

1997

Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973

Douglas Kinnard

William C. Hammond

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kinnard, Douglas and Hammond, William C. (1997) "Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 50 : No. 2 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol50/iss2/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

144 Naval War College Review

an American welfare program, in the form of logistical support.

Round and round they went, the prime minister furious and relentless, the chiefs vigorous and unflinching. At one point the chiefs agreed that if Churchill persisted in his "false statements, false documentation, and defective strategic thinking," they would resign. None did. The author suspects that during this period the chiefs' staff developed into an independent player, though so discreetly that the others failed to notice.

As the war neared its end in both Europe and Asia, Britain did not what it wished to do but what it *could* do. To its own surprise, Indian and British troops, under a splendid commander, carried out an excellent overland campaign in the Burmese jungle, regaining both Rangoon and the route to China. But by that time China had lost its allure for the Americans. The latter, disillusioned about attacking Japan by air from Chinese bases, were doing so from bases they had seized themselves from the Japanese in the Pacific. Simultaneously, depending on a few weak bases in eastern Australia and on a wholly unsatisfactory fleet train at sea, all six of Britain's fast carriers (never more than five at a time) shared in the American struggle for Okinawa and later in the attacks on Japan's home islands. But its carrier aviation, lacking aircraft equal in number and quality to the Americans' and with naval aviators whose skill did not equal their courage, suffered losses (23.4 percent per month) even worse than the appalling American rate. Given the shortcomings of both its resources for underway replenishment and its aviation logistics, the British Pacific Fleet was fortunate that the war ended when it did.

Willmott leaves the reader in no doubt that the British achieved a great success in Burma, but one without strategic meaning; in the Pacific they made themselves useful auxiliaries to the Americans, but at a price beyond their ability to keep paying.

This master of the English language has written another in his series of clear, insightful books. One hopes he will be writing military and naval history and analysis for a long time to come.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Hammond, William C. *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1996. 659pp. \$43

This latest book from the Army's Center of Military History completes William Hammond's two-volume effort on the media and the Vietnam War. The first volume was published in 1988 and covered the war from 1962 to 1968. In this volume the author continues where he left off telling the story of the media, the military, and the U.S. administrations from the post-Tet 1968 period through January 1973, when the peace agreement went into effect.

In the prologue Hammond recapitulates his earlier volume. Recall that Vietnam had run its American course for more than a decade, allowing journalists covering it a relative independence rare in military history. Reporters had never before enjoyed such freedom of movement and observation in time of conflict; furthermore, the ubiquity of the chopper

in Vietnam assured rapid mobility for the press. However, military and civilian officials both came to regret such indulgence, and constant official adaptation and adjustment characterized the era. Media strategy and tactics became, and remain, an essential facet of command interest.

The better early correspondents—the Sheehans, Brownes, and Halberstams—enjoyed a rapport with U.S. forces in the field, especially with the advisers to South Vietnamese units. Though they often wrote stories opposing Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) pronouncements, theirs was not an antiwar attitude, as some in the military and in the administration howled. Instead it reflected their concern for progress, and it was based on solid information gleaned in paddies, jungles, and villages outside Saigon. Their views often relied upon official sources frustrated with decisions made in Saigon—John Paul Vann being the most visible symbol.

Public Affairs consists of twenty-three chapters, each broken down into shorter topics (such as narcotics, race, and morale) or events (battles, scandals, and leadership changes). It is a logical organization and progression, an effective narrative device that enhances this book's value as a reference.

Hammond often weaves tactical and strategic situations into contexts of U.S. domestic politics and diplomacy. For example, in August 1968 Creighton Abrams, the new MACV, was restrained from exploiting a critical enemy weakness in forces and morale by a White House too concerned with the Paris peace negotiations and too worried that

dramatic offensives would harm the Democratic presidential campaign.

As the author develops it, when Richard Nixon took office he began to reset the dominoes that had fallen during Johnson's administration. A president must see a threshold where support by the electorate will either weaken or strengthen a policy, which was, in this case, war. The Chief Executive's policy goals must also be in balance with the responses of international allies and opponents alike. Nixon sought, at least initially, to move the media along with his policy of gradual disengagement, sufficient to strengthen U.S. bargaining positions while improving relations with the Soviet Union and mainland China, the two underwriters of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong opposition to the Saigon government. However, by 1969 and certainly by 1970, public affairs in Vietnam were beset by always increasing problems of another nature. The chapter headings recall these matters for us: "Race and Drugs," "Discipline and Dissent," "My Lai," and "Morale Becomes an Issue." With such issues playing to an American public already tired of the war, the press had an important advantage. To quote Hammond, "The best reporters, by virtue of their many contacts, sometimes had a better grasp of the War's unmanageable human elements than the policy makers supposedly in control."

One section of the book that students of the Vietnam War and the home front will find most useful comprises the two chapters concerning the Cambodian incursion of 1970. This was the era of Kent State and all that it symbolized. Like Tet in 1968, the Cambodian incursion was a watershed in what had become the inevitable strategic withdrawal of America

from an unwinnable situation, whatever tactical success might be claimed. On the day the incursion ended, the United States Senate passed the Cooper-Church Amendment prohibiting the expenditure of funds for any future use of U.S. ground forces in Cambodia.

Like the first volume, this is a major work covering an important aspect of the Vietnam War. It is a permanent historical resource of value to those who wish to study this war, which was the major failure of American foreign and strategic policy in the twentieth century.

Why did the U.S. Army sponsor these volumes, which, after all, cover much broader issues than those for which that service has primary responsibility? I suggest the answer is, who else would have? Put another way, had the Center of Military History not taken the initiative, this important and well documented study would not have been done.

Hammond, a writer-historian, avoids predictions or recommendations, leaving for future readers to decide the applicability of this case to their own times and circumstances. This is a wise decision in a period of escalating technological developments that fuel mass communications, already changed by the speed and nature of news dissemination and interpretation. The Vietnam era ended a quarter of a century ago, and in the military that is a long time.

In sum, this book is thoroughly researched, nicely organized, and well written. It is a must for those interested in the pivotal role of the media in a war in which the American home front, not the battlefield, was the strategic target of the adversary. In combination with the

first volume, this is an outstanding contribution, deserving of recognition at the Pulitzer level.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Professor Emeritus
University of Vermont

Fehrenbach, T.R. *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History*. McLean, Va.: Brassey's, 1994. 483pp. \$28

When T.R. Fehrenbach published *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* in 1963, his indictment of initial U.S. failures in the Korean War struck a chord, and the book became a much-quoted classic. Long available in paperback, it has now been reprinted with a new subtitle, in hard cover, under the auspices of the Association of the U.S. Army. While this book purports to be a history of the Korean War, it is in fact a long essay on limited war, the role of the military in a democratic society, and the consequences of military unpreparedness. As history, it has limitations; but as an essay, it is of enduring value. (I am indebted to David A. Keough, Assistant Archivist at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, for the characterization of *This Kind of War* as an essay.)

Fehrenbach is very good at illuminating the rhythms and patterns of the war. He makes use of his own combat experience in World War II and Korea to etch gripping, realistic vignettes of small-unit actions. He describes with economy and precision such complex concepts as containment and limited war, making clear that Korea was but a campaign in a larger confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. His focus is on American ground combat forces, but