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Big Story

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PROFESSIONAL READING 101

Braestrup, Peter. *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977. 1,446pp. in 2 vols. (NOTE: An abridged edition was made available as a Doubleday Anchor paperback in 1978, 606pp.)

Vietnam was, among other things, a journalistic first in the American experience. During no previous war had the press been accorded comparable access to the war and freedom from censorship; on top of that it became our first "war on television." So-called "media coverage" of that war has come in for extensive criticism in military and naval circles; in its more extreme forms that criticism often has assumed the existence of some sort of ideological media conspiracy against any or all of the following: military leadership; U.S. "imperialism"; the war policy of the Johnson administration; and war in general. In this case study of one brief period of that long war—from 21 January through the end of April 1968—Peter Braestrup demolishes the conspiracy theory, but in the process does little to inspire confidence in our major news organizations.

The author's credentials are impressive: combat service with the Marines in Korea, followed by a career in journalism that took him to *Time*, the old *New York Herald Tribune*, a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. While with the *Times* he covered Algeria (1962-65), Paris (1965), and Southeast Asia (1966-68). In January 1968, just prior to Tet, he joined the *Post* as its Saigon Bureau chief, returning to this country in 1969. Unlike many of the reporters who covered Tet and its aftermath, he had some experience of war and of foreign climes.

Big Story makes a big book, two in fact in the original Westview Press edition. The first volume comprises 15

chapters on such topics as: The Press Corps in Vietnam (who they were, where they came from, experience levels, etc.); Performance, Morale, and Leadership of U.S. Troops (how reported and by whom); Khe Sanh; The Debate at Home; etc. Throughout, the analysis is directed to the war as reported (and *purportedly* explained) by the principal U.S. news organizations: the wire services (AP & UPI), the television networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC), two newspapers (the *Times* and *Post*), and the major weekly news magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*). The second volume reproduces the data base in 41 appendixes, 23 tables, and indexes to all Vietnam-related coverage from 31 January through 31 March by the organizations listed above.

Many of the appendixes are haunting in themselves as, for example, the transcript of "Meet the Press" for 4 February when Secretary McNamara sought solace, at his wife's suggestion, in T.S. Eliot—"We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." The reader who tries appendix 40 (a step-by-step, person-by-person, decision-by-decision account of the filming and telecasting of the execution of a VC officer by General Loan, chief of the Vietnamese National Police) will probably never again trust *anything* he sees on the evening news. The 1978 paperback edition omits the contents of the original Volume II, but contains virtually all of the original Volume I (and brings the price down from \$50 to \$8.95, which seems a fair bargain).

In a style that is lively and engaging throughout, Braestrup demonstrates clearly that the reporting of Tet was badly flawed, but ascribes this to many causes, chief among which were institutional habits and procedures of the media as a whole. A partial list would have to include: manpower shortages; the inexperience of those on the scene,

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whether by virtue of youth or short tour policies; the incessant demands of news managers at home for "good copy" (destruction was a story; recovery was not); stateside embellishment of basic copy sent from the scene; a predilection for disaster stories ("the conventional journalistic reaction to calamity"); competition (AP vs. UPI, CBS vs. NBC, etc.) to be first in explaining events, even when the overall pattern was clouded and obscure; and finally, a certain degree of resentment stemming from the Administration's "progress campaign" of late 1967, leaving some newsmen feeling they had been used. (Braestrup makes it clear, however, that this sense of "resentment," leading to a degree of "retribution," was not widespread, was present more in New York and Washington than in Vietnam, and was too weak to support any conspiracy theory. Indeed, the reader cannot avoid feeling that the ineptness of the press as a whole in overcoming its so-called "practical considerations" was such that a conspiracy could not have been pulled off even if the press had tried!)

In short, coverage of Tet was shaped largely by habit and convention, ingrained approaches to news reporting that left newsmen ill-equipped to cope with the unusual ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding Tet. Journalism suffered from

a serious lapse of self-discipline. . . . There was no institutional system within the media for keeping track of what the public had been told, no internal priority on updating initial impressions. . . . The result was that the media tended to leave the shock and confusion of early February, as then perceived, fixed as the final impression of Tet, and thus as a framework for news judgment and debate at home. At Tet the press shouted that the patient was dying, then weeks later began to

whisper that he somehow seemed to be recovering—whispers apparently not heard amid the clamorous domestic reaction to the initial shouts.

The final chapter should be read by everyone who reads either a newspaper or a news magazine, or who watches the news on television. It even includes an informal score sheet that rates the performance of various news organizations: AP over UPI, the *Times* over the *Post*, *Time* over *Newsweek* (the latter described earlier as seemingly bent on "merchandizing the jitters"). The description of the role played by stateside news managers behind the scenes at rewrite desks, both for the press and television, will be eye-opening for many readers not intimate with the methodologies of modern American news reporting.

In the end one is led to the conclusion that the search after villains in journalism's coverage of Vietnam—rather like the search after villains in anything related to Vietnam—is essentially sterile. There is plenty of blame to go around. Far more important is Braestrup's conclusion: "The special circumstances of Tet impacted to a rare degree on modern American journalism's special susceptibilities and limitations. This peculiar conjunction overwhelmed reporters, commentators, and their superiors alike. And it could happen again."

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Cooper, Matthew. *The German Army, 1933-1945; Its Political and Military Failure*. New York: Stein and Day, 1978. 598pp.

The alleged purpose of this long, tiresome, and poorly written book is to explain Hitler's control over the German Army and the reasons for its defeat in the Second World War. Unfortunately the explanations presented by the