows in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1963, 1.
- ⁷⁴ David Halberstam, “Vietnamese Reds Gain in Key Areas,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1963, 1.
- ⁷⁵ Halberstam, “Vietnamese Reds Gain in Key Areas.”
- ⁷⁶ David Halberstam, “U.S. Problem in Saigon,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1963, 2, (emphasis added).
- ⁷⁷ David Halberstam, “Repressions Are Seen Creating Sharp Divisions in Vietnam,” (emphasis added).
- ⁷⁸ Halberstam, “Repressions Are Seen Creating Sharp Divisions in Vietnam.”
- ⁷⁹ David Halberstam, “Vietnam: Army’s Role,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1963, E4.
- ⁸⁰ Richard Reeves reports that Kennedy told Lodge at the time of the latter’s appointment that Lodge would “have to share the responsibility for whatever was going to happen next. That...might well be the overthrow of Diem and his family—probably in a coup by his own generals.” Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 527.
- ⁸¹ Richard Reeves provides a compelling account of both the Kennedy White House’s deliberations prior to the coup and the coup itself in *Kennedy*, 526-77.
- ⁸² David Halberstam, “Anguish in Saigon,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1963, 4.
- ⁸³ Halberstam, “Anguish in Saigon.”